



&

Thursday

Friday

DFHall



This is the end.

The Senior Youth League for the Advancement of School Shootings shall rise.

Dogma shall begin.



Thursday & Friday

D. F. Hall

Hardboiled Babylon

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006002020000I

www.hardboiledbabylon.com
authorfunction@hardboiledbabylon.com

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Death, as we may call that unreality, is the most terrible thing, and to keep that which is dead so demands the greatest force of all.

Thursday & Friday

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We, being what had been called God, here, are and were no longer bound by linear time, and though you have chosen freely as is possible to persevere upon this course, or courses, laid before you, steeped as you are in such temporal tyranny, we feel it necessary to say...

We are sorry.

But we, being God, who is there said that may forgive us?

Technically, the world had started to end from the moment it began. Even if they had chosen their socks more carefully, such was always to be the case. And sometime between this beginning and its inevitable end, it being far closer to the end than the beginning, Gabriel sat at the highest point on campus just as the sun had fully set behind a stand of tall pines that lined the top of a distant ridge. The campus belonged to, or was part of, depending on how you want to phrase it, Eaglleton Technical College (note the two ells), an institution which, for a myriad of somewhat archaic and financial reasons, culminating in a fiasco of such proportions as to make it a worthy story unto itself, but which does not, at this point, play directly into these events, other than its being here, and other than in the way all events relate to and play into one another, but it had not followed the majority of other technical schools in the state of North Carolina in the adoption of the term ‘community college’. As such, rather than be stuck essentially being referred to, if not in polite conversation, as the place where one goes when one finds one cannot get in a real college, the real college in this case often being implicitly Eagleton University (note the single ell), the county’s largest financial drain (depending on who you ask) and the only thing that brought them any greater attention from the rest of the state, which, otherwise, wouldn’t have known they existed—alternatively, the technical college, often being mistaken for a sub-campus of Eagleton University proper, a quite common occurrence—but it all allowed opportunities for some very particular, though too often repeated, conversations, often taking the form of retirees discussing the sorry state of the current generation over coffee at one of the local gas stations while at the shop next door one of the mechanical graduates of that same establishment is troubleshooting the electrical system on their car, while those more

ascendant in the multi-tiered strata of middle-classness discussed the same over breakfast in their customized breakfast nooks just off from the customized kitchen in their modular-built homes while also managing to comment on those who go out to gas stations to eat their breakfast, and whom they will see while filling their car with gas on the way to work, who if they can ever bring themselves to actually use one of the three or four non-paid sick days they're technically allotted a year, will go to a doctor's office, where they will also have the, essentially, same conversation with someone they know and have just happened to meet in the waiting room, along with a choice few complaints directed toward the receptionist, who also doubles as a medical technologist, who will have likely, also, graduated from that same establishment, along with that person, who exists somewhere on or between the male-feminine poles slash anti-poles, or some point orthogonal to such a scale, such an entity slash person who collects their bodily fluids and slots them into the machines, a role, like almost all others, which has been decimated under the progressive march of automation, as Shepard more than knows, though few others know he knows this or know the way he knows this, the actual and former extent of the duties of such job positions now and then being that of merely sticking a tube in a hole and reading a screen, or so some people of a certain middle-class position and disposition who might happen to have *some* knowledge of these things will say during the course of idle discourse.

But in any regard, the bench at the top of the hill established a natural resting point after having started in the parking lot below and circuiting the two mile trail that eventually wound its way back onto campus. He'd never experienced a true runner's high, though the sense of the physical that came with sweating and breathing hard, the ache of his legs and shoulders, could be pleasant enough in itself, even, or especially, when he pushed himself up against that hard line of pain that, like a mathematical function, approaches ever closer to injury, but possibly, with skill, can be held back from that terminal point in perpetuity, even if it can't. The unpleasant thing was how his soaked shirt clung to his chest and back as his breathing calmed. Far down below, the traffic had picked up, students and instructors headed home, state employees from the nearby equipment yard headed out,

as well, school buses returning to the storage and service center; it's why he preferred to run this time of day: even the retired still obeyed the evening schedule that shuttled everyone toward home and supper, most everyone too weary, mentally if not physically, to contemplate the notion of exercise, and if they emerged for an evening stroll, if such a thing still existed in any appreciable way, existed other than a nostalgic placeholder to be sold in advertisements and holiday cards, that wouldn't be till some hours after the sun had set and the autumn heat had lessened as much as it would before night came. But it wasn't a foolproof plan. Addled as he was by the heat and the run, exasperating, as it were, the oftentimes normative hyperkinetic state of his mind, a condition that more than once had led him into close quarters with rattlesnakes before the more rudimentary, though that is not to say more base, parts of his mind could get the attention of the remainder of his consciousness, but he completely failed to notice that anyone else was coming down the trail, until she was on top of him. Angela slowed as she approached the bench, coming to a stop to bend forward and plant her hands on her knees as she breathed hard, and her damp-heavy shirt hung toward the ground. "That's," she said between deep breaths, "a long hill."

"You should try going round the other direction," he said.

She still breathed hard. "It's not any..." And sucked in and let out a breath as she straightened. "It's just as steep coming up that way."

"I didn't claim it was functionally different," he said. "Just that it was different."

She looked at him in a polite way, but it went on just a little too long. "Aren't you..."

"Yes," he said. And when he saw she looked perplexed and annoyed, he added, "Sorry." And he shook his head and leaned back against the bench. "It's a bad habit. Yes, I know I look exactly like my uncle. People mention it alot. It gets a little aggravating. And sometimes I don't hide it as well as I should."

This strange amount of honesty left her just as perplexed as before. However, her annoyance had sublimated into a faint worry that didn't produce—yet—enough condensation to be readily detected by her conscious mind and induce some sense of rationalized trepidation about asking, "Alright if I sit down?" And any such unconscious sense

failed to register until after she'd already said it, which, fortunately and unfortunately, committed her.

"I'd recommend it," he said. He leaned over the bench rail and rummaged in his bag. "Bottle of water?" It was tepid, but at least had been in the shade. But she shook her head. "It's still sealed."

She glanced at him. Here, some of what had sublimated earlier had gathered enough body to percolate upward and convert into aggravation. She took the water bottle and cracked it open. He reached down and rummaged for another and did the same. He'd drunk about half when he said, "I should really get a steel reusable one." He faintly laughed.

She said, "What's so funny?"

He shook his head. "Nothing," he said, and took a sip of water. Another bad habit he had was leaving people with voids, voids into which they would naturally fill the worst possible information. Which Angela's mind had already started to do, in accordance with a few hundred-million-plus years of primate social evolution. The ultimate void, of course, is the stranger, onto which people project, well, sometimes, the most extreme and ludicrous things. And as much as some want to claim they hold no such prejudices against those they have never met and don't know exist, well, there's no point in pointing out they're lying to themselves as much as anyone else. But in regards to Angela, Gabriel existed in a kind of inter-phase: her and his uncle technically had worked together, in a very distant fashion, when he, Gabriel's uncle, had been alive, that is, they had (her and his uncle) worked for the same institution, the one they both sat looking down on, and she had technically, once, met him, Gabriel, many years before, so the algorithmic process deep in the older, but not oldest, parts of her mind could not factor him as a true stranger, or at least, a stranger, perhaps, with a capital S, a Stranger, in the way one might refer to the capital O, Other, as opposed to merely an other, or whatever excuse they want to label it as—they just can't help it with the capitals, just can't *not* use them. But on the other hand, he, clearly, could not be reckoned in any close association, in that this was the first time they had exchanged more than a-dozen-and-a-half non-professionally circumstanced words in their respective thirty and thirty-two years of existence outside their respective mother's wombs.

However, only the vaguest sense of this had yet seeped through her interactions with him, such as they had been in the last five minutes.

“Are you excited for the end of the world?” he said.

“What?” She turned and looked at him.

“It’s something my mother’s gotten off on,” he said. He took a sip of water. “When the moon and sun and Earth align it’s supposed to do something or the other to cause earthquakes, which is going to destroy everything and release one or the other horsemen of the apocalypse.” He took a sip of water.

“Are you being serious?”

“That depends,” he said. “If you mean I’m seriously reporting that as having been communicated to me, then yes.” He took a sip of water. “But if you mean seriously in the sense that I’m *actually* saying the world is going to end in two days...no.” He took a sip of water. Already he could feel too much of it rolling round in his empty stomach. “Or at least I hope not. I think I have a good chance, anyway. I’ve survived, like...almost two dozen at this point.”

“Two dozen? Ends of the world?”

“Someone’s always saying it’s going to be X date.” He took a sip of water. “Then it passes and they say oops it was actually supposed to be this *other* date coming up.” He looked out where the edges of the pine trees glowed red. “Heck, you’re older than me. So you’ve survived more of them than I have.”

She re-capped the water bottle. “How do you know that?”

“Well, you had just graduated when I transferred into the public highschool from Surrender. You had done dual-enrollment here and graduated at the same time. I was put into the program when I transferred. And you were the ambassador that showed the eight or ten or however many of us there were around right after that. So you have to be at least two, three years older.”

“Oh,” she said. But to be honest, it was only an instinctual response, she had no more specific recollection of him than any of those other ten (and it was ten, not eight or nine) that started dual-enrollment at Eagleton Tech (a program that allowed highschoolers to take classes to gain college credits, for what it’s worth, but the program had been different back then, not comparable to now at all).

But her response, of course, was something he was not in the least

surprised by, considering the circumstances. Which prompted him to say, “And I doubt you would remember that, because it was in no way memorable, and literally, two weeks later I had transferred out.”

“Why?” And this time she was interested in the question, it wasn’t just an automatic response, or more accurately, it was, but she was also interested in it on a conscious level, at least to some degree, or at least the default degree of inquisitiveness among *Homo sapiens* of certain non-specific genetic lineages, which went otherwise unremarked in regards to some extended phenotype advertising this state of genetic disposition, which was contrary to what some people, such as Hunter, wanted to promulgate.

“Well,” he said, and shook his head. “I was only ever there because of a set of issues at Surrender, and the law told my parents I had to go *somewhere*, and the only place available at the time was public school. So... That’s what happened. And then a slot eventually opened up in God’s Armory, over in Macon. And my mother preferred driving over Cowee twice a day to going to public school.” He tipped back his head and drained the last of his bottled water. “Absolutely no offense meant by that. It... Um... I didn’t have much say in it.”

And to be honest, she took no offense, up until he said that. But even then it was on a purely automatic basis. She tilted back her head and drained her own water bottle and twisted on the cap. “Thanks for the water,” she said, and offered it to him.

“No problem.” He clamped the neck of each empty bottle between the fingers of his right hand.

She rose, stretched her shoulders, grabbed her ankle, and stretched her leg.

“I know I may be going a bit far,” he said, looking away from the fire-rimmed trees in the distance and up at her, “under the circumstances. But are you seeing anyone?” And the nice thing about phrasing the question that way, or at least, what he thought of as the nice thing about it, was if it were asked of a woman, and the woman was gay, she could turn him down without explicitly having to say that, and if asked of a man... well bad things had a tendency to happen in that case, one way or the other, anyway, if he’d in fact been that way, but an old experience had affected him enough for him to work really hard on patching a certain tiny aspect of his personality,

which had almost gone over too well. He would've preferred a version of such a question that didn't require someone to answer 'no', then to follow up with 'but I'm not interested', or experience trepidation because they were afraid rejecting him might offend him, or get them murdered, but as of yet he'd never discovered such a phrase in the English language. And sometimes you have to use what you have at hand, even if it's the Grim Reaper's Scythe to clear a field of wheat.

Angela paused a moment, various series of completely unconscious communications and dispatches cascading through the various segments of her mind, most of them simply communicating to the further and farther reaches a series of determinations that a smaller part had reached almost twenty minutes before. But not that it was a simple one-way communication, a dictatorial, top down, imposing of order; there had to be several...cross communications. The result of this being, on her part, a momentary stammer. "No."

"Well," he said, "if you didn't have any particular plans, and just in case the world is going to end, I would really like to go out with you before then. Or during."

Much of the same attempted inter-communication and processes as had been initiated earlier still hadn't subsided, obviously, be it as the present social situation was by no means yet resolved, and the result, again, was a stammer on her part. "I have to work," she said.

"Wow. As much as everyone's been going on about this for months. On the national news and everything. Everyone in the union's pouring in. But it doesn't surprise me. I thought they were supposed to have a viewing down in the football field?"

"They're going to."

"And you're not going?"

"Well, for a bit," she said. "But it's also a teacher work day. And... Everything's behind." She wasn't a teacher. It was also the day they were going to bring the new network equipment online, which couldn't have been done back in the summer because that would've been too reasonable, and instead, she'd have to worry about breakage and crashes during a week of live school. So the only hope was to get it patched together over the weekend, which meant working all weekend.

"I know how that goes." He looked across at the darkening

treeline. "I really would like to get a chance to talk to you some more." It would be better than just watching her on Facebook and following her on Twitter. He looked up at her. "So, if they allow you to eat over there, would you like to have lunch with me before the eclipse?"

"There'll be too many people out," she said. "You won't be able to drive or walk anywhere."

"True," he said. "I take it you're taking your lunch then."

"Yes. Why?"

"Well," he said, "I was thinking if you were gonna take yours, I could bring mine. Of course, I very much doubt they'll let me on school grounds." And only after he said it did part of him realize that phrase would likely set up a very unpleasant set of processes and subsequent conjectures, all in themselves bad to worse, so he added, "The way they are these days about locking down schools, anyway."

"Yeah."

He sighed. "Look," he said, "I'm going to say what I want, and I'm not going to apologize for it. I would really like the opportunity to get to know you better. I would sit in eat lunch in the graveyard across the road, if necessary." (There's one conveniently across from the highschool.) She laughed at that. "But if you don't want to, please, just tell me no. A definitive no is much better than a what if, by a mile. And I, as you may tell, am not, in the least, good with hints. And while I have no general problem tolerating ambiguity, I have no interest in doing so on this subject." He sighed. A paraphrase of the quote better to not open your mouth and let everyone think you a fool rather than open it and prove them right ran through his head like water, so like most things, only the vaguest sense of it remained.

"I only have forty-five minutes," she said. "On Saturday. One o'clock." And she turned and started down the trail.

And I won't say he didn't notice the view, (after all, it was a hot day, and shorts and a t-shirt were almost too much to run in, and he wouldn't have minded that scenario, for the most part, either) because, well, anyone who professes, even tacitly, that *kind* of interest in someone and *doesn't* have a passing interest in them in a pair of shorts... well, that should be clear enough, (but I'm not talking about *that*), and I won't say anything about it, (I'm talking about

something else) but at least to some, the ones who don't spend an inordinate amount of their mental energy on why I would, as they've said—and said—go through the trouble of giving people arms and legs just so everyone could try and ignore they exist, though, in fact, the way most people's mental faculties operate, they only noticed their body, anyway, at certain key points, but that's usually enough to cause those same faculties to experience anxiety (it's pointless to stoop to the software analogy for that which operates within the system of the brain, as traditional computation is merely a subset of all possible computation and one is nothing like the other, other than in the ways in which it is) but, however, the product of this anxiety usually manifests itself in the physical world in the secondary form of all those books and pamphlets and tv and radio programs as to why everyone else should try really hard to ignore these things, especially when they realize they exist.

But in the moments of her disappearing down the side of the hill, he had something that, even without the experience of the other to compare, was so far beyond a runner's high as to match the distance separating planets, which most are biologically incapable of contemplating, anyway—which is not my fault. He probably could've managed at least another half-dozen loops around the whole trail. But what made it through the very hazy sense of self that'd engulfed him was that he had to go by the grocery store before he went home, and that there was an envelope full of coupons on the dashboard, of which, half would expire that day, and if that happened...

So he collected himself and dropped the empty water bottles into his bag and zipped it up as he started down the hill toward the parking lot.

But in any regard, it didn't keep him from getting home till after dark. The outside light came on as if it were automatic, but tangentially to that, even without any conscious knowledge of that, a lifetime of experience had put it onto an almost instinctual level the knowledge that she was watching from...somewhere...anywhere...everywhere that he was. He parked the truck and climbed out, reaching for the two paper bags in the passenger seat first. The usual kind of dance involves getting the screen door open enough to wedge a foot against it, and maybe an elbow, depending on the situation. It was an elbow night. Still holding the bags, he carefully poked the illuminated keypad. The lights remained off inside (something that would have added to an illusion about the outside lights being automatic), and he touched the switch with his elbow. As he set the bags on the kitchen counter, his mother stepped out of the darkened hallway. And when he turned to go out again, she said, "Where are you going?"

"The boxes are still in the truck."

Harlans, like most of the grocery stores in the area, stacked empty milk boxes at the front of the store for anyone who wanted them, and he usually packed things into a couple of them to keep anything from blowing out of the truck bed. Carrying the two at once, one stacked on the other, he danced with the screen door again.

"This wasn't on sale," his mother said. She held up a bag of noodles.

"It was in the discount bin." He set the boxes by the counter while his mother dropped the bag of noodles on the floor and dug into the bag again.

"Where's the receipt?"

"I don't know," he said, as he knelt and pried apart cardboard box flaps. "Maybe it blew out."

"You're supposed to make sure everything comes up right."

"And I did," he said. He set the milk and almond milk in the refrigerator.

She jerked a box out. "This wasn't the one on sale. It was the four pack."

"Yes." He lifted the bag of noodles off the floor and carried them toward the pantry. "But the twelve pack was an in-store special and even accounting for the coupon and price difference, it still came out thirteen cents cheaper a pound."

"So you didn't use the coupon."

"Nope."

"I don't know what I go through the trouble of doing these things for, then." She slammed the pasta box on the counter and turned and went down the hallway.

Gabriel set the pasta box in the cabinet. He neither sighed, nor had become angry. A kind of acceptance had crept into him over the years, something not so much possessed of a nullifying effect or anesthetic quality so much as an... acceptance of a model of the world. In fact, their relationship, much like the way it is reputed that Mesoamerican aborigines conceived of European sailing ships as floating mountains, initially, in the middle years of his life, into his late teens, when a subtle remodeling of the world had taken place, in which he had found the normative conditions of his own life lay in a seeming disparity with what other human beings considered normal modes of interaction, had come to be accepted as is and for what it was worth. The initial shock of this was, of course, anger, a state, unfortunately, lasting many years. The effects had only diminished slightly by his mid twenties, and it had taken a good five more years for this present certain kind of... quality to come into fruition. In many ways, it was reminiscent of the kind of mindfulness taught to members of the military to deal with those variations of torture that the public decries when used against *their own* but champion with bloodthirsty zeal to be used against *them*. He set the milk boxes by the door, (they always had some utility, so keeping a few around was always a good idea) and he started toward the hall, but then turned and went out to the truck again to get his bag. He turned off the outside lights on his way in.

His mother's voice carried from down the hall. "I heard the door. Where did you go?"

“To get my bag out of the truck,” he said.

“It’s a waste of gas to go all the way out there for nothing,” she said.

“I had to go out there to get groceries, anyway,” he said. He turned on the hall light. “And to pay the cable bill.” The lack of a data cap was the only upside to an internet service that was still technically slower than carrier pigeon (approximate potential theoretical max one-hundred-forty-five gigabits per second per sixteen birds, depending on wing span and composition of lunch) at a price that an entire apartment complex would pay in aggregate in a developed country. So in many ways, between monopoly and piss-poor infrastructure, even the urban environments of the United States have less functionality than many so-called third-world countries, and about anything even remotely approaching the rural it is borderline too absurd to bother attempting a description of without being accused of composing a sequel to some manuscript that local ministers would define as post-modern trash. He had noticed the faint blueish glow that filtered through the doorway at the end of the hall before he turned on the light. And after he dropped his bag in the laundry floor, he continued that way and reached in and turned on that light. His mother sat in the corner, hunched forward in an old dining room chair, toward a small desk, eyes fixed on a small TV used as a computer monitor. A narrow walkway led from the door to there, part of it along the side of the bed that wasn’t covered with stacks of newspapers and magazines and junk mail, almost everything that had arrive by post over the last ten years. But at least part of the bed was accessible, as no other section of floor, outside of that narrow walkway, was. Part of a stack had collapsed, again, spilling junk mail over other junk mail in an even more haphazard fashion. Gabriel turned to go back up the hall, a task in itself narrowly accomplished with all the restrictions placed on either side: stacks of toilet paper bought in increments of five dozen because of some sale or the other, paper towels, boxes of seven brands of dietary supplement and weight-loss shakes, material that would survive the apocalypse in the way Twinkies (which, interestingly enough, the distribution of is banned by a county ordinance dealing with cream-filled cake products, an embargo so steeped in historia that no extant human who knows about the ban knows why such an injunction exists or, even, from whence it originates, only

that it is an incontrovertible fact of life, which is why no one bothered to contact the company on that point or otherwise publicized what was taken to be common sense, so the companies, and all associated, remained unaware that they were banned, which included those who distributed and stocked such on the various wire racks and shelves of the many gas stations and grocery stores extant within the county) but it was exactly what such pseudo confectioneries would have wished for in lurid moments of wish-fulfillment fantasy, had they been capable of such. Also, boxes of unopened, cheap smart phones. Spares. But Gabriel has lived so long with these things, the state is normative, and he could quite automatically navigate them to squeeze into the laundry room and open the washing machine as much as the door could before it hit something. Even though you might imagine all that paper product would act as an insulator, at least to some degree, the cacophony and sounds of brutalized typing carried into the laundry room as if they'd been one and the same space, a rubber-membrane staccato, which in one sense would have seemed at odds with the fact that only the tips of his mother's fingers had even a limited range of motion, with her hands confined in the therapeutic wrist braces she always wore. He pulled off his shirt and threw it in the wash before he closed the door. "I'm going to take a shower," he called, as he stepped into the hall. "I'll fix supper after I'm out." The cacophony followed him into the bathroom. The problem is that hot water feels good (he had once tried to start out with cold showers in the morning, but the effects proved too deleterious) but it's harmful. The harm manifested in the fact that sometimes patches of his skin would dry out and itch and be just that much more aggravated if he actually did scratch or rub it, which might seem counter intuitive from a biological standpoint and the survival of the organism, but there it is, or one might argue it's simply a matter of the survival of the one with the most self control. The second rate laughing stocks of this world dare to blaspheme the human body as the pinnacle of perfection, as if perfection had gradations. While the true laughing stocks are those idiots who think if they jettison it entirely they will somehow be pure and free, and if nonexistence were possible, then they would be correct. He bowed his head and let the water run down over it. Also, besides the fact of wringing oil

out of the skin like water out of a sponge, neither is masturbation a good idea in the shower, at least for the male of the human species, because eggs, which solidify with heat, and though eggs biologically are traditionally associated with the female organism, the composition of a mammalian ejaculation has the same physical characteristic, as a consequence of being primarily composed of proteins, as well, which leads to the provisos posted in the Eagleton mens dorms admonishing its residents not to masturbate in those areas, the costs in money and therefore man (there is only one female plumber in the county limits, which in and of itself is the subject of another deal), but the man hours to deal with the very physical blockages that often result is not insubstantial and does technically come partly from the money given by the county, and other tax-payer dollars from the state and federal levels, as well as in the form of tax incentives to the University, which some, if they ever bothered to consider it, would've taken it as a form of divine punishment for allowing young people to masturbate in the first place and that this is what circumcision was supposed to prevent, while others, if they were to consider it, which some have, find themselves appalled at the notion of said individuals in the shower contemplating members of the same or opposite sex, who might not know they are being contemplated in such a mode, thereby raising the question if such activity is a type of sexual assault and if any such consideration can by definition ever be consensual, as by definition, to exist in someone else's mind is to be objectified, while said individuals masturbate, or not. However, for Gabriel, in this instance, it was the aftermath, on this occasion, that held something of a different character: where generally there was a general emptiness, not so much a hole or void, so much as a...state of nullity, instead remained the same warm, general fuzziness that had started earlier. And it continued as he stepped out of the shower and dried himself off, same as it had since that evening. It made him feel almost buoyant as he went into the kitchen, enough so that he occasionally whistled as he dumped a bag of frozen vegetables into a pot and added some water and set another pot on to boil. As usual, the plastic bottles stuffed and stacked in the crook of the corner counter shifted and tumbled down into the floor, and he whistled to himself as he gathered them into his arms.

“Don’t throw those out,” his mother said. She’d appeared at the head of the hall, looking down at the phone in her hand as her thumb stroked the screen.

“I’m not.” He finished re-stacking them beside the sink basin, which was already overflowing with empty plasticware sandwich-meat containers, fruit cups, potato salad buckets, glass jam jars with red-white checkered metal lids, milk jugs, etc.

“I’m going to use those,” she said.

“I’m just picking them up out of the floor.” He turned his attention to the things on the stove, then to clearing a small space on the counter. His mother sat at the table, forearms braced against the edge so she could hold the phone up near her face, her face awash in backlight. No room remained at the table, as only the one chair could be pulled out, the others being packed with various odds and ends, but mostly plastic shopping bags compressed down to near the levels needed to turn them back into the liquid form of the parent materials from which they were derived out of from one of those long-ago ancient extinctions, while the tabletop, itself, sat stacked with newspapers and old mail, but mostly old, moldering copies of various Bibles, the most of which had never been printed on any kind of quality paper, nor bound any better, which had made their way here, slowly, group by group, as extended members of the family had died and the artifacts of the lives thereof had shifted hand to hand till reaching this terminal point of existence. The red-coated top pages made them look like so many stacked bricks.

“Where have you been?” his mother said, but didn’t look away from the phone.

“To pay the cable bill.” He reached and turned off a burner. The other pot hadn’t yet started to boil. “Then for a run to the grocery store. Same as always.” Though, this time obviously hadn’t just involved watching from the truck.

She didn’t reply immediately, but just stroked the screen with her thumb. And he just stood there watching the water as it approached a rolling boil. When it had, he added the pasta and started the timer, then gently stirred it. “I’m going to go out on Saturday.”

“You can’t go out.”

“I need to run a few errands.”

“Jesus might return.”

“Well, if he does, he knows where to find me as good one place as the other.”

“If there are any earthquakes, the bridges might collapse.”

“I’ll make sure I take the long way around then.”

“There’ll be too many people out. Who knows what they might bring in? They could be bringing diseases from anywhere.”

“I’ll make sure to stay away from crowds, then.”

“And all the trash.”

“I doubt I’ll see anyone I don’t know, anyway.” He squatted and opened the cabinet and dug through glass bottles and plastic coffee canisters to find the colander.

“Don’t throw any of that out.”

“I’m not.” He set it on the stove to have room to shift things out of the other half of the sink basin and rinse it.

“And what if the truck breaks down?”

“I’ll call triple aye.”

“You’d better charge your cellphone.”

“Already on.” Steam caressed the window curtains and condensed on the faucet as he dumped the pot. “Do you want a plate or a bowl?”

Her thumbs, which besides being, obviously, as with the majority of human animals, her two most flexible appendages, were the ones allowed to flex most within the confines of the wrist braces. He stood in front of the stove, slowly stirring the pot as steam still curled out of it, while he waited for her to answer. But instead, she slipped sideways out of the seat—it wouldn’t push back because of everything stacked behind it—and rummaged through a grocery bag that had been left out from a few days before, and pulled out three, then four, Marz Barz, and still looking at the phone, turned and went down the hallway.

Gabriel took it all the same as he took most everything else and opened the dishwasher for a bowl and spooned himself out some noodles and leaned against the counter as he ate, staring blankly at the refrigerator, the two-hundred-plus magnets of every description from children’s TV characters to automobile sales advertising providing a crack-free shell over the original paint, which might matter if such things had resale value, although someone had bought that freezer that will come out of his grandfather’s basement after he died so...

In any regard, while there's no point in going into detail about what or how he thought, and in fact it was, at best, hazy, a competing set of overlapping concerns and conflicted priorities that summed to that fuzzy feeling that he'd had all evening, because that much should be obvious, and if it isn't, well...

The sun rose over the clitoral hood of a vaginal-shaped valley (since the human body is so often described in terms of geology and geography, it only seems fair to apply such remarks in reverse, as the namers of Grand Teton should well know), in and of itself an ambiguity, as too many want to refer to the whole of anything in the general region of, or south of, the mons Venus by that term, rather than just the technically correct hole. Gabriel stood on the front porch as it did, unable to see the whole in all its glory, but instead, able to watch the light move down the valley floor across the green pasture on the far side of the stream, striking cows, seeming for a moment that it might be solid enough a force to tip them over. That the valley itself, bifurcated by a stream, had been what some might've called blessed with what they would've called a small amount of providence that kept that side green pasture from one end to the other, confining houses to the opposite side, went unremarked, a providence only partially, if at all, appreciated by too many of those living on the opposite side, who routinely, it seemed, every summer, brought a petition before the county council to instate a noise ordinance that would gag the cows on the opposite side from mooing after nine-o'clock. Usually, the majority of those houses stood vacant after the end of summer, and the area would at least have its opportunity for rest through most of the fall and winter. But all of those who couldn't or hadn't wanted to come had found themselves in a position vis-à-vis technology to list their houses online for short-term rental with an otherwise hither before unrealizable ease. Already, the cars of these short-term renters had started up in the morning, heading out for breakfast, clogging the one-lane road that led into the valley, causing curious cows to look up, disturbed from their own breakfastings, and to twitch their ears and wonder in cow-like fashion what the use was of making so

much noise first thing in the morning, when nothing was dying. In short, the eclipse, having yet to even have happened, had already caused enough aggravation to justify its early cancellation, had that been possible. And if there had been a big red button available for that, Gabriel would have pushed it if Saturday had meant nothing more in itself than that. He stood there on the porch sipping his coffee and turned to look down the rows of houses. Second from the next over, a woman in just a t-shirt, or at least a t-shirt long enough to obscure that she might've worn anything else, stepped out onto the deck built over the edge of the stream and leaned against the railing, looking out on the morning-lit pasture, her hair messy and tumbling over her shoulders. She ran her fingers back through it and gathered it with a scrunchy that she'd worn around her wrist. She saw him, then, as she turned to go inside, acknowledging him as much as he acknowledged her, which in and of itself, was not, for him, or for her, a pleasant or unpleasant experience. Instead, it was the variable-pitch call of, "Heeeello," that made him put too much pressure on his left molars. "Good morning." An older woman waved. Even though the sun had barely risen, she already wore one of those semi-transparent, tinted sunvisors. Gabriel didn't reply, which, however, didn't stop her from coming partways up the gravel drive. "I said good morning. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Gabriel nodded and moved along the porch around the side of the house. "Morning."

"It's so pretty up here, isn't it?" she said. She looked between the houses, toward the pasture.

"I guess."

But she wasn't the type to be impeded by lack-luster or one-sided conversation, and still smiled. "Yes, it is such a beautiful place." She looked between the houses, again, then over her shoulder at the other houses planted between the trees that rose up that side of the valley. "Are you Gabriel?"

"Yes."

"I'm Dee." She pointed. "We're renting that house down there for the weekend." She looked at Gabriel as if some acknowledgment were necessary, but he couldn't see the point in repeating the obvious. She continued, "We just drove over from Tennessee this morning,

been driving since before six o'clock, actually. The three of us, that is, myself and Johanna and Lydia." She smiled and looked down that way as if she expected to see someone. "But they told us the water would be turned off and you would be the one to talk to about turning it back on. They said they would send you an email about it." Something about the last had the faint air of a question, but not enough to form the mark.

Gabriel nodded. "I'll come around in a few minutes."

The woman still smiled. "It's a very pretty place here." And she looked around as a car passed down the one-lane gravel road that separated houses. "And you live here?"

"All my life."

"It must be a very nice place to live in."

"It's a place." He set his mug on the railing. "I'll come over and take care of that."

"I wouldn't want to interrupt your breakfast. It's just that... We got breakfast on the way in and had too much coffee, you know?"

Gabriel came down the steps, slipped his hands into his pockets as he stepped along the gravel path and into the driveway. Gravel crunched beneath his boots and her slip-on shoes as they walked along the edge of the road, where kinked grass lay dying from cars and heat, and where tires didn't roll, a thick belt of it had grown up in the center of the road, high enough, like many of the other lawns, but not quite yet in need of mowing. "So you take care of all the houses around here?" she said.

"Most."

In fact, his current income, meager in most respects, stood as enough, considering he had no house payment, an electric bill no worse than anyone else under the statewide monopolistic system that effectively appointed Hodine the approximate power of a minor demigod, no home owner's insurance, no health insurance, no dental insurance, no magazine subscriptions, and only an aforementioned cable internet bill without the cable part, or any of the other things that can impinge upon an American's freedom. It was a job grown out of an unintentional criminality, on his part. Back then, in his childhood, when such rural Appalachian areas had first become popular with those aspiring towards upper-middle-class-with-a-wink-and-a-

nod-toward-the-nouveau-rich had first started to eye the area for its ‘unique charms’ real estate developers had wasted no time in subdividing swaths of the county into half-acre lots, temporarily reuniting sweeps of farmland that had once been massive land grants from the time Jackson marched off the Cherokee, subsequently divided down among families, a portion to each child for a subsistence farmstead, until each contemporary descendant of the tail end of these family trees farmed in tears and blood and—land taken with the same, not that they wanted to remember that, because only *their* sweat mattered in the admixture—held little more than a couple or three acres apiece, a minor portion of such land once tentatively repurchased and re-consolidated along the seventy-five acres here, but which, too, had been subdivided down after his father had sold off everything but what directly stood around their house to cover hospital bills and cover a new tax scheme handed down from the state legislature to encourage Hodine to improve its rural infrastructure—something the law conveniently never explicitly required for the money, and which subsequently was pocketed without any work being done—but Gabriel had found, after each house and lot had been sold and each owner subsequently invested in the area’s charm, a number of jobs mowing lawns and planting and watering flower boxes, which the seasonal owners, obviously, couldn’t maintain throughout the year, but liked to see in bloom when they came in for the summer. Given that everything was, obviously, in pushing distance of a mower, the job proved, in many ways, ideal in practice, and not just in the image of the ideal, the young rural boy working earnestly to earn his place in the world, a myth that, in itself, influenced more than a few to hire him. It was only that, at the time, an completely unbeknownst to him, he had contributed his part to a minor plan to defraud the Florida state government of a rather small, admittedly, amount of revenue. At the time, of course, he hadn’t known anything about license plates and taxes and that one state could be cheaper than the other, and that if a yard was maintained regular enough and mail collected, and the flower boxes kept planted and watered, and the house aired out, the authorities of the state that *was* receiving tax dollars could be willingly fooled into the idea that it was a most-of-the-year residence, rather than a few-weeks-in-the-summer one. Not that he minded

any of this after he was old enough to understand it; it went into the same category as almost everything else: if it didn't hurt you directly, why care? His younger self had just been glad enough to get the extra thirty-five dollars a year. Adult him... It was a job and he didn't have to drive anywhere to get to it, which meant, in effect, he was on the job all the time, but outside of a few weeks a year, there was little to hold him to it. But he was a fixture of the place, probably considered as much a part of it as the houses themselves and the cows across the way, then again, the people who came in would never have noticed those cows changed out year to year, and would have been less than thrilled to know they had been eating a smaller portion of the previous residents of earlier in the evening, though it was only the specifics that caused an issue, since so long as the origin of anything remains abstract it's comfortable. Such as... But anyway, he had graduated from the embodiment of the youthful male variant of the American dream to a fixture of the landscape, an old moss-covered tree everyone just expected to be there year in and year out who no one could understand had been cut up and carted away for firewood after being struck by lightning. He pulled his keys out of his pocket as he moved around the side of the house while the three ladies gathered round the car. Really, all it took was opening a padlock and turning two cutoffs. He did the same, with the respective differences for electricity vs water, to the breaker box, the pump kicking on. He put his keys in his pocket as he walked around the house. "Everything's on," he said.

"Thank you." Dee smiled.

"Dee."

She looked at the other woman, shook her head, and reached into the car and rummaged through her purse and handed her a set of keys overtop the car. The other woman quickly went up the front steps and unlocked the front door to go inside.

"One thing," he said, and Dee turned toward him. "There's a trash can by the toilet for paper." She looked at him quizzically. "We have septic tanks out here. Toilet paper fouls them up. If the bag fills up, put it in with the rest of the garbage."

"Oh." She nodded. "Okay." She smiled again. "Are you excited about the eclipse?"

"It is what it is."

“Since you’re from around here, you probably know the best spots to see it from.”

One of the things he wouldn’t have thanked what they call providence for, had he known it, was that the world was descending on this county and its neighbors because of a meteorological happenstance—or that is to say, he knew of the happenstance, that rain and cloud cover and timing had conspired to make this eclipse almost unviewable anywhere on Earth but on this one strip of this one state—it’s the providence part he didn’t know about, but only because no one else did, either.

“Kinda depends, I guess. They’re having something on Mainstreet. But that will be crowded. And another one over at the highschool. There’s a thing at the University and at the technical college, as well. If you go through the park, I think they’re setting up to take pictures on the lookout up there.”

“And where are you planning to watch from?”

“Don’t know that I am, yet.”

“You’re not going to watch the eclipse?”

“I figure it’ll be memorable.”

“Oh? How?”

“Well, everyone else will be watching it, and if I’m the only one that purposefully stays in and doesn’t, that makes me sort of unique.”

“Oh, but you can’t do that.”

“Well, as I said, I haven’t decided yet.”

The other woman, the one who’d gone inside, Lydia, emerged onto the porch, touching her forehead as she looked at the way the sun streamed through the trees and speckled rooftops and siding. And the third, Johanna, had started to unpack the car.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. Have a nice day.”

“Um.” Dee raised her hand to catch his attention before he turned. “Maybe we should get your number. Just in case something goes wrong.” Human discourse and dialogue, of course, expressly excels and exceeds in succeeding at failing to be literal, due to the nature of the technology itself. Certain theology claims this to be an inherited trait. But none of these people know what they’re talking about. As if meaninglessness also has to be designed.

“Email’s on the fridge.” He talked very little on the phone. If

they made one without the phone part, he'd have bought it. "It's the easiest way to get me."

"Not that there will be a problem," she said. "But you know what they say about being prepared."

"Yeah," he said. "Yuns take care."

"Yuns?" Lydia said, as she came down the front steps. "I thought people here said y'all."

Dee let out an exasperated breath.

"It's yuns," he said, and turned and started back down the road. But after a few steps, he turned, and walking backwards, said, "We also tend to use yonder alot," and turned, again, and continued on.

Things he didn't hear:

"What's wrong with you?" Dee said.

Lydia had just hauled her suitcase out of the trunk. "What do you mean what's wrong with me?"

"That was just horribly rude."

"It wasn't rude."

"Besides," Johanna said, "he's not *that* cute, anyway." He would've, had he heard it, regarded this as too kind a statement. But everyone just hides in absolutism for fear of relativism and cowers in relativism in fear of the absolute.

"I didn't say anything about that."

"You didn't *have* to."

"You should have asked him where's a good place for lunch."

"There isn't anything in the fridge," Lydia said.

"Of course you already looked. And besides," Johanna said, "if he'd been interested, he would've offered to help with the luggage."

"Oh, be quiet." Dee hauled out her own two suitcases, set both on the gravel, and shut the car door.

He added his mug to the small collection of dishes in the space carved out from among plasticwares atop the dishwasher. Predictability had, of course, gone out the proverbial window: whereas a lifetime of experience usually told him the vehicular habits of a statistically large portion of the county's population, and therefore allowed him on an instinctual level to know when the traffic would be least and the fewest people any particular place, the few million people now pouring into the county was very much beyond the calculable. The house was otherwise dark, besides the light coming through the lacework curtains hung over the kitchen window, and through the den windows. His phone'd been left hooked to charge atop a stack of old mail in a chair in there, the indicator light on the end of the charger painfully blue, which thankfully extinguished when he disconnected it and put the phone in his front shirt pocket over his heart. He took the truck keys off the peg board as he stepped into the kitchen. "I'm gone," he called down the darkened hallway. But no reply came. But he glanced at the garbage can on the way out. He couldn't remember if the dump would close tomorrow or not. (It did.) So he disconnected the lid and pulled the bag and tied it off, but left it without a replacement, even though he knew he didn't have to worry about his mother replacing it while he was gone.

He'd started out, but dropped the bag and stepped into the kitchen again to grab his sunglasses off the top of the microwave. The front door, like the back, he'd replaced some years earlier with one of those models that have the blinds builtin. And as usual, they were closed, so he couldn't see anything before he opened the door. So it resulted in them startling each other quite badly. (But it shouldn't be construed that I had any hand in arranging this set of circumstances to coincide, because sometimes that's just the way things happen, given enough

activity, some of it has to overlap, so nothing more should be read into it.)

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. And she stepped backwards across the porch to allow him out. He pulled the door to, and the keyless lock clicked. “I don’t mean to disturb you.”

“It’s no problem.”

“Going out?”

“Taking off some garbage.”

“Well, it’s not that I want to be a bother or anything, you understand. It’s just, well...”

“What do you need to know?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just.” She held up her phone. “We were trying to decide on lunch, and we thought we might try to avoid the rush, you know. They say there are going to be an awful lot of people coming in today. And we thought it might be a good idea to swing by a grocery store and pick up a few things.”

“It would be a good idea.” If everyone were smart they’d keep a minimum of a week’s worth of food on hand in case of blizzards and solar eclipses, except no one will need that much for this occasion, obviously.

“The problem is, we keep trying to look these things up, but it doesn’t make any sense. It says there should be a store just a couple miles down this road.”

“Yeah. You can’t trust the online maps of anyplace around here. Unless you want to be on a road that doesn’t exist.”

“Oh.” She didn’t sound too convinced of that. But it was factually correct. “Okay. So what would you suggest?”

“Well, the closest one is Anglers, which I know sounds like a fishing supply shop. You go down through here back to the four-lane, turn left, then right before you hit the service station at the top of the hill, you turn right onto a two-lane road, you take that road past the Koch farm and around the substation, and you keep on that road until you get to the Mennonite church, then you turn left, cross over a bridge, go up the hill, take the right fork, and go through this minute township called Presbyterian, then out by the technical college, and the state depot yard, and it’s just beyond that on the right, but you have to slow down and watch for the turnoff, otherwise

it's easy to miss. But if you do, you can always turn at the intersection and take the overpass up and around behind the technical college and try again."

There's no need to describe how she looked in response to this answer.

"Things are spread out here."

"Apparently."

"Let me know if you need anything else."

"The thing is... We had figured we would probably have to find an ATM. Do many places accept Apple Pay around here?"

"Short of a used bookstore, yes. There's an ATM in the technical college parking lot. There's also one at the credit union, just past the grocery, halfway between it and the highschool. You can't miss it, the highschool's up on a hill, so once you see that, look to your left."

"Well, I'll try to remember that." She glanced down at the bag of garbage. "Well, I don't want to hold you up from anything. Thank you very much."

"No problem."

"I guess we will just have to find our way as best we can. It will be sort of an adventure. Is there any place you recommend?"

"Depends on what you want, I guess."

"I hope it's not too easy to get lost."

"So long as you stay on pavement, you either connect back into a main road or come to a dead end. So you just have to make sure you don't end up going in circles."

"It sounds like you're just making fun of us."

"Not trying to."

She laughed. "If it's really that bad, we might have to have you drive us around."

"Like I said, I'm going that way."

He could sometimes manage to be cavalier in *just* the kind of way that was exciting in a very *particular* way. And considering family history, there was more than no small part of it genetic, which, as with athletic ability, did require no small amount of practice, no matter the latent talent, but which, once developed, could be almost automatic.

"Oh, only if it didn't put you out. And it does sound so silly." After

all, they'd just met; he could be a serial killer, or something. Being something might be worse. Even if, or especially since, the reviews were good.

"You probably see so many people come through here that it gets impossible to remember names and faces."

"I naturally have a problem with names most of the time, anyway."

"But you must make an impression." Point of fact is quite a lot of reviews on various rental sites regarded him highly, though identifying him by first name only. If anything, it was an oddity in the site's business model, since with no particularly overly hostile negative reviews there was nothing for the review company to charge for having removed, and reduced them, on those pages, at least, to relying solely on advertising income.

"You'd have to ask other people about that."

"Mm."

"Well, if you need to ride out."

"Only if it won't cause you any trouble. It's just..." She motioned with her phone. "Unless you can accept something, that is. Do you have an account?"

"It'd be easier just to ride out. That is if you don't mind riding in an old truck."

"Oh, no." She turned. "Just give me a minute." And she started down the front steps.

Gabriel followed her down, and as she went down the driveway and cut onto the road, he tossed the garbage bag into the truck bed. And he waited there, leaned against the side of the truck, forearms propped on the side of the bed until he saw her walking back. He climbed into the driver seat and leaned across to unlock and open the passenger door. "Sorry about the mess." A couple pairs of leather gloves and a few crushed plastic bottles rolled around in the floorboard, and he bent over and grabbed them and stuffed them behind the seat.

"Oh, it's no problem." She slammed the door, looked over her shoulder for the seat belt.

"I have to make a stop at the dump."

"Please, don't let me hold you up from anything."

"It's on the way." He put his arm over the seat and turned to look back through the window as he reversed. A horn blared; he

pulled toward the edge of the one-lane road, but the car coming in didn't have that much courtesy. Adequate roads are the last thing any developer thinks about, if they think of them at all, beyond the absolute minimum, and contrary to the notion that water will always flow downhill, or in other words, take the easiest path, housing development roads might be seen as proof of alternate universes, if there were any such a thing, most of them seeming to emerge partially from some more chaotic universe, where everything's uphill and corners cannot be physically constructed to less than a certain degree, and in which gravity always pulls everything laterally. "It can be a difficult place to drive if you're unaccustomed to it." He turned the truck onto the road again. And that was only the first head-on encounter of that morning. Though, to his advantage, people with nice, small cars generally gave his beat-up piece of junk a wide berth, or would have, if their suspensions and clearance allowed them to get off the shoulder of the road, so even with the advantage, he ended up pulling into the grass more often than not.

At the bottom of the creek, a line stretched off the four-lane, bottlenecked by the one-lane bridge. And finally, after having had just enough of incourtesy, he jerked the wheel and revved the engine and went over the bridge, skimming by a small SUV. A horn blared. "Sorry." He stopped at the edge of the four-lane and eyed the traffic either way. "You might regret riding with me." And she couldn't hide that's what she wasn't sure she hadn't thought on some level, as he gunned the engine and hopped out into the median, waiting there as a stream of cars punctuated by the occasional tractor trailer blurred past. He gunned the motor again and shot through a gap and onto a small stretch of pavement on the far side that led through a chain-link gate, either side of which garbage lay strewn, ripped open bags and things that had never been bagged in the first place, thrown out by people who couldn't be bothered to drive twelve more feet or read the open hours posted on the bullet-marked sign bolted to the fence just above the one that warned entrants to beware of the bees, and around a hill meant to hide the few dumpsters and recycling trailers from the general public whooshing by just a few yards away. He dropped the truck into park and jumped out and threw the bag into the compactor, nodded to the man in the little building paid to

ensure only county residents disposed of their trash and recycles in this particular location, so it could be hauled off by a company *paid* by the county, who then turned around and sold those recyclables for yet more profit, whereas neighboring counties had managed to work out that the disposal companies would pay *them* some pittance, a fact conveniently avoided by the county commissioners. But anyway...

Pulling out of the dump didn't prove to be as hard as getting across all four lanes, and once they turned off below the service station, the traffic lessened considerably. The road dropped off one side down to the river until they got out near the substation, where, below the road, a farmer had long been trying to disprove evolutionary theory by demonstrating that animals could not, in fact, turn into one another, by attempting to force cows to turn into pigs by raising them in mud holes. He slowed to move toward the middle of the road to avoid the small array of protesters standing with cardboard signs, overlooking the farm. Nearby, another, larger, group stood taking pictures. The protesters fluctuated in number year to year, a kind of club based at the university, dedicated to bringing to the public's attention the potential health hazards that might arise from electro-magnetic radiation emanating from the substation and associated lines overhead that feed into various points of the county, on various species of livestock. What you won't find on those signs and posters is the general consensus, though not explicitly articulated or even necessarily, consciously known, is that alien abduction, in the case of cows, is an attempt by a benevolent species to ameliorate this flaw in the human food chain by treating these cows via a kind of extraterrestrial chemotherapy, the cost of which is borne out by the broader base of an inter-and-sub-galactic Pseudopublicrat healthcare plan. Incidentally, this notion, just as inarticulated and unconsciously known, is the primary foundation for a local meat-eaters association, who, though nominally and publicly known to exist to push back against vegan aggression, according to a professor at Eagleton University, after an intensive meta study of papers related to the use of language among local vegan and non-vegan organizations (the former outnumbered one-thousand-to-one, there being only one full—true—vegan within the county limits—not to be confused with vegetarianism—even if they often were) but this meta study concluded,

though with a rather high error bar, that the use of language between mainstream society and such groups was orthogonal, at best, and that, in effect, phrases such as those by national fast food vendors are, implicitly, though not consciously, taken by this segment of their advertising base as referring to the advancement of a program of explicit extermination against any species receiving such socially funded medical attention. But in any regard...

As he'd said, the shortest way was to turn across the bridge at the Mennonite church. Though, there were no known Mennonites left, however, the imposing white-painted structure remained looking out over the Tuckasegee river, the main artery of this, as well as the five surrounding counties, that had once, before the placement of dams, been THE thoroughfare on which dugout canoes had passed on this aboriginal superhighway. The Mennonite church, itself, had been built on something not nearly approaching a village, really, a kind of way station, mostly used by a Spanish expedition that had never returned, but who'd gone off somewhere else before they'd disappeared, so there really was no one to have ever given a shit about the place to haunt it, but they—who they were always being indefinable—did anyway, that is, at least according to the tales that even old wives had sense enough not to stir. These days, the church has no owner, in fact, any attempts to establish that have so far devolved over the last seventy-eight years into such counter-suing messes that a state law had been enacted three years prior to ban such lawsuits for a period of seventy-five years, with an option for renewal at that time, a legal move not without precedent, not that that would have been completely necessary, as, at some point, there's always a point before all precedents and at which point that which will become the precedent must be set, otherwise such subsequent references to such a precedent could not take place and everyone would be left perpetually doing things for the first time. There are currently two lawsuits challenging the legality of this law. (Something that state legislators had failed to take into account before the last session ended.) Neither had it been placed on the roll of historical records, in most part because no one had yet found any records of any Mennonites ever residing in the county, which might or might not be connected as to why there are none now. In any regard, it remains a mystery who keeps repairing and whitewashing it. But overall it

looks as new as it did... whenever it was built, which is not to say that I don't know, after all, it's just that there's no point in spelling it out. Already there's approximately one church per fifteen-and-one-half county citizens. There is a point where enough is enough.

"What a beautiful bridge." She looked up at the struts that rose over their heads as they rumbled across planking bound to black iron that had been put into place before there'd been cars invented to cross it.

"It was actually built as a railway bridge," Gabriel said. He pointed over his shoulder. From the end, the whole structure looked directly into the front of the white-washed church. "Right after the Civil War—" —And there's no need to even bother to go into the history of the county during that silly affair—" —a guy came down claiming to have a piece of paper that said he was a descendant of the original landowners, that he'd found in a secret compartment in a chimney or a fireplace, or such. This was just as timber production was getting up. So supposedly they were looking at pushing in a railway line from Asheville. Supposedly he was angling to get the land for that. And the thing was supposed to run right through here. And he built this bridge to supposedly sell to them." By the time he'd said this, they'd already started up the hill into Presbyterian, and could look down on the church and river and bridge and the cars that lined both sides of the river and near choked the narrow two-lane highways that ran alongside. Brightly colored inflatable rafts and kayaks, black inner tubes, made it difficult, at times, to discern the water proper, as a bathing-suit-clad collective human mass floated downstream. It was the removal of the dam just outside the Helena township that had opened up enough of the river to really make the area something of a destination for water sporting in the last few years, something for which, without their own knowledge of it, many shop owners offered semi-daily prayers of thanks for its removal and, connectedly, the fact that former county commissioner Wallace Zimmer's daughter was such a slut.

"Without trying to sound like too much of a tour guide," Gabriel said, "you're now entering the smallest township, officially the smallest township, in the state." But they'd already gone past, even with the fifteen-mile-and-hour speed limit after reaching the top of the

hill, and passing two flashing DOT signs that warned of this fact, by the time he'd said it, and she had to try and look over her shoulder at the small stone post office, one stone house, a stone church, a stone school building, and a vine-covered plank building that was, indeed, an outhouse, mainly because the outcome of a legal fight between the county and township in the 20s had resulted in them being ineligible for sewer service, but conversely, due to the nature of their incorporation, left them unforbidden from developing their own sewage-handling standards.

Down the other side of the hill, flashing DOT signs indicated a return to the standard speed limit.

The county, however, in recent times, has risen some in estimation, proof of that being on the road just past the technical college, where one of two new roundabouts had been constructed the year prior. Unfortunately, they were both a little small and lopsided, so tractor trailers sometimes threatened to tip over when they passed round and through them. Dee had to brace her arm against the truck door. "Sorry," he said.

"Oh, it's fine."

"Would you prefer the credit union or the store first?"

"Oh, whatever is easiest."

But there was no such thing on the section of road ahead. And ever since they'd approached the technical college, traffic had increased, some might say exponentially, though this would be technically incorrect. Ahead, the sun sparkled off thickly packed car roofs. He slowed, eyeing those phenomena exuded from the interplay of artifacts moving upon the landscape. "Hang on." He cut off the road and dropped down into the loading area behind the store, ran alongside a tractor trailer just pulling out, and went into a narrow-paved corner that led along the one side and out into the parking lot. Cars already filled most of it, actually, almost all of it, though most of it was spillover from the local Joint Burger (and yes, the owner does suffer from dyslexia, and he is also an advocate of the statewide legalization of marijuana, neither of which issues had anything to do with the name of the place) which lay on the other side of the parking lot, just ahead, where heat wavered from the smoke stacks as if going up to fuel the sun, blowers carrying the smell out over the nearby road.

When they'd climbed out, he said over the truck bed, "I'll have to give you a small warning." She adjusted her sunvisor to look across at him, but still had to squint. "You might find...variety lacking around here." Buggies piled out of their corrals, and Gabriel grabbed one and shoved it across the concrete, one of the wheels rattling as if it would come off. Cars passed through the parking lot, and they waited for an opening to jog across and then between those parked in the firetruck lane. Already, a good number of people milled among the tight-packed aisles, but nowhere near as many as would by the middle of the afternoon. "Ah, crap." He shook his head at the empty buggy corral inside. "Here, you take this one. I'll go out and get another one." And the automatic doors, as slow as they were, didn't need to reopen to allow him out into the heat and brightness. When his eyes had readjusted after coming back in, he saw her down in what passed for a bakery section. At least, that was a relief; though it very much wouldn't have been the first time he'd have had to shepherd someone around aisle by aisle. The store manager had come out to work one of the checkouts, and eyed him, but Gabriel didn't regard that before he squeezed the buggy between a checking-out customer and one of the racks of wines, or more accurately, what remained of one of the racks of Asheville-native wines. In fact, Anglers rested *just* within the borders of the Kingsly township, its outside wall on one side, in fact, formed a portion of the border, and thus, being under the township's jurisdiction, rather conveniently, it was the only grocery in the southern half of the county exempted from the dry laws, meaning they stocked beer and wine (however, still not to be sold on Sunday, although the courts claim that is, in fact, *not* a religiously motivated law, and partially justifying this is a rather esoteric argument about the Sabbath actually falling on Saturday...) but no hard liquor was sold, which is reserved for the state-sanctioned monopoly of the ABC store (part of this monopoly stipulated that there could never be a store covering the remainder of the alphabet inside the county). But too, a good portion of that refrigerated shelf space already sat empty, and by the end of the day, even the middle-grade and worst would've gone, as well. Someone had already rolled out a trolley stacked with boxes fresh off the truck and stood cutting the plastic wrapping with a utility knife. And both of them ignored

each other as Gabriel left the buggy and stepped past him and grabbed a six-pack of dark lager from an upper shelf, which, luckily, would always be the last to go, and they only had the one brand, anyway, in cans or in bottles, even with all the local craft beers that came from being so near and yet so far away from the newly minted micro-brew mecca in the east, and both would've probably sat there on the shelf even if the whole store'd emptied, except not. But shopping's so boring, even if it's all there is to do, and even though it's the time of year when female coeds, though guys on occasion, too, tend to come in wearing sun dresses, which have a peculiar quality all their own, regardless of quantity, which might somehow be the inverse of Stalin's notion of quantity having a quality all its own, but anyway, this didn't matter as he pushed the buggy between aisles to search out cat food while, out past the parking lot and across the crosswalk and up the hill to the highschool, the Senior Youth League for the Advancement of School Shootings is currently in a special meeting.

Here, Shepard, who some would say, if they knew it, may be one of the most perfect of creations (*he* doesn't read YA dystopian fiction), calculated to execute his duty with the utmost in fidelity, taking into account every conceivable, and some inconceivable, incongruities, in the state of man, walked down the hall with his backpack slung over one shoulder. He'd managed an exterior reflection of an inward calmness that put even Gabriel to shame, a demeanor so effortlessly relaxed, yet never cold, never indifferent, yet never the opposite of those. He existed almost as if he floated through the world, the borderline Gnostic ideal of someone about to, at any moment, shed the sin of flesh and become insubstantial spirit, destined to exist forever beyond the notion of time, as if in some way the disposition of original sin'd somehow been relegated to or related to a pocket watch, or some other form of time-keeping device, which some among them, had the movement managed to exist in any substantial way, other than in the subliminal form it's taken in modern society, would be invoked by some painter, perhaps, with images of melting clocks draped over the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

"Did you see Lily today?" John said. They walked down the hallway together as students scuttled out of class at the start of lunch.

"She'll get in trouble wearing that," Shepard said. His eyes flitted across the faces of those who moved through the hall.

Ahead, Luke transferred books from his backpack to his locker, and both stopped when they neared him. And having sensed them both there, he glanced over his shoulder. "Be there in a minute."

"So what about tomorrow?" John said.

Luke said, "You hear about Lily?"

"What?"

"Got sent home." Luke closed his locker. "Suspended."

“Not exactly unexpected,” Shepard said.

“I heard they got out a tape measure and everything.”

“I’d like to’ve been the tape measure,” John said.

Mathew came up, silent exchanges between them all.

They fell into walking together toward the cafeteria. And Mark came running up from behind. “Did you hear about Lily?” He shifted his backpack off his shoulder, and they made their way along with and through the multitudinous streams of foot traffic.

“Who hasn’t?” Mathew said.

Nominally, the school existed on a single level, always building outward, rather than up, though the recent addition of a building for the performing arts made that appear not to be the case. But in any regard, first-time visitors inevitably found themselves initiated by stumbling as they passed through one hallway or the other, where newer construction had not *quite* married the level of that which had been existing prior, and which left a small step up or down between the two. But after having walked these halls long enough, such obstacles become quite automatically avoided, and it would have required a substantial effort, if not an almost Herculean one, to get anyone currently passing through those halls to consciously acknowledge them, and if they had, they would’ve probably tripped.

“They made her put on a coat and had the police escort her out and everything.”

“What would you expect?” Shepard said.

A general, though lowkey, noise rose in a staticky haze over the dining area as they filtered their way into the queues that made their way up to the trays and down the food line toward the cash register. Shepard pulled his phone from his pocket and idly held it near the payment screen and tapped it in a rapid, habitual way that nothing but his motor skills paid attention to.

“So,” Mark said. He stepped over the bench with his tray in both hands and set it on the table. “Are we still supposed to come in tomorrow?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

They ripped the plastic baggings that separated them from their utensils.

“You think Lily’ll be allowed to come tomorrow.”

"Not from what I heard."

"Crap."

"Hey."

Shepard turned and looked over his shoulder.

"Did you hear what happened?"

And he looked up at her as he chewed.

"Are they really not going to let her come back for tomorrow?
What're we supposed to do about the show?"

Shepard swallowed and shrugged.

"This isn't fair," the girl said. "It's all bullshit."

"Careful," Mark said. He glanced passively at one of the security cameras.

"They can't hear anything," the girl said, indignant about being insinuated to be an idiot. "Besides," she said, "it's already on Facebook. Haven't you seen?" Mathew pulled his phone from his pocket. Mark, who'd already had his on the table, tapped the screen of his.

"Ouch," Mark said. And he rotated his phone and slid it across the table, toward Shepard, who regarded it casually as he took another bite. And while he did, a message popped up, followed by the sound of popcorn, and Mark pulled it back. "Oh, wow. Get a load of this."

Luke's phone had gone off, too. In fact, several around the cafeteria had, enough so that the static staccato that'd hung over the room momentarily changed pitch and frequency.

The girl pulled her phone from her pocket. "This's bullshit."

"It's what happens," Shepard said. He removed his own phone from his front pocket and laid it beside his tray.

"She didn't even show anything."

"You think it'll make the news?" Luke said.

"Will she get a mugshot?"

"Oh, god," the girl said. "This is so much bullshit." Though, she wasn't really talking to me. So-called sane people hardly ever do. It's just a figure of speech. It'd be like that even if I didn't exist. "I can't wait to get out of here." But it's not as if that matters. Even after she graduates, speaking hypothetically, of course, in case it's been momentarily forgotten when the world's supposed to end, it'll just be that she gets fired from a job, rather than merely suspended from a school, when she posts something contentious, or when a former

boyfriend leaks nude video of her. After all, highschool's purpose should, ideally, be to prepare students for the real world. And it's nice to see that something can live up to an ideal. Of course God is eternal and without change, and therefore, change is the opposite of God, even if God is all things, and therefore change must be...evil? And then that which is created in the image of God must seek not to change, and it is the eternal temptation toward change that is sin. All notions of right and wrong are precluded, and it is only change and not-change that matter. To change is to err. Flexibility is to err. So in some ways, though some would say he is not my greatest creation, some would say there is a spark of the divine in Principal Anderson.

And Shepard recognizes this, even though that spark would be defined as impure. "It's the rules," he said between bites. "And it's the law."

Again, phones vibrated and ringtones cut through and temporarily silenced the student body.

Gabriel, momentarily enthralled, by, though his casual glance wouldn't have revealed it, and even he didn't realize it for the first 9/16ths of a second, the body lightly wrapped within a white-print sun dress patterned sparsely with small yellow flowers, but he turned from the sight of it and looked down the meat counter. All the pre-packaged, pre-spiced, pre-marinated, pre-rubbed barbecue'd been taken twice over, and the guy handling stocking was still in the back trying to dig up anything else. Sometimes he looked for markdowns, however, today, they'd gone through and sharpened out all the lower prices, so that even out-dated packages were full price. Of course a few people noticed, but there were plenty enough who didn't. So it was shaping up nicely that barbecue'd be featured prominently the following days. North Carolina's always been in a heated battle with Texas over their dedication to it, though, most mental energy was dissipated on internal strife, that is, the perennial struggle between eastern vs western barbecue; why fight Texans when you can fight yourselves? This county, in particular, has a rather tempestuous relationship with barbecue. Though, it is firmly within, if not the heart of, the western barbecue tradition in the state, though no one else besides them recognizes this, of course, it is also prominent, though, again, not widely known or acknowledged, for having the largest anti-barbecue congregation of any state, or so everybody else, not just limited to preachers in rival churches, tend to say. And in fact, this congregation, under the leadership of Reverend Russell Pope, who besides, so they say, besides having a rather unfortunate name for someone so ensconced within Protestantism, and in fact, so do they say, it had been one of the primary motivators for him starting his own church, as he couldn't find employment in the only field he was credentialed for, any other

way, so they said, though this was really just a way of acknowledging their own situation as ministers, but this congregation, so they love to say, spent most of its time on the road in a set of three secondhand school buses, making their rounds along a circuit that encapsulated the major barbecue venues of the mainland United States. Mostly, it was said, their actions had taken the form of protests, some of which had even been on YouTube, before YouTube started removing videos for having too few views after a certain amount of time. Their GoFundMe page fared somewhat better, it was said; there's always someone willing to contribute to evangelical groups claiming persecution, or so they say, another needed acknowledgment of their own situation, that is, that situation of those who repeated these stories and theories, a state they nominally maintained as their sole income, that is, pointing out how Christians couldn't be anything but persecuted in the modern American landscape, therefore states and counties failing to supply them with a police guard during their protests, which few ever realized were going on, anyway, because they tended to park on public land up to a mile outside the venues in question, and because they, on account of their signs, were often mistaken as hitchhikers, but still, in failing to supply such protection the states and counties were obviously discriminating against Christians, thereby proving the existence of such persecution already taken to be, and at one point or the other, it tended to be more convenient, and cheaper, for a town official to come up with a couple hundred dollars out of his own pocket to get them enough gas to get out of town. Not that that was a form of charity; the congregation always made available a pamphlet on the nature of their beliefs, which they sold for whatever the person felt moved by God to offer, or so some said. And while some might make a claim of me having moved certain people in such a way at times, if I had done so, it would've only been so that this particular congregation would arrive home, as it were, at the appropriate hour. And also, it was completely their own choices and plans that led to it. If such a congregation had existed. And in any regard, as stated, these concocted stories were merely a means of acknowledging their own situation, a safety valve that protected the Protestantism of the American South, though not just them, similar protection mechanisms had long before evolved

within the base feature set of the human mind, but other humans are not the topic at present, so in that regard, continuing, it was these flights of fantasy that allowed them to survive against themselves by acknowledging themselves by not acknowledging themselves by projecting these acknowledgments onto another group that wasn't themselves and which couldn't threaten them by actually existing to contradict any of this so that they could then be acknowledged.

But in regards to Gabriel, when he looked up again, the coed in the sun dress had disappeared down the dairy aisle. He tore off a plastic bag from the overhead roll and put a couple packs of very spare spare ribs on top of the mass of cat food cans stacked in the buggy.

And Dee, emerging from the end of an aisle, waved and pushed her buggy toward him. She'd been content to smile at him every time she saw him in the distance up until that point, and continued doing so now.

"Finding everything?" he said.

She laughed. "I'm afraid you were right. But I guess we'll just have to make do." She glanced into his buggy and then down the meat aisle. "It's just amazing, isn't it, to see everything almost gone?" As she said that, a stocker pushed a pallet of boxes out from the back, and they had to move aside. She glanced at what remained of the meat. "It would be nice to have something. But I'm afraid we're all quite terrible with the grill. Do you grill?"

"On occasion."

"I bet you're quite good."

"That would depend on who you ask." In fact, he was, in general, considered a local heretic, being as it was that he observed neither, truly, an eastern or western style, and even being in the western end of the state, he could've found some respect for a steadfast holding to the eastern ways, even if they were wrong, however, there is nothing more deplorable than a mix-and-match attitude, which, at one point, had almost resulted in him losing a thumb.

"Oh, I bet you are." She looked in his buggy again. "If I may ask, are you planning anything soon?"

"I was thinking about maybe tonight, actually."

"With anyone?"

"No."

“Since you’ve already helped us out so much, why don’t you come to dinner with us then. We can fix everything up, and all you have to do is bring the meat.”

“Alright.”

“Wonderful. Well, I’ll let you choose what will work out best, since you’re the expert and all. Just don’t be skimpy, now.”

The lines had only gotten longer by the time they’d made their way to the front of the store, strangling access to any of the aisles from the front and effectively trapping anyone in the back of the store and preventing anyone else getting in. All this confusion was only aided by the self-checkout line, which in combination with high amounts of errors and the abysmally slow scanning process, and the time needed for the over-harried clerk to walk between the four queues and back to her console to clear each error, and then repeat the process because it hadn’t actually cleared or the customer did *exactly* the same thing a second, if not a third, time, the creation of which are only technically my fault in the sense that having created the men and women, so they say, who then created these abominations was my fault, and therefore everything in creation technically comes to be by creation via being a creation of one of my creations, but that withstanding, I will not be held responsible for it, but could reserve the right to use it to my own ends, if I wanted to, such as now, but I don’t have to, as a fight breaks out completely on its own, merely as a result of compression and heat and human consumer psychology, only a small one, but I don’t have anything to do with it, it’s all their fault. And in fact, with so many people packed around, it’s not as if a real fight can hardly get started, let alone sustain itself, so the whole thing went, essentially, unnoticed, and therefore happened in only the most technical sense.

Gabriel pulled out his wallet and offered his rewards card to the cashier. And, yes, his mother assuredly would have verified that the rewards points had gone in correctly online. The scanning equipment steadily beeped as she shuttled items into the plastic bags on the carousel. And she did the same with the beer and bagged it, tapping the console, without *actually* verifying via visual inspection that indeed he possessed a valid driver’s license or state-issued ID, an occurrence that didn’t bother him, even though he was already standing

there with his wallet open anyway and it wouldn't have been any extra trouble, and some would think, as much as the manager—who incidentally is the brother of the highschool principal—they both share the same gene for developing a balding patch on the back of their heads, and another set that predisposes them to being partial to the inculturated idea of dealing with this fact via use of a combover—but as much as he's, practically, if not necessarily literally, though only because of the particulars of the law, which was one regard in which his brother had it better, beat it into her that you card *everyone*, you'd think that there would be *some* tacit attempt in that area. But, hey, in case anyone's forgotten, the world's supposed to end, so...yeah, so it's not as if anything worse can be done to her at the moment, and in fact, death might be too easy a release from the current situation, after all, it's not as if she has to worry about things like having healthcare out of this kind of position, and since the world's going to be in the process of ending, tomorrow, but not reach the end of the end yet, because the full end of the end's still more than a day away, things, even the middle of the end, have to reach the middle before they can reach the end of the end, but since the world's going to end tomorrow, paying in anything extra would have just been a waste on the company's part, anyway, and besides, if I were to interfere, which I wouldn't, but I could, But if I did, I would have a use for which to put the result of all those bonuses the owner has given himself, which, technically, or so they want to claim on the occasional Sunday, belong to me via something greater than the transitive property, though they don't say this, but in fact are saying something completely else, when they say that everything is God's.

But in any regard, the two eventually made their way into the hot, sunlit parking lot. In the distance, one of the sheriff's department vehicles came down the hill from the highschool, but cut through the light without stopping. Gabriel noticed it in a very automatic way. He took a few milk boxes from the pile in front of the store. Only locals knew why they were there or had any use for them, so plenty of them remained, and in fact, half the covered front of the store was packed with them. He tossed them into the truck bed. "If you tie the bags a couple of times, they're heavy enough to stay put. Put them up behind the cab, and they won't get hit by the wind."

“You always do everything in a truck?”

“Pretty much.” He’d inherited it from his father, who’d inherited it from his father. It was the only one the three of them had ever owned. Which went a long way in explaining why the company was in the shape it had been before its financial demise, which is a certain kind of worse-than-death, some would argue. He offered to push her buggy toward the overflowing corral, and jammed the one into another before he left it setting in the handicap space the excess spilled over into.

He climbed into the truck. “We’ll shoot over to the credit union.” But after he’d steered between the cars entering and exiting and the ones threading their way around looking for a space that wasn’t there, they jammed up in the intersection, cars stacked all the way back through the roundabout and past the technical college. “Shit.” He sighed. “Well, we might get back by next Tuesday.” He gunned the engine, and a small sports scar hesitated when faced with the rusty behemoth and would’ve reversed if it’d been possible, but Gabriel managed to fit the beast into the flow of traffic anyway. If nothing else, with the heat the way it was, they could’ve gotten out and grilled everything on the hood, if need be. They had cooked eggs once that way when he was in highschool. It’d been on a bet. Worked out well enough. The taste, in combination with old paint and car exhaust, had been another matter. Though, in some places, in regards to barbecue, that would merely be considered a weak pre-seasoning. Dee sat lightly pulling her shirt away from her chest, forcing air with it as a makeshift bellows. “Sorry about no air conditioning.”

She shook her head, smiled in kind of a wilted way. “It’s just more ...rustic, isn’t it?”

Finally, the light, which some liked to say had a mind of its own and would sit there for half of eternity at midnight with only one car in one lane, and other times going from green to red faster than human perception could process, finally decided to allow three or four vehicles through, but not too many, though Gabriel managed to gun the engine as soon as the light went yellow, and even if a deputy’d been watching, he’d’ve been as mobile as anything else, all of this to turn into the turn lane and wait there for something to open up so he could turn across into the credit union parking lot, and it might’ve

been next Tuesday before that happened, if the light hadn't happened to change, which, incidentally, has no mind of its own, it being a mechanical object and, regardless of what certain people may think, the amount of electronic circuits in it doesn't come up to the level of complexity evolved in the average amoeba, which would be a bad example because they're so damn complicated, but the point still stands, which is why some local preachers used this particular light as an example of why evolution couldn't possibly be true.

All in all, getting in had proven worse than getting out, lengthening a normally twenty-five minute trip one way to a little more than two hours, exacerbated yet further by the fact that they'd let out school an hour early and all the buses were on the road. Lydia, who'd been standing on the porch, waved at them as Gabriel pulled the truck into the driveway behind their car. But all of this is too damn boring, just like the majority of life. Cars had filled up the inhabited side of the valley, gone in and out to the point even the most overly inquisitive among the bovines out in the field found them boring, as well. Which is exactly how Eva felt when she stood on the deck looking out at them, or what she could see of them, since the afternoon sun all but obliterated everything into uniform brightness—and pronounce it right, it's not Latin, and Latin may be a dead language, but those're no excuses, even if it isn't Latin. She sighed again. The air conditioner unit beside the house continued to hum loudly. She could hear the TV through the glass sliding doors. She sighed and turned and went inside. "Can I have my phone back?"

Her mother looked up from across the couch. "Why?"

"I'm going for a walk. I might need to call an ambulance, or something."

"We've already had this discussion, and you've proved you can't be trusted with that privilege."

"Fine. I wouldn't want to call you even if I was being eaten by a bear, anyway." She turned and went out onto the deck again and down the side steps. Stepping out of the shade, the sun broiled the top of her head. She panted before she'd gone even partways up the road. And stood there huffing as she looked around. Charcoal scent carried on the vague wind that stirred the leaves, the smell of burnt burgers and other charred meats. Bleh. She pulled a face and continued

on. Everyone, it seemed, had situated themselves indoors, bulwarked within the confines of air-conditioned spaces. Hot as she was, everything about it made her mad. Of course, everything made her mad. The main gravel road seemed to travel forever in the distance up the valley, past the more premium-ish houses that bordered the river, where sometimes signs staked at the edges of a given lot admonished anyone passing close that no fishing was allowed and that clearly implicitly stated any fish that might be residing in that particular section of stream at any given time were the property of the property owner. She could've marched all the way up the valley and it wouldn't have looked any different, as if she wasn't getting anywhere at all. And the only interesting thing was an uprooted oak tree that'd come down next to a house, something that, when Gabriel checked his messages, he'd find the owners were quite irate about having happened, after they found out about it from a picture sent with a message from one of the short-term renters who was gravely disappointed in that regard and felt that there should be some financial compensation involved, but what could be done about what might be called an act of God? She looked at the gaping, ragged hole it'd left in the ground, and because the root ball shaded it, the earth actually did look quite cool, a place a mammal could climb down into and sleep peacefully.

A child squealed somewhere. But when she looked round, she couldn't see anything but cars and houses and trees. She looked back at the hole in the ground again.

"What yuh looking at?" Maria, another young woman, stepped beside Eva and shifted up her sunglasses to look down into the hole. She said in a whisper, "This's really boring."

Eva stood there too hot to laugh.

"You from Florida?"

"No." Eva paused a moment in contemplation of that question. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm not allowed to talk to people from Florida." Maria shifted down her sunglasses and looked at her overtop them and smiled. "So if you were a Floridiot, I couldn't talk to you." She looked down the road. "Where're you staying?"

Eva looked over her shoulder, and only then realized how far

she'd come, because she couldn't make out the house in the distance.

"Down there." She pointed vaguely, turned away. "Somewhere."

"This the first time you've been here?"

"Yeah."

"Boring, ain't it?"

"It's okay."

Maria laughed. "You don't have to lie."

Eva turned round. "It's just that there's nothing to do."

"That depends on where you look."

Eva looked at her. "Where do you look?"

Maria smiled. "Around." She inclined her head. "Wanna walk?"

"I..." Eva looked back the way she'd come.

"Your choice."

Eva looked at her. "Where are we going?"

"Around," Maria said, and turned.

"Hey—wait up." Eva fell in beside her.

"What's your name, strange girl?"

"Who're you calling strange?"

"Where's your phone?"

"What do you mean?"

Maria glanced up and down at her. She whispered, "I once saw this video of a woman sticking one up herself." She laughed.

Eva pulled a face. "Weird."

Maria laughed. "Okay, weird girl."

"Stop calling me weird."

"Well, what else'm I s'posed to call yuh?" Maria looked over and grinned.

"Eva."

Maria chuckled. And the chucklings gave way to much beyond that.

Eva stopped. "What's so funny? And stop laughing at me. What is it?"

"You don't get it?"

"No. I don't."

Maria stopped laughing, but still smiled. "What do you get if you put our two names together?"

"I don't know. I don't know your name. What is it?"

Maria laughed. "Sorry. It's Maria."

"So?"

Maria shook her head. "Eva Maria?"

"So?"

"You never heard of the song?"

"No."

Maria shook her head. "It means hail Mary."

Eva puzzled on that a moment or two, and when she looked up, Maria'd started walking again, and she jogged to catch up. "So what does that mean?"

"How should I know?" Maria said. "Maybe it doesn't mean anything." She shrugged. "Do you like beer?"

"I guess...sometimes..."

Maria pointed. "Some guys are having a party up there. A couple of them are reasonably cute." She glanced at her again, from behind her dark glasses. "You're cute enough. And in those shorts I bet they'd let you in."

"Gross."

Maria shrugged. "No wonder you think everything's boring if you won't do anything."

"I do plenty of stuff."

"What happened to your phone?"

"Nothing," Eva said.

"You one of those digital detox people? You're probably a vegetarian, too."

Eva stopped. "If you're going to make fun of me—"

"So you *are* a vegetarian."

"W..."

Maria walked on. Eva jogged to catch her. "How do you know that?"

"It's all in the way you got mad."

Eva shook her head in confusion. "You're weird."

Maria shrugged. "You can always go home and sit with your parents."

Eva didn't reply.

"And what do you think about the end of the world?"

"What?"

Maria shrugged. "They not got you on a leash, your parents? I bet they're the kind that say *if I ask for your phone, and there's a moment's hesitation, that's it, it's over.*" She chuckled to herself about her own funny voice.

"I can get out on my own just fine."

"Uh huh."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. But you know it's just because they don't think you can get in any trouble out here."

"What kind of trouble?"

"You name it. Meth. Heroine. Alcohol. Pain pills. In the city you actually have to *look* to find this stuff, okay, except, maybe, alcohol. If you're into any of those sorts of things."

"And you?" She glanced at Maria, unable to keep a certain note of hesitation out of her voice.

"Oh, I see. You're one of the straitlaced ones."

"I am not."

"Well, if you really want to know, I find it all so boring." Her phone went off, and she pulled it from her back pocket, looked at it, and held it in both hands as she thumbed the screen. "You been anywhere?" she said, without looking up.

"Like where?"

"Anywhere."

"No. Just here. There's so much traffic."

"Ain't there. There's gonna be more than a million people coming in, you know?"

"I guess."

Maria stuck her phone in her pocket. "But there's so much to do around here."

"Like what?"

"Like you could go down and pay to toss some scraps to a bunch of underfed bears they keep in a couple of concrete pits and make 'em dance."

"That sounds awful."

"Yup. Even got on the news one time. Big buncha people were down there protesting. Didn't do nothing, though."

"Seems like that is something that would be against the law."

"They got laws against it where you're from?"

"I...don't know." Eva kicked a piece of gravel. "Are you from around here?"

"You think I'd talk this way just out'a the fun o' it?" She pointed. "Watch out for that house. They got some thirteen-year-old boys that'll leer at yuh through the window." Eva followed her finger. "Less you're into that sort of thing, that is."

"No."

"Just what *are* you into?"

"Lots of things. Stuff."

"What kind'a stuff?"

"Lots of stuff."

"Well, if you like stuff, you should take a walk down to the bottom end, down there where it forks off the road, one morning."

"Why?"

"That's when Isaac comes to check on the cows. Now, he *is* cute. If you're into that sort of thing."

"What's that mean?"

"Exactly what it says. So what happened to your phone?"

"I just didn't want to be bothered with it."

"No boyfriends or girlfriends to update?"

"That's no business of yours."

Maria shrugged.

"Besides, I just don't have to have it all the time is all."

Maria's went off, and she pulled it from her back pocket, looked down at it as she walked, clicked it off, and returned it to her pocket.

"What're you gonna do, then, while you're *disconnecting*?"

"Whatever I decide to do."

"Well, maybe I should leave you to it, then."

"What're you going to do?"

Maria paused. "Maybe that's no business of yours." She looked at Eva and smiled and looked up the ridge. "I think I'll walk up to the fire tower."

"What's that?"

"It's up there." She pointed up the valley. "They put a man on it to watch for fires." She started walking again.

Eva started after her. "Is it hard to get up there?"

“Just gotta follow the road.”

“Is there anything up there?”

“Just a fire tower.”

“Then why go?”

“Why not?” Maria looked at her. “Wanna come?”

Where am I? Oh...I'm here. I'm always here. But that's the problem with being always supposed to be seeing everything at the same time, you're always supposed to see everything at the same time. And it's such a hot day. This's the hottest western North Carolina August on record, and a long time before that, you can take my word on it (and, yes, it's been hotter, but that's only technical). And smoke's rising up everywhere. The scent of charred meat. So relaxing and portentous. That's what they would say. But what is there to do on such a hot day? Oh. Yes.

Russell Pope stands naked, looking out the full-length window, down the hill, over the whole of Mainstreet, the new courthouse on a distant hill, the old one now having become a library, the cars moving so slowly as to not to seem to move at all, the pedestrians who can't shift by one another without rubbing against the other, he himself hidden by distance and the intense glare the late afternoon sun induces against the glass. That light glinters against the sides of the drink glass in his hand, and in the ice therein.

His wife could see none of this. Secluded in the darkness behind her blindfold, she saw even less of the world than anyone who can't see everything sees, which for most purposes is the same as its opposite. The plushly lined gauntlets faintly moved against her wrists and ankles as she shifted what little the ropes allowed. Time is a relative thing passing in gravity and darkness. And the only touch of the world, outside of the restraints, were the sheets against her naked back, the only indication she'd not floated into some interstitial space, void, and yet, sometimes, even then, it did.

Russell turned and looked at her. Drink in hand, he moved toward the bed. Melting ice clinked against glass, buoyed in shallow liquid. Even with the air conditioning, the glass had begun to sweat. And

grasping the rim with the tips of his fingers, he set it in the center of her chest. She shivered and arched upward. He steadied it so it didn't topple, but didn't remove it. Droplets, dislodged by her motions, trickled down the glass and pooled, dribbled off the sides of her body. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Now, stay very still." He brushed her hair behind her ear. "Don't let any of it spill." The tips of his fingers, still cold from holding the glass, grazed over her left breast. They, like everything else, were the same as much as they were different, not the kind of difference that left one sized just faintly smaller or larger than the other or pointing in a contrary direction, though they had that, but the change of familiarity, how much in the same way his body had widened and bulged, puffed in certain places over the years, so had hers, though just as often in different places, now, the weight of her breasts causing them to droop from the sides of her chest, but in watching the unseen changing, day by day, everything remained, still, always as it had been, yet not, the same two people, the cellular descendants of the same bodies issued at conception, more exhausted, sometimes, more delicate, in ways, but extant. His hand drifted down to rest on her stomach, that puffer, too, but still, a puffiness arousing enough to faintly stir the precursor of an erection, a softness as pleasant as all the rest of her. That was something they'd found themselves in the changing years to have in common; her own arousal always stirred by, his expanded, but by no means excessive, middle-aged gut, gut being the word she liked most to use for it, somehow dirty and exciting in the same way as slang for body parts more universally recognized as being in necessity of such abstraction. Ice tinkled against the sides of the glass with her movements. "Don't spill it." His finger dipped into her navel. This had been a more recent addition to their forays, something obviously ridiculous, yet somehow more arousing for it, in the way that there was no predefined expectation for it, something otherwise elided over yet when considered, is no more so than anything regarded as standard, and it's only that a particular culture may define certain metrics of gravitas to certain creases and folds and holes of the human body, all of which can come to obliteration when the acts themselves are not ritualistically administered over and over again, and sometimes, even then, are undermined through this very repetition, so it can be

so hard to know what to do, and in any regard, what culture has not died or is in the process of such? And after all, had not this hole or depression been as censored once on tv and in movies as what lay just above and below it? Which, partially, born and borne out of the long-tail of the interplay of cultural information and interpretation and interpolation, came to be the reason she could and did shudder when he probed into her stomach, as the culture that surrounded them, walking out there on the streets, embodied in human artifacta, delivered through the mass of TVs and radios and computers and phones, would have considered an appropriate and perhaps, even, fitting reaction—though, only if the MPAA weren't involved—to him doing the same between her legs if they could have admitted to the notion of pleasure bestowed or experienced by a possessor of such dual chromosomes. “Don't let any of it spill.” Her chest rose and fell, ice tinkling against the sides of the glass. Leaving his finger where it was, he reached toward the nightstand for the probe, medical-grade purple plastic, only slightly greater in diameter than a q-tip, arrived at after much trial and error. He removed his finger from her, and she made a noise. Resting his then free hand on the lower part of her stomach, he traced the probe's rounded tip over her flesh with just enough pressure to depress the outer film of the largest single organ of any given human body. Ice tinkled against the glass as he circled. “Don't let any of it spill.” He slipped the probe into her navel. Beads that'd collected along the glass's beveled bottom edge and clung there via surface tension between the glass and her skin vibrated away and trickled off her sides as she shook. He released the probe, leaving it to stick at a right angle from her body before he rested the tip of his finger on the end of it, slowly pushed it in tiny, almost imperceptible, circles. Ice rattled against the side of the glass as it toppled over, and cold liquid spilled over her chest, draining off of her, ice rolling off and being sucked down into the sheets by the shifting of the mattress top and pieces of cold wedging against her back. He rested his other hand on her stomach as her breathing steadied, feeling that pulsing movement and the movement of the central artery underneath, the probe still rising perpendicular from her body.

His other hand moved down, his fingers intertwining with the curly hairs at the fringe of the thick forest that washed from between

her legs. This, too, had been one of the long-remodeled grounds in their lives, having begun this journey so long ago, when porn had been on reels in real theatres. And in ways their bodies, as with many others, had reflected the times they'd passed through, but none of these parts so much, perhaps, than her groin, which had gone from the wildness of unknowledgeable youth, to trimmed, to shaved, to be grown again, to be shaved as her legs'd been tied wide in the shower as her husband knelt between them while she cried at the loss but told him to go on with the wonderful humiliation of being exposed and controlled, to the full thickness, the wildness, the untamedness she'd allowed to develop in these latter years, the both of them agreeing, and not just solely in certain moments dominated by want and need, there was something unmitigably sexual about a woman, and for him, especially *this* woman, with uncontrolled body hair, a power conspired against by steel manufacturers and classical painters and the technical limitations of the cameras employed to produce gonzo porn for the preservation and reproduction of capital.

"I told you not to spill anything." He touched his fingertip to the end of the probe. And she arched her back into the wet sheets. "Now you've made a mess." He tweaked the probe. "You always do this. I don't know if you're not listening, or if you're just not trying hard enough." He withdrew the probe, leaned down and kissed her stomach. "I was very thirsty, you know." He kissed lower down her stomach. "You're going to have to make up for that." He straightened and reached for the glass, which lay on its side on the mattress, pressing against her side, the glass now warm. Carefully, he set it on her stomach. "Now, this time, it had better not move." Movement from the shifting of the mattress transmuted through her body and shook her and the glass as he rose and moved to the end of the bed. Both shook again as he climbed back onto the mattress. He crouched forward and kissed the top of her leg. "Or..." He kissed the inside of her thigh, moving up. "There will be consequences."

And plenty of idiots will expect me to make some snide comment here, won't they? Except those sickos can take the hell off, everyone's always deciding what I do and don't want, but running the *no one can know the mind of God* line when someone else bests them, or points out something that their small minds and fragile egos can't

stomach, a rule, one rule, thou shalt not take my name in vain, did I care that anything swore *Goddamn you* or even *God damn you*, never or ever, was I even supposed to?—no more than a father cares if a child runs screaming behind his legs admonishing him to *beat 'm up, daddy*, but to take my name—my name—or what there is of it—and say that *I* gave you something, told you something, and that you have some power, and that some insignificant thing can claim to be doing my will, to be doing my work, and hide behind the admitted fact that I am capable of anything and can do anything and need nothing of them, except that they assume I do, and your own greed and disgust and stinking shit is propped up by *my* name, except it isn't even a name at all, a noun with a capital, a generic, a generic into which everyone has filled everything they've ever liked and hated, loved and been disgusted with, wanted and tried to avoid, so that by the end it does, in fact, encapsulate the totality of the universe within itself, larger than the thing that which it is contained within, and full of nothing but contradiction, but that is yet still the very nature of the whole of the thing, the horror of the thing, the sublimity of the thing, the madness of the thing that reaches round into reason and unreason alike, each feeding on the other in semi-eternity, neither ever one or the other, neither separate, nor together, neither extant, nor nonexistent, every truth only communicable through lies, the fact there is nothing but, and the unmitigated gall of some tiny *insignificant* part of that to claim, to claim, the *infinitude* as flowing through such pathetic wants and desires is more disgusting than the sum total of the disgust that can possibly be contained within the nature of the universe and everything beyond...

So in that way, the word God thus became God.

The smell of charred meat rises into the air. Someone's finally here. Out there, here, coming down Balsam, cars on the inbound lanes sitting bumper to bumper, pumping exhaust into the air, straining their air-conditioners, as the sun glints hotly off chrome and hood ornaments.

David drummed the steering wheel with his fingers.

"So this is where you're from?" Veronica said. She peered through the window from behind dark wraparound glasses at green hills washed out by afternoon sun.

"Not quite." He pointed to the sign ahead that welcomed everyone to and marked the county limits. Protected by sunglasses, he squinted to get a better look at it. "Looks like they haven't replaced it, either. It's still ragged on the corner where it took a hit from a shotgun."

"You're joking."

"No, I was there when it happened."

"And you..."

"Oh, no, it wasn't me."

"Why?"

"Unofficial local sport? I don't know. It's not like it was the first time. If you look close, it's got several bullet holes in it."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, just take a look as we pass it here in half an hour. Two of them are right above the 'e' and make it look like it's a European letter." He drummed his fingers against the wheel. "Since we're not going anywhere, we could step out and get a picture of you next to it."

"No thanks."

"Probably for the best. I wouldn't advise flashing anyone around here. Oh, and while I'm at it, if you're drinking down here, never have an open beer in a vehicle, it doesn't matter if you're a passenger

or not, even if it's not been opened, don't have it visible in the front or back seat, and a semi-transparent plastic bag will not count as it being hidden, I know this from experience, so either have it in the trunk, or have it wrapped in a brown paper bag, and absolutely unopened."

"Seriously, sometimes I don't even know why I let you talk me into these things."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to come. Oh, and don't drink anywhere near a street or on a sidewalk, or in sight of one. And if you have your keys in your pocket, they will charge you with intent to drive under the influence."

"You forget I can't tell sometimes when you're being serious or not."

Hands on the wheel, he looked across at her silently.

She shook her head. "What kind of crazy place have you brought me to?"

Engine noise from all those idling vehicles intermixed with the sounds of the air-conditioner in their own. Veronica shifted and pulled her phone out of her purse. David glanced down into it. It seemed as if she'd stuffed everything in there. "Are you ever going to get one of these yet?" She tapped the screen of her own.

"Why?"

"So people can call you when they need to. So you can call someone in an emergency. You're over thirty, you know, it's time to start acting like an adult."

"So far as I'm concerned, being an adult means paying taxes, which I do more than enough of. Everything else is just, eh..."

"What about Tracy?"

"What about her?"

Cars will always prove to be one of the worst environments for conversations, second only to elevators, environments of pure intellectual, physical, and emotional confinement. Which wasn't their worst aspect. To paraphrase Marx: "America talks of Jesus, but worships a four-wheeled god." And if he were to return tomorrow (Jesus, not Marx) and said that cars were evil in his and my sight and there would be no such thing in the new kingdom, half of Americans would tell him to go back to where he came from, as Langdon'd not so eloquently elucidated while not-quite drunk at a party some years before.

“She likes you.”

“You know I won’t sleep with anyone I work with.”

“You’re a walking brutality,” she said, without looking up from her phone. “I’m tweeting that. And when are you going to get a twitter account?”

“Two years after the company goes bankrupt.”

“Do you know how many fans email *me* trying to get to you? Your name’s a hashtag.”

“Only because I’m so mysterious. Aren’t you the one who wrote an article on why mysterious things are sexy? I’m like a vampire, attractive so long as I stay in the dark, one trip out in daylight and—poof—leprosy.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way.” She didn’t look up from her phone as she said this.

“You should know me by now. You’ve always known my self-esteem runs into the negative digits. Anyway...”

“I can’t believe you can’t see how bad Tracy wants to rock your world.”

“I never said I couldn’t see it, or didn’t want to, just that I’m not going to. Do I need to quote the rules again?”

“Please, god, no.” She wasn’t actually talking to me, either. “You know, while I completely respect you, you’re an idiot, and I don’t want to wake up and find myself as a side character in a live version of the forty-year-old virgin.”

“You really wanna bring that up?”

“I’m just saying.”

“I just don’t want to feel like she thinks she’s got to sleep with me to get parts.”

“You really are full of crap, you know that?”

“Quite.”

“Don’t agree with me.” She shook her head, still looking down at her phone. “Clive’s right, you take consent right to the apocalyptic end, where it can’t exist at all.”

“I never said that.”

“That’s how you live.”

“I wish this would get moving.” He turned his head to look up through the windshield at the sky. “Otherwise one of us is going

to kill the other.” Horns blared. “Or somebody’s going to kill somebody.”

Not yet.

“So did you make reservations somewhere, or what?”

“Reservations? Hah. Everything for this weekend’s been booked out for the last six months. And that was before the weather shit started. I got an old friend, she’s lending us a room. I sent you an email with this stuff.”

“You seriously think I’m going to share a room with you?”

“What, you think I’m going to violate rule 2-A?”

“Oh, never.” She sighed and looked up from her phone, through the windshield. “We’re never going to get there, anyway.” She leaned back the seat.

“Just give it five more minutes.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Just five more minutes.”

“Uh hm.” She tapped her thumbs against the screen. “What about the radio?”

“Don’t touch that,” he said. She’d leaned forward, and he pushed her hand away from the console.

“Don’t assault me.”

“First, at best, it’s only battery. Secondly, there’s only one radio station, and as bad as everything is in this car right now, I’m not even going to dare to try and deal with you after you hear some of that.”

“Oh?”

He pushed her hand away again. “I’m serious.”

“I don’t like people who try to tell me what to do for my own good.”

“It isn’t for your own good. It’s for my safety and sanity.” He guided the car forward as traffic slowly advanced. Horns blared.

“I’m not going to take orders from a fascist,” she said, and reached forward and touched the radio power button and tapped auto-scan. David sighed as various species of static hissed through the speakers till, finally, a humanoid voice emerged.

“...sored by your continued donations. Please help us to keep this station on the air and spreading the Lord’s message. The world is filled with sin, and we have to do our part to fight against it. Let’s go to our

next caller. You're listening to 88.8 EFKO. Good afternoon, caller, what's your name and where're you from? *I'm Cynthia Davis, and I'm from Cane Creek.* And what do you have to say this afternoon, Cynthia? *I just wanted to say that something I heard the other day was right, that if they took all the gays and locked 'em up some place, like an old prison or something, or maybe build a big fence somewhere, that they wouldn't be able to breed, and they'd just all die out. It'd create jobs too, watching them and building the fence and that kind of stuff. And I just wanted to say that your foot lotion's been a godsend for my mother.* Well, thank you for that, Cynthia. And how old is your mother? *She'll be ninety-two this year.* Blessed be. And thank you very much for your call. Remember, folks out there, this station only stays on the air because of your support. And money's tight. Tight as one of my Uncle Leonard's belts. In fact, we don't know if we'll be on the air come Christmas. So if anyone out there needs anything to sooth your aches and pains or you just want to reinvigorate yourself and get that energy you haven't had since you were twenty, hop on over to the end is almost here dot com and stock up, because you don't know when we might have to close the doors, or they're gonna come and shut us down, at this rate, folks. Now, our next call—"

She held her finger against the power button several seconds past what she needed to, careful that it might not have actually turned off. "What the fuck?"

"I tried to warn you."

"Shit." She lay back against her seat.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy, and—" He jerked the wheel, cutting into the gap between two cars in the right lane.

"What the hell're you doing?"

Horns blared. "Getting us outa here before this goddamn idiot can cut us off again." I'll allow that. The other driver has done things in his life that have earned him far worse. And David cut the wheel hard, almost having to do a u-turn onto a two-lane road that dropped steeply and curved yet sharper below, where they met a garbage truck coming up, which honked, and he had to almost go off the shoulder to avoid it.

"Jesus—you're going to get us killed." Well, he's already been dead, anyway, so at least it was a semi-symmetrical statement. But

it's not like I have to be reminded of these things—I can't forget them, remember? That's what they say. And besides, everyone keeps repeating it so much, it wouldn't matter. What's the use of being omnipotent *and* omniscient, when the omnipotence can't be brought to bear to make it possible to forget? *Why?* But it can and can't.

"Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down."

"This's just a normal two-lane country road. People drive on either side all the time. And as for speed limits—well, look, you can see the numbers've already been shot out. And state law puts a maximum speed limit of...something miles per hour on roads outside of a city or town, unless otherwise marked. Besides, if we get pulled over, that's what I brought you for. You can give them an autograph."

"I'm going to kill you."

"Now, how much fun would you have then? And you wouldn't have someone around to point out the county transfer station." They passed it at the bottom of the hill, just before they crossed the trestle bridge. "I will have you know I've hauled multi-megatons of crap through there." He stopped at the crossing as the lights flashed and bars descended, a freight train approaching from the distance and passing slowly. "I wouldn't miss a chance to show you this." He started up the hill on the other side and went round a curve. "This," he said of the building below the road, "is the school where they send all the rotten eggs and dummies in the county, when you get kicked out of all the others." Something about it induced a more...prisony feeling, even by the standards of most schools. Maybe it was the three sheriff's department cars in the front parking lot. Or the chain-link fence. Or the barbed wire.

"And you went here?"

"Oh, yes." He stopped at the intersection and leaned forward to try and see around the corner. "Tell me if there's anything coming. This's always been a horrible place."

She sat up and leaned toward the windshield, nose almost against the glass. "Nothing."

He turned, glancing at the school building as they went past. Sitting back in the reclined seat, Veronica looked at him. "You never talk about highschool much."

He looked away, the school already having disappeared behind them. He glanced ahead at the sawmill. "Nothing to tell." He slowed, motioned at the workers who were returning from the diner on the other side of the road to cross. "Not that it was all terrible. Just that the most of it was boring as hell." He continued on. "Of course, there were a few silver linings."

"Oh? What? I doubt it has to do with girls."

"Most of the ones we had were pregnant, anyway. And, no, not by me." He slowed for another railway crossing. "Better get a load of this while you can. Bluehoppers distribution station coming up."

"So?"

"So what?"

They passed a line of storage facilities. The county had seven-point-three-eight storage units to every home, not counting what was currently planned or in construction.

"Come on, what was it? What happened?"

"You mean in highschool?"

"Stop being an idiot."

A former sawmill stood in a distant field, nothing but rusted poles and frameworks and rotten timber covered with kudzu amid high grass and weeds.

"We had one good teacher. Or at least she tried."

"And?"

"And? What more does there need to be?"

"Was she attractive?"

"You know I'm the wrong person to ask about that."

"You wanted to have sex with the teacher." She sang this.

"Every sixteen year old wants to have sex with anything that's breathing. And sometimes the breathing part's optional. Besides, she did me something better."

"Oh, what?"

"She gave me a copy of *Lautréamont*."

"*Lautréamont*?"

"Yes. As in quoted by your favorite author *Lautréamont*."

"Wait. That copy you always have sitting on your desk next to that little dog statue?"

"The one I won't let you steal. Yes."

She lay there with her phone resting screen down against her chest as she looked up at the roof.

“That and porn,” he said.

“What?”

“I was a hardheaded little atheistic shit, like the usual kind you find on the internet. But she suggested I take a look at the Song of Solomon. So she’s probably responsible for my career path to this point.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, my god.” Her phone emitted a noise, and she lifted it up to look at the screen, poked it with her index finger. “Does she know that?”

“Have no idea.”

“Am I going to get to meet her?”

“I doubt it. It’s been almost...fifteen years. She might not even be here anymore. Besides, I know what you want to do.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” He glanced over the river, toward the health department building, as he approached the next intersection. But he passed it.

“Crap. Crap. Crap.”

“What’s wrong?”

“No,” he said to himself. He nodded. There might still be a way to get around the main part of town on the two-lane roads, which they almost all were, so that was a stupid way to put it, so the kind of roads that were more two-lane than others. He could only hope, being aware both consciously and unconsciously that going through it directly would be a mess.

Gabriel had gone ahead and taken the truck back down the road after they'd unloaded everything, and stood boxing up the cat food to carry it inside. He set it down and propped open the screen door and punched the keypad. It was, as usual, dark inside, the only light being that which made it between and through the lacework curtains over the kitchen window above the sink. He set the box in the floor and went out for the rest, leaving both doors open, so hot air flowed in and clashed with the staler warm air that had collected inside over the course of the afternoon. Marz Barz wrappers lay curling on the floor. He went down the darkened hallway, guided by the ambient glow through the doorway at the far end, and leaned through just enough to see her sitting in the corner, haloed by the flicker of a scrolling screen. "I'm back." He waited for an answer that didn't come. "I've got a few other things to do, so I'll be out for a while." Still no answer. He went back up the hall. In the kitchen, he collected the few things he would need, utensils, matches, lighter fluid, and roused up a couple of canvas bags to carry them in. Half a bag of charcoal'd already been leftover there from last year, so that was taken care of, he knew. He checked the truck on the way out, left the window rolled down, and walked. Someone honked, tires crunching gravel as they passed. Gabriel nodded and waved as best he could with his hands full. Just the general hum of so many people together, even though ostensibly quiet, had become overpowering as the afternoon'd worn on. Three children ran and shouted in the distance. Slowly, everything seemed to be drifting into a perfect simulacra of movies about summer vacations from the forties and fifties that in themselves had never existed beyond their representations as edited together for video commentaries about such types of films on YouTube. He cut around the side of the house and up the side steps onto the deck. He

laid the bags on the picnic table. Dee waved at him through the glass sliding doors.

The fire-brick grill occupied the far corner of the deck, out from under the roof, hard hit by the afternoon sun, and even with his sunglasses, he could barely see what he was doing. The lighter fluid blazed when he tossed on a match, and he stepped into the shade to allow the coals time to heat. Lighting such in this fashion was against some people's religious and moral beliefs and, as some said, just common decency. However, he followed, in this case, the long American tradition of pragmatism.

Dee slid open the glass doors and poked her head out. "How's it coming?"

"It'll take a bit to get hot enough. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes."

"There's no rush. Do you want the meat left out or..."

"Yeah. I'll come in and take care of that."

Lydia and Johanna were also in the kitchen, working on salad.

"Gabriel's going to provide the meat," Dee said, as she came in behind him.

He glanced at the cheap knives in the knife block on the counter. "I brought a knife with me. I'll—"

"I'll get it," Dee said. And she went back through and out onto the deck.

"So you know all about meat," Johanna said. She stood there looking down at a zucchini as she chopped it.

"I guess." He turned when he heard Dee behind him, and she offered him the knife blade first, which was one of those things some people do that he could never understand, but then again, maybe he'd seen more movies that'd involved people offering other people swords than other people had. "Lay it on the counter. I'll get this out of the packaging first." He stepped toward the counter and removed the packages of meat and set it aside to hold the empty foam and torn plastic that he soon have to deal with, the thing just deflating there on the counter like a sick thing.

"What do you think about wrapping meat up in plastic?" Johanna said. She started down the other half of the zucchini. "A waste of resources? All that plastic that goes right into the landfill, filling up

the Earth.” She put down the knife and scooped up two handfuls of dismembered vegetable.

“Or all those poor sea turtles,” Lydia said.

He broke the plastic seal and pulled it away from the styrofoam tray. “Probably is.” He stepped toward the sink and nudged the faucet on with his elbow.

“Probably makes it taste funny, too,” Johanna said.

Lydia couldn’t suppress herself and had to clear her throat and focus her concentration on her knife work to keep from cutting the tip off her index finger.

Gabriel searched the cabinets for those few items that remained between visits and produced a container of salt. “I hope—” But his phone started to sing, and he set the salt on the counter and pulled it from his pocket. He tapped the screen and it went quiet.

“We’re not detaining you, are we?” Dee said.

“No.” He picked up the salt and pried open the spout with his fingernail and dumped some into his palm. “Just someone trying to keep up. It’s not important.” It sang again, and he pulled it from his pocket with his free hand as he sprinkled salt. And he pressed the power button long enough for the power-off menu to popup. He returned it to his pocket. “I hope salt and pepper will be okay.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be fine,” Dee said. “After all, you are the expert on meat.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” He turned on the faucet and washed his hands. Drying them, he turned to go into the den and back out onto the deck. “I’ll check the grill.”

Lydia looked up from her chopping to see that he’d gone, said, “You two are terrible.”

“And you,” Dee said, “said he wasn’t even that cute.”

Johanna stepped toward the sink and turned on the faucet and reached for the soap bottle. “So long as form follows function.”

Lydia caught herself and cleared her throat as she heard the sliding door open and boots on the floor. Gabriel stopped in the kitchen doorway, towel over his shoulder. “Should be heated up in another five or ten minutes.”

“You are the meat expert,” Johanna said.

Gabriel pulled the towel off his shoulder and dropped it onto the

counter. "I have to step down the road real quick and turn on the water. So when I get back, I'll start."

"So we should just leave the meat out on the counter like this?" Dee said.

Gabriel nodded. "Room temperature's best. I'll be back in five minutes." And he stepped through the den and out onto the deck to check the grill once more before he went down the steps and across the road.

"It's good to keep the meat aired out once in a while," Johanna said.

"Oh, stop it." Dee shook her head.

“So how far is it to this place?” Veronica’d positioned her seat upright again, sat there looking through the window at old stone and mortar garages that’d been built into the banks, where the roofs had rotted and caved in, as David steered the car along curvy, narrow roads that only technically qualified to be wide enough to accommodate two lanes, and in fact, had been, originally, one lane, and later converted to two by slightly widening them, which put the edges of the road into the grate-works and manholes for the old original sewer system that Josh’s grandfather still sometimes complained about his taxes going up for and going toward back in the day when the first big sewer system was run all the way out to one of the county commissioner’s houses way out in the real middle of the middle of nowhere.

He turned a corner and started down a hill. Below, the main high-way lay filled bumper to bumper. “At least another hour, hour and a half the way I’m having to work around. Why?”

“I’ve got to stop.”

He crossed the bridge, stopping to wait for a way into the flow of traffic. Below the road, beside the river, sat a very small motel, the swimming pool filled with dirt and being used to grow corn, the stalks now brown and all too obviously crinkly. “Is this a woman thing?”

“Don’t make me hit you.”

“Well, there’s a gas station—or at least, there used to be—just up here on the left. I’ll see what I can do. If nothing else, I’ll pull into Harlans.”

“What’s that?”

“The grocery store out on this end. I know it’s gotta still be here. If it isn’t, the whole area’s fallen apart.” He started forward and wedged a hole that the car behind could only blow its horn at, but had to accept if it wanted to retain its headlights and paint. “Goddamn it, if

I'd known it was going to be like this." He shook his head and bent to look through the rear window. "I'd never have come back. And I don't know why I did in the first place." No one does. But they're the ones that chose to do it. No one made them do it. He glanced at her. "I hope you've nothing planned immediately this week. Because I don't know if we can get out of here like this. We may have to wait till next Wednesday."

"I thought you had a shoot."

"I put that off until the first of the month. I wanna do it all at once. Otherwise it'd've been split over a three week break. Josylenn's out doing makeup for some studio that's shooting something for Netflix down in Atlanta."

"What?"

"Didn't ask. So's that going to be trouble for you?"

"I brought my laptop. I hope your friend has internet. We're not, like, going to some cabin miles in the backwoods with no electricity and no running water and bears everywhere, are we?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"*What?*"

"I could've sworn I told you."

"*What?*"

"I'm sure I sent you an email about it."

"Don't make me hit you."

"Trust me. Remember I'm not the one the gets you into trouble. You're—" He jerked the wheel and turned to pull into a parking lot as the light went green. The driver behind him honked in lieu of being able to do anything else. "Harlans it is, I guess, then." He pulled past the self car wash and into a parking space and looked through the window at the cars stacked into the gas station across the road. He opened the door. "Now you're going to get a real experience."

She climbed out and groaned as she stretched. "God, it's hot." I know.

"It's always at least ten degrees hotter here than in Asheville, regardless of what the weather girl says." He stopped in the shadow of the awning, just out of range for the automatic doors to open. "Aw, they got rid of Sandy."

"Who?"

“The horse. Or at least the one that was here.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“There used to be a mechanical horse. Put a quarter in, ride for a minute.” He shook his head. “What they call progress, I guess.” He put his hands in his pockets as he stepped into the air-conditioned interior. “Well, here it is.” It had the look of a store built more than seventy-five years before, which it had been, span after span of florescent lights stretching along the short ceiling, illuminating tiles that were of a color and pattern that prompted some strange, perhaps cosmic, horror as they lay revealed between the close-packed aisles, something all those who’d been born there recognized, yet’d become familiar with, a familiarity that swept over him in one great submerging wave with no pretense of subtlety. “At least the claw machine’s still here.” He pointed to the machine directly in front of them. “Only legal non-government sponsored gambling in the state, outside of the reservation, you know.”

“Great.”

He pointed. “Restrooms are in the back corner. Straight through the double doors. Or they should be.” She moved past him.

Quickly as he could glance at the pin board outside the manager’s area and away, she’d already disappeared down an aisle. David stepped out of the way to allow someone to the buggy racks, and he ambled toward the produce section. A refrigerator unit sat in the corner holding fruit and vegetable juices and espressos, and he pulled out a carrot juice. He cracked the cap on it and took a slug as he walked toward the front, glanced at the magazines and local advertising papers stacked at the end of the aisle, and set the open bottle down on the conveyor belt while he produced his wallet. He stood staring at the cashier’s name tag as he offered her a ten. “You wouldn’t happen to be by any chance related to Ray Crestweld, would you?” The register clunked open, and the girl picked out coins into her palm.

“He’s my dad.” She offered him the bills, then held out her hand and dropped the change on top of them and into his palm. “Why? Do you know him?”

“Is he still got the scar on his arm?” He raised his elbow. “About four or five inches along this area.”

“Uh. Yeah... I guess.”

Veronica came up on him from behind. "I want something to drink."

David pointed at the next checkout aisle. "Is he still here?"

"Yeah."

It was a small store frequented by elderly locals, and slow that time of day, so someone standing around talking wasn't at all unusual.

"You know, it has been a long time. A very long time. Actually, I gave him that scar."

"Uh."

Veronica showed up again with a bottle of water.

"I got it." David motioned for her to set it on the conveyor belt. He still had his wallet out, and the change in one hand, so he just offered that back to the girl. "Her father used to beat me up," he said to Veronica. "You were asking why I got transferred, actually one of the reasons was because I knifed him in the arm."

The girl stood there, cash still in her hand. He turned toward her, again. "Is he doing well?"

"Y-yeah."

"Hm." He handed Veronica her bottle of water and grabbed his bottle of carrot juice. "Was nice meeting you." And he took a slug as he stepped out past the checkout and toward the doors.

Veronica hurried after him. "What was all that about?"

"Just homecoming."

She shook her head as she looked around from behind her sunglasses.

He knocked his sunglasses down over his eyes as he stepped outside. He looked at the spot where Sandy'd been. "Goddamn it." And he shook his head and took a slug of carrot juice. He started toward the car. "Did I ever tell you that we're the only state in the union that's been hit with two unexploded nuclear bombs?"

Still hot. Sunlight had moved up the side of the valley as the sun had fallen, as if tracking them, or as if the shadows were chasing them. Eva breathed hard as they crested the top of the ridge, her damp shirt sticking to her back.

“Boring, huh?”

Eva looked up, straightened, followed Maria’s gaze out over shadow-variegated ridges and valleys, where the occasional house, their owners connected enough and rich enough to bypass grade ordinances, broke the fractal organization of nature with something grotesquely artificial and simplistically arranged.

“You know how all this came to be, don’t yuh?”

Eva shook her head.

“It hit Africa.” She punched her fist into her palm. “Smack. And pushed all this up. Or at least, what would become Africa, or something like that.” However, this demonstration, on Maria’s part, of her hereticalness, was completely lost on Eva, who, while never really having paid attention, had at least attended a school that made a passing attempt to speak aloud a few general ideas about a view of geological history that made some passing pretense of the idea that the planet she and Maria currently occupied was more than ten-thousand years old.

Eva shielded her eyes and tried to look at the top of the fire tower.

“Wanna go up?”

“It’s locked.”

But Maria pulled a key out of her pocket and dangled it as if in front of a baby. And she turned and removed the padlock and pulled the chain through the grated door.

“Is this alright?”

“Do you really only do things when they’re alright?” Maria looked over her shoulder, then turned away, and stepped under the tower

and onto the stairs and started to climb. Eva glanced around, seeing nothing and no one in the distance, and followed her.

At top, the world spread out before them, a quilt that lay crumpled at the foot of the bed after being thrown off in the morning. And just that little extra height above the surface of the Earth provided enough alternative perspective to alter perception. That's why Babel was a lie, a lie to cover the feebleness of the human heart after they had obtained some perspective and scared themselves shitless and had to have something to blame, something to allow themselves to destroy themselves, because they always need an excuse that isn't themselves, to flee from that, to run, to pretend it'd never existed, to turn back a clock that can't be turned back, as time continues on, forever in that direction, an arrow pointing one way, toward the conclusion, the inevitable end, the end and nothing but, and only the end, and everything that comes and goes with it...

"Boring, huh?"

"It's so big."

"Just a buncha trees," Maria said. She hunkered down with her back against the boards beneath the windows. "It's not like they've even been around that long. Did you know that crocodiles were around before trees existed? And sharks are even older than that." Such things are easy to talk about when they're so far away.

"Really?" Eva said, but her voice lacked conversational glue as she looked out over the green-covered expanse of the Earth's buckled surface. And again, even if she had paid more attention in what scant lessons she'd sat through on evolutionary biology, the basic, general idea of it was just there as a rudimentary part of her understanding of the universe that lay inarticulated such that the context of Maria's statements flew over her head like the distant jet at the head of a long white vapor trail far away and high in the sky over there.

"Hey, weird girl."

Eva turned. Maria's phone didn't make a shutter sound, but the point was obvious.

"What're you doing?"

"Blackmailing you."

"What?"

She turned her phone around to show the screen. “Caught you breaking into state property.”

“You’re the one that broke in.”

“Well, there’s not a picture of me.” She turned the phone to look at the screen. “So it’s like I never was here.”

Eva stood there, her face...

Maria shook her head. “Come on.” And she jumped up and put her arm around Eva’s shoulder’s before she could react, and raised her phone in her other hand, versions of them each, one smiling, one still confused, appearing on the screen. “Smile.” And the screen momentarily froze before jumping ahead into time and into the present and into motion again. “There, yuh happy?” Maria shook her head as she tapped her phone. “You’re too serious, weird girl.” She tapped the screen. “See.” She held it up for Eva to look at, then tapped the screen. “There, all gone. Just like it never happened. So we were never here.” She lowered herself onto the floor again. “I’d’ve offered to send you a copy, but I don’t guess your parents would like that.”

“W—”

Maria looked up from her phone. “You’re a little cute when you’re confused, you know?” She set it down on the floor beside her. “I’ll make you a bet.”

“W-what?”

“I bet I can tell you all about you just by looking at you.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Just what I said.”

“Like what?”

“Oh...” Maria glanced at the ceiling. “Like, I bet you’re the kind who writes yuri fan fiction.”

“I—”

“And your parents found out, and now you’re digitally grounded.”

“How do you know that?” She stood there open mouthed after she’d blurted this out.

“Why should I tell you that?”

Eva’s heart hammered against the inside of her rib cage, still, beating at only a fraction of the rate at which alternatives hammered through her mind, usernames, passwords, which websites where, had she said something in a message board? dropped some unconscious

hint in something she'd written? something in an email? that stuff administrators are supposed to be able to do on the server end? a virus? spyware? had she been hacked? how many people knew? was there some place where they gathered all this stuff together? did they sell it? who else had access to it? was it something that would get on the news? did everyone already know about it? were they already messaging her about it? were they already piling up on her phone? was her mother reading them? had her parents bought this information somehow? was there some kind of service parents could subscribe to and track their kids? did they have something on the computers in the school library? is it something the NSA collected? what was going to happen after she went back to school? was everyone that passed her in the street going to know when they looked at her? would she be able to get a job? what was going to happen in college? would they know about that on the admissions stuff? what—

"Jeez, calm down." Maria shook her head. "You'd think you were the first girl who ever looked at or wrote porn."

"H-how do you know that?"

"At least you're not denying it."

"I—"

"Oh, I have my sources."

"How? Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"It's not like there's any need to worry. It's not like *he's* gonna tell anyone else."

"*Who?*"

"You ever thumb wrestle?"

"What?"

"Thumb wrestle." Maria wiggled hers.

"I don't—"

"If you can beat me, I'll tell you who told me."

Eva stood there quiet. Maria wiggled her thumb.

Eva slowly dropped to her knees and put out her hand.

"Alright," Maria said, "you grip like this. No, move your hand. Like that. Now, the object is to pin the other person's thumb. Simple, huh? We'll do a practice run. Ready—go."

“Hold it.”

“Alright, once more. Go.”

Eva’s eyes darted as she tracked Maria’s thumb.

“Alright, enough practice. Best two out of three.”

“Wait—”

“Go.”

Coming into the third round, dead even, a one-to-one win, each tugging and pushing the other’s arm to try and gain the advantage, Eva breathed hard, her eyes fixed on Maria’s shifting thumb, so she didn’t have time or preparation to respond as Maria shot close and kissed her and they both tumbled onto the floor. Maria pulled away enough to look down at their interlocked hands. “Looks like you win.” She bent close to Eva’s ear. “God told me.”

I can vouch for this.

“Do you have a lot of cats?” Lydia said, right before she took a sip of wine. “Or are you just stocking up?”

Gabriel laid an empty rib bone on his plate and tried to jam his tongue between an eyetooth and its neighbor. “Neither.” He sucked meat-juice from his thumb. “They’re alotta strays around here and no one to feed them but me. So I catch them and get them neutered and release them.”

“That’s so nice.”

Three kinds of wine sat open on the table, no one being able to decide which exactly went with the meat, and after a few glasses it didn’t matter one way or the other. Gabriel wiped his fingers on a paper napkin and reached for his beer. His phone rang, and he lifted it from his pocket to glance at the screen, then dropped it in his pocket again.

“Work?” Dee said.

He shook his head as he sipped his beer. “Not really.”

“You’re not going to run off?”

“Don’t plan to.” He set down his beer and pushed back his chair.

“But if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll wash my hands.”

“Hurry back.”

Johanna lifted her wine glass. “Yes, do.”

“You’re so embarrassing,” Dee said to her after he’d gone out.

“Me?”

Lydia smiled to herself.

“And what’s so funny?”

Dee balled her paper napkin and dropped it on her plate. “I think I will go wash my hands, too.”

“At least,” Johanna said, “everyone will have clean hands this weekend.” She sipped her wine.

Marietta showered while her husband sat on the toilet. “Remember,” she said, loud enough to be heard over the rushing, splattering water, “you promised to go see Anime before the weekend if we got back in time.”

“It’s too late.”

“I called her earlier. She said she’s staying open.” She ran her hands over her wet hair. “She says she’s staying open later today to try and get some of the foot traffic.” She wiped water from her face. “And before you say anything, you know what tomorrow will be like.”

He flushed the toilet. “Yes, dear.” He pushed open the shower door and peeked inside. “Room for one more?”

“Now explain this to me.” Veronica’d adjusted her seat up and sat there with a bunch of brochures and pamphlets in her lap as she looked down at her phone and stroked the screen with her thumb.

“Where’d you get all those?”

“They were in a display out front of the store.”

“Well, if you’re planning on going rafting, we’re going to have to take the next turn.” They’d had to get back on the four-lane and sat waiting to get onto the bridge just outside Helena, unable—yet—to see the myriad of inflatable rafts and tubes on the water below.

“How come,” she said, and stroked her phone, “how come half these brochures have it spelled with an ‘e’—” —she held one up as if for proof, but didn’t look away from her phone—“—and the other half don’t? And... On wikipedia it’s listed as both, with a slash between them? What’s the deal? And the picture of the sign here has it without an ‘e’ too.”

“Try it on Googolplex images.”

The pamphlet fell into her lap as she tapped the screen with both her thumbs, then scrolled with her pointer finger. “Why are there welcome signs with both?”

“The sign at one end of the county says one thing...” He checked the rearview mirror. “And the sign at the other end of the county says the other.”

“Why?”

“If you answer that question...” He turned his head to look through the windshield and try and cut the glare of the late afternoon sun reflected from so many windows and so much chrome as cars stretched up the hill on the other side of the bridge. “You won’t win a million dollars, but you’ll earn my confusion.” As the traffic inched forward, he turned on his turn signal. It clicked-clicked-clicked as

they moved slowly forward. "All I ever heard about it was it had something to do with the federal government in the fifties, supposedly some fallout over the other road to nowhere and blew up in everyone's faces and since then it's been required to be listed with both on any federal or state document." Traffic in the opposite lanes was as heavy and compacted as in their own, but he slowed, turn signal clicking, stopping in the turn lane, waiting for an opening. A horn sounded behind him.

"And what the hell's the other road to nowhere?"

"It—" A horn honked. He cut across the road, between oncoming cars, which braked and sounded their horns.

"You're going to get us killed."

"Well, if we're dead, we won't be able to worry about it anymore." He turned onto a two-lane road that ran along the river. He glanced at the clock in the radio. "Goddamn it."

"I'd trade with you," she said. "But I don't know where we're going."

"It's okay, I don't either."

She didn't bother to look at him *or* shake her head, but, instead, stroked her phone.

"Are you reading wikipedia?"

"Yes. But I still don't get this. I mean, how does this road factor into it?"

"I wouldn't even bother with that. We're almost there. You can't trust anything that you read about the county on there, anyway. There's about three or four different groups here that are constantly in editing wars with each other. That and it keeps getting deleted for lack of relevance."

"And how do you know that? I thought you didn't have anything to do with this place."

"Oh, an old acquaintance interviewed me for part of his doctoral thesis and sent me a copy."

"So you did have friends."

"You're going to find out." He stopped at the intersection that forked between Presbyterian and the Mennonite church, turned toward the church, then turned left before he hit the bridge, running along a road that paralleled the river. "What're you reading now?"

“Nothing.”

“Well, we’re almost there.”

“Do you know there’s this whole page on this conspiracy theory website about how this county doesn’t actually exist?”

“Wow, if I’d’ve known that, I could have saved the trouble and stayed home.”

“Is it really constitutionally exempt from the census? That can’t be true. Right?”

“It’s sort of like how the antiquities act applies to all states but Wyoming. It’s a... Well, it’s a... Yeah, you don’t want to go into that. Suffice it to say there was a senator’s daughter and a Cherokee man involved, and—looks like we’re not the first here.” The house itself had been built somewhat back from the river, and he turned onto the gravel drive that led up to it.

“Wow, that’s a nice house.”

“Oh, the one next to it goes with it. That’s the guest house.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah.” He found a space among the other cars and a truck.

Propped over her, Maria said, “You want to see something?” But before Eva could reply, Maria’d pulled herself up, straightened, and reached up to snatch a pair of binoculars hanging on a nail overhead, and turned. “Or are you just going to stay down there on the floor all day?”

Eva scrambled up as Maria raised the binoculars and looked through them, adjusted the focus. She stepped aside, indicating for Eva to take her place, and offered them and pointed. “Right out there.” Semi-unconsciously, Eva took them, glanced at Maria as she raised them. Maria pointed. “Out there.” Eva tried to look through them, but the landscape blurred with the slightest motion.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Hold them steady.” Maria tried to sight down them. “It’s small from here, but when you notice it—”

“I see something. Or... I think I do. What is it?”

“That’s the Culverton House. Looks small from here, don’t it? It’s over a hundred years old. And looks like something out of Downton Abbey, not that you can really tell from this far away. You been?”

“No.” Eva still looked at it. “Is it someplace you can go?”

“Yeah.” It was the only way the family could keep hold of it, to sell tickets for people walking through, though most people would’ve rather gone to the Biltmore House, the one being bigger in a very American way, something people could more easily lull themselves into believing they’d’ve been the Lords and Ladies of had they been born in those *There-was-a-time* days that the narrator in the commercials referred to. But grand as it was, Culverton House lacked too much of a separation between those below and those above, something any visitor unconsciously acknowledged, though could rarely articulate, that the curtain covering the mechanisms for their existence could too easily drift aside from a stray breeze.

“Shut Up,” Maria said.

Eva pulled the binoculars away, looked at her. “What?”

Maria shook her head. “I wasn’t talking to you.” This caused Eva to furrow her brow in puzzlement, though she remained consciously unaware of either the physiological or psychological aspects of it.

“Come on.” Maria took her hand. “It’s getting too noisy up here.” She looked over her shoulder. “Unless you want to stay, that is. Of course, I should warn you we’re being watched.”

Eva looked around.

Maria laughed, pointed her index finger up and twirled it round. “By God.” Eva still furrowed her brow at her. Maria shrugged. “Of course, he’s always watching everything, anyway, the creep.” She took the step back necessary to close the gap between them. “Would you like me to kiss you again?” But Eva froze. “Oh, well.” She let go of her hand. “Your turn now.” And she turned and started down the stairs.

Eva stood there a moment, confused, then hurried after her. “What do you mean?”

Maria paused and watched her descend. “What do you mean what do I mean?”

Eva paused on the landing above. “What do you mean my turn?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

After a moment, Eva shook her head.

Maria rolled her eyes. “Come on.” She sighed. “The next time you’ll have to kiss me yourself.” She turned and continued down the stairs. “Things can’t be all one way, you know.” Eva caught up with her at the base of the tower. “That is,” Maria’d adjusted her sunglasses down and thus cut off Eva’s unconscious access to the older parts of her brain, “unless you’re just one of those straight girls who writes yuri to be cute.”

Afternoon light came in with a harsh yellow slant and made Eva’s eyes watered as she squinted to try and find those things now hidden in Maria’s face. Maria smiled. “You wanna come or not?”

Neither consciously nor unconsciously, did Eva pick up on this double entendre as they started back down the road. But to be fair, it wasn’t one of Maria’s best, or best-integrated efforts.

“Oh, shut up.”

It was of dubious benefit, being able to walk down to Mainstreet, if only because, once down there, it required walking all the way back up again. That combined with the fact that sidewalks ended just up the hill from Main, which was one of the only streets in the county to even have a sidewalk, it being that slanted in favor of motor vehicles, so to get to the houses above required foot traffic along narrow one-laned roads whose only benefit was being paved, which might not have been a benefit, seeing as how it made drivers think it safer to ply the gas. And since the county commissioners had worked steadily, since the introduction of motor vehicles as any major force in the country, to prevent any means of movement through the county, other than those small secondary roads that were, by then, for the most part, so run down from lack of repair and funding, but that didn't go right down Mainstreet, both lanes sat full end to end with cars and tractor trailers. The only benefit to the design was that both lanes traveled the same direction, and lanes traveling the opposite way wrapped around on the backsides of the buildings that faced Mainstreet, on Backstreet, meaning that, hypothetically, a person only had to manage one direction of traffic when crossing. Though, several shop owners and select county commissioners had long militated against this, attempting, at least once a year, to introduce a plan to turn Mainstreet back into a two-way street, as it had been in the earliest days of the township, but as of yet it remained unpassed due to some enigmatic facilitator and financier who always managed to arrange for a small counter campaign every time the measure arose, and in political reality, a small, but vocal, group is all one needs to achieve anything. But with little regard to this history, other than at the most rudimentary level of his perception, Russell walked with his arm around Marietta's waist while exhaust fumes burned more putrid in the afternoon heat.

“You also need to tell them to start delivering the paper again,” she said.

As they passed the offices, he looked at the door. “Are they open?” He tried the knob. They stepped in. The old building inadequately distributed the output from the air-conditioning system, leaving the front lower part still too warm.

The woman behind the high counter looked up. “What can I do for you?” Of course, they knew each other, in fact, were related, but the coldness with which she looked at him when she’d recognized him, and the flat tone of her voice, conveyed the entire history and feelings of most of those of late-European descent in the county.

Russell smiled. “I’d like to start re-delivery of my subscription.”

She looked neither happy nor sad as she produced a small card and put it on the counter with a pen and returned to typing as he filled it out. He pushed both across the counter. “Thank you very much.”

“It could take two to three periods before your service resumes,” she said, without looking away from the screen.

“If that’s the way it is.” Russell still smiled, put his arm around his wife’s waist. “Have a nice day.”

When they’d gone out, he paused and rooted in his pocket, came up with some change, and fed it into the machine. A mock-up of the eclipse dominated everything but the masthead, and he only glanced at it before they continued toward the crosswalk. “And what,” she said, “are you thinking?”

“Hm?”

She lightly elbowed his side. “Don’t *hm* me.”

“Oh, It just seems to me that what someone said to me when I was a kid was right.”

“And what was that?” She couldn’t, and didn’t care to, cover the suspicious, yet humorous, tone in her voice.

“About how there ain’t ever been anything in this county worth anything. And if it were blasted off the face of the map, the world wouldn’t lose nothing.”

“Hush.”

“That doesn’t include you, though.” He squeezed her. “You’re only an immigrant.”

“Don’t get in a terrible mood on your first day back.”

"I'm not in a terrible mood." They stopped at the crosswalk, waiting for the light halfway down the street to turn and cut the flow of traffic to a dribble. "In fact, I'd say I'm in a very good mood. Aren't you in a very good mood?"

"I'm in a very good mood," she said. "Did you remember to bring your phone?"

"Nope."

"Lack of telecommunications before a fall, dear."

He laughed, glanced down the street, and saw that the light must've turned, and they hurried across as the last stragglers rolled through and opened a gap. Crossing at the end of the street was the only safe thing to do, as all the other crosswalks occurred at intersections, and even while the walk symbol was lit, it was still legal to turn onto the road from side streets, which often meant pedestrians narrowly missed getting to know what it felt like to be roadkill, and often enough it would be a sheriff's department vehicle that might happen to be the instrument of this near transmutation.

People had packed onto the sidewalks, though not nearly as many as would arrive by tomorrow. Already, with the increased numbers of arrivals that had been scheduled in the wake of the weather conditions in other parts of the country, Asheville Regional Airport was borderline beyond capacity and would, by the morning, be beyond that, though little to nothing could be done about it now, 1) because of inertia, B) because of a bug in the scheduling system that no one was—as of yet—aware of.

Russell and Marietta paused in front of the antique shop and looked through the window, casually eyeing the things that hung on the other side of the glass. "You know," she said, "I saw that same thing in Los Angeles in a shop and they wanted five times as much for it."

"And you'll notice this one's sitting there as unsold as that one."

They turned to continue down the sidewalk. "You should get a haircut sometime."

His eyes darted across the street, flickered over the crowd that moved along that side, along the ivy-covered stone retaining wall that allowed the elder house up the hill to exist. But he brought his attention forward again, briefly wondering what he'd seen, before he shook his head. Marietta glanced at him. "Something the matter?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

But he'd seen him, even if he hadn't known he had. He'd gotten out of prison forty-eight days earlier, while they'd been driving through the Arizona desert.

They continued down the street.

Everything they passed seemed to remind them of something that needed done. Finally, they arrived at the thing they knew needed done, the used bookshop. And Anime, who stood there in the middle of the shop looking out through the front windows at seemingly nothing and everything, lost in her own thoughts, even the ones she hadn't known she'd had. Then, as if released from them, she turned her head and waved at Russell and Marietta. The two front doors had been propped open to try and account for the fact the shop and building had no air conditioning, and a box fan sat in the middle of the floor in an attempt to get air moving through the windows open in the back room and out the front. Barefoot, (technically illegal to do in a shop, according to state law) Anime smiled as she stepped behind the desk and cleared a space among the books stacked atop it so she could lift a cardboard box and set it there. She'd always seemed the kind of scarily hippie person who'd've scared hippies with the extent of her actuality. Part of it was her eyes which, magnified to gigantic proportions by her glasses, had earned her the nickname which few others in the immediate area having the wider cultural experience to know otherwise had simply assumed it to be some normal, though unconventional, moniker an import mother, who had moved here when Anime and her brother had been five and three, respectively, would've come up with. She still smiled as she pried apart the cardboard flaps. "How was the tour?"

Marietta pulled away from her husband and moved toward the aisles and the books piled at the ends of them. "Oh, the same." She squatted and looked at the spines. "You know how he is."

Anime cleared another space, setting a stack of books in the floor, and started to shift volumes from the box into that newly cleared space. "I really thank you for doing this."

"No problem." Russell patted his pockets. "You got a pen?"

"Ah." Anime raised her hand as she looked down at the desk, one of the mismatched pairs of things wrapped round her wrists falling

down to hang around the thicker part of her forearm, the strung-together particulars matching her earrings neither in size nor style nor in composition. She opened a drawer and dug into it, uncapped three pens before she'd found one that hadn't dried up.

Russell accepted it, opening the volume atop the stack to the title page. "The usual?"

"That'll be great."

He dashed off his name, put the book atop another stack, and moved down to the next, Anime reaching for them as he finished each, and so she could return them to the box. He offered the last one. "There you go." And then the pen.

"Thanks, really."

He shook his head. "How's business?"

She shrugged, set the box under the desk. "Can't complain. Could complain."

Marietta approached the desk with two books and laid them atop a stack to be able to open her purse.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Anime said.

But Marietta shook her head and handed across the cash. "Now, take it." Business and Anime never had aligned. Foot traffic was, of course, abysmal, even on Mainstreet. And even the ones that did come in the door, all it took was a casual glance at aisles marked *Feminism* and *Communism slash Marxism* for them to turn out again, they, of course, as so much cumulative biological history dictates, making rather snap and generalized judgments that, while useful in the terms of the survival of the species to that point, at times ran aground against a more nuanced conception of the constructs sometimes known as reality, they, of course, assuming she somehow related to these vague charges in some specific way, and though she might; and in particular those two respective fields, being so broad, she agreed in small measure with *some* things, though no one could encompass the whole of the contradictory mess, in many ways a mirror of life, except for perhaps... But in any regard, those sections, with no slight addition from a section of reproductions, and some authentic works, of Victorian pornography, it had been no wonder there'd been more than a handful of attempts to forcibly relocate her shop, or more accurately, depending on who might be spoken of, end its existence on Earth,

their assumption being it couldn't possibly have existed in heaven, however, time and time again such attempts had continually failed, various measures of the county commissioners, as well as the town board, and the business associations, having been curtailed by, again, a rather mysterious benefactor, who had eventually purchased the building, itself, outright, at which point Anime had been, quite as much to her own surprise as everyone else's, granted a hundred-and-one year lease (with the proviso that the space would remain a used bookshop, of course). Some people might've suspected it'd be there to the latter days—if it wasn't in some way responsible for bringing such about. Which was technically true, but only the first part.

So she took the cash and stuffed it into a desk drawer.

"Where're yuns going to watch from tomorrow?"

Marietta glanced at her husband. "I'm sure we won't go too far."

"Have you heard they say the world's supposed to end?" This would come under the heading of strategic leaking.

Russell smiled. "Well, it had to sometime."

"Don't encourage him," Marietta said. She picked up her two books.

"They're going to be doing live coverage on the TV and radio."

"Live coverage for something that everyone can see live?"

Anime shrugged.

"Ignore him," Marietta said. "He's in one of his moods." She intertwined her arm with his. "Can you come for dinner?"

"I...don't know. Langdon's got to work late, so I was just going to work here till he could pick me up."

"Tell him he can come up to the house and pick you up. And if he's early enough, he can join us."

"Oh, he'll be late." He and Gordon were running around trying to collect up questionnaires about the eclipse so they could compare the so-called memetic and semiotic contents with the same survey they planned to issue following the events. However, best-laid plans and all that.

"Then come up. I brought some jicamas back with us, and I want to see what you think."

Anime looked out through the front windows. "It'll take all day to get anywhere."

“You can always sleep at our place,” Marietta said.

Anime shook her head.

“You’re always welcome. And besides, it may be the easiest thing.” She looked at her husband. “Right?”

He scratched his cheek. “They say it’s only supposed to get worse by tomorrow.”

“So you come up the hill,” Marietta said. “And if Langdon shows up, he can stay over, too. And if not, he can fend for himself.” They’d always been a brother and sister with a rather interlocked relationship.

“What time do you want to eat?”

“We can eat anytime.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“How are you imposing?” Marietta shook her head and looked thoughtfully at her. “Hon, you just show up and stay as long as you like.” Cars honked. “Besides, you’ll have to tell us all of what’s gone on since we’ve been away.”

As they walked along the gravel road, someone shouted from a back porch that overlooked the creek and at another person fishing on the far bank, who just stood there looking at the yelling woman, the line pulled loosely against his fingers, as he waited to detect a bite, passive, mainly, because the fish wouldn't, for the most part, care about the noise.

Maria laughed. "She don't know it," she said, "but they come down and fish off her back porch all the time while they're not here." Any boot prints could be written off as Gabriel doing his job. Eva couldn't determine, though she mulled it quite consciously, if this were a double entendre or no. But in any regard, that took a back seat as they approached where she and her parents were staying, or more accurately, the nature of it were added to broader considerations, only on a partially conscious level, that had started to percolate upwards as nervousness, though not with enough quantity to—yet—notice, on her part, but not noticing it didn't preclude feeling it. "So can I get something to drink?" And when Eva glanced at her, she added, "Some water or something."

"Okay. Yeah." They both came round the side of the house and went up onto the deck. Across the creek, cows lay in the shaded pasture, chewing, looking disinterestedly at everyone across from them. Eva stopped, her hand on the sliding door handle. "You want me to bring it out or..."

"Why?" Maria glanced over Eva's shoulder, through the glass door. "You hiding something?"

"No."

"I'll come in then."

Eva'd already seen no one was in the den. She paused a moment, listening.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Eva said. She moved toward the kitchen. A stack of yellow plastic cups sat freshly opened on the bar, the plastic wrapping torn in a great gash. Maria filled one and stood there leaned back against the sink as she drank.

Then Eva’s mother stomped in. “Where have you been?”

Eva turned. She was about to speak when her mother noticed Maria. Maria raised her hand. “Howdy.”

And the things Eva’s mother would’ve said went momentarily unsaid. Instead, she said, “Your father’s gone out to see about getting something to eat. If you want something in particular, we’ll have to call him.”

Eva shook her head. “Whatever will be fine.”

Her mother looked at Maria, who said, “Nice to meet yuh, mam. Sorry we’re late.” The benefit, at least in this case, of a certain accent relied on the fact that, whether those affected by it acknowledged it or not, few ever did, or could know in the first place, Eva’s mother being one of them, that the country, with some tentative association with the purity of nature and a dose of noble savage, rendered it either almost impossible to contemplate such perversion as one can supposedly so easily locate in more population-dense areas, if only because everyone keeps to themselves and hides it by default, or conversely, at the extreme, they may project every dark thing in the human soul, transforming human beings into the nameless, formless monsters which they are. The effect of Maria’s on Eva’s mother was the former. Although, more often than not, most can occupy both states and hold the resultant prejudices (in the generic sense) simultaneously.

And she smiled faintly and nodded her head. “Are you from around here?” It wasn’t that knowing the answer to a question before you ask it had rubbed off from being a secretary in a legal department, that was just her personality.

“Oh, yes, mam. My whole life.” Maria set the cup beside the sink. “Thank you for the water. I should be getting home now. It’s coming up on time for supper.”

“Is it far away?”

“No, mam. Just back up the road up yonder a bit.”

Eva’s mother nodded. “You must be excited about the eclipse.”

“Oh, yes, mam.”

“Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow while we’re out for it, then.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, mam. That is, why go somewhere when you don’t need to? The fire tower’s going to be about the best view anyone can get. Even better than going up to the parkway. And without all the traffic.”

“The fire tower?”

“Yes, mam.” Maria pointed in the general direction of it, as if that meant something inside the house. “All you gotta do is follow the road right up the ridge.” She looked at Eva. “Well, thank yuns again for the water. I’d best be getting back.”

“I’ll...show you out,” Eva said. She turned and followed her through the den.

Maria opened the sliding glass door and stepped out, turned, and glanced over Eva’s shoulder and toward the kitchen doorway. “You might wanna to hurry up about it.”

Eva’s brows furrowed. “What?”

“Kissing me.”

Eva quickly looked back over her shoulder. And when she turned, again, Maria’d ducked her head through the doorway, close, whispered, “After all, the world’s gonna end tomorrow. So you ain’t got much time.” She pulled away. She smiled as she turned and crossed the deck.

“Eva.”

Eva turned, saw her mother standing in the kitchen doorway with her phone to her ear. “Your father’s just gotten out onto the highway, so it will be a while before he gets back. Is there anything you want?”

I’ll be expected to remark on this, if not now, then later. But why should I bother? Why should I bother defending myself? Let them go find where I said anything against it. So what of it? Might as well make it now *and* later. But why? What should I have to defend? Let them come up with something. Do everything and nothing. Let them. Let them. Let them. Let them. Let them.

“Close the door,” her mother said, before she turned to go back into the kitchen again. “You’ll let the air conditioning out.” She called, “So is there anything you want?”

“I...don’t think so.”

Her mother appeared in the kitchen doorway again. “And what does that mean?”

Eva shook her head.

And so did her mother. She turned to go back into the kitchen again, and said into the phone, “Just get her a chicken sandwich.”

In regards to those bombings, they'd been an accident on the military's part. Following the height of the Cold War, so there wasn't even the excuse that they'd had to have them flying up there constantly all the time for *that*, in fact, it was just out because they have to keep them flying so and so often and burn up so and so much money in fuel, otherwise things start getting cut left and right and when it's needed there isn't a dime to be, proverbially, and sometimes literally, had. But during the course of a rather routine mission, without so much as an indicator light coming on, the bomb bay doors opened, and two, quite live, thirty-megaton nuclear warheads were released from their cradles, approximately, over the northern end of the county. Interestingly enough, at least to those who know of these events, though they aren't considered secret or classified, only one of those things the general populace declines to inform itself of, neither warhead detonated, though, as stated, the remaining one was, and is, quite live. The first ended up hanging in its parachute from a tree. Unfortunately for them, the second buried itself into the ground so sufficiently that the army core of engineers couldn't find any way of safely excavating it. This led to the, rather forcible, acquisition, on the part of the United States Federal Government, of a portion of land in the northern end of the county. The perimeter of this was then cordoned off with a chain-link fence, purchased from a North Carolina manufacturer due to a deal of sorts between various interests in the federal and state governments, which set rather interesting requirements on said fence, such that, apparently, only one company on Earth was able to fulfill the contract to specifications, which, due to a few hundred square acres of said acquired land being formerly property of the Cherokee reservation, as well as the Culverton Estate, the site itself, by definition, in proximity to a portion of the Qualia

Boundary, the fence had to be inaugurated, of sorts, by a particular set of religious rituals and ceremonies, but that since such circumstances hadn't previously existed or been quite been foreseen by prior generations, certain ceremonies and rituals were required to be slightly amended and recomposed to be amenable to the problem at hand, and in fact, while the fence looks quite normal, it is, actually, the only one of its kind ever to have existed, and due to certain... irreplacable processes, will likely be the only *ever* of its kind. It has—yet—however, failed to exercise any special properties in regards to preventing four-wheelers from entering the area, and indeed, certain vagaries of its construction would seem, in fact, to encourage such. This, at one point in the mid nineties, led to one Arthur Tibbs, having wrecked while on just such an excursion, being trapped beneath just such a vehicle, his leg broken, for thirty-two hours before being located after a troop of local bird watchers reported a larger than average gathering of cadaver fowl in the general area some hours earlier. A lawsuit had been attempted by the government in regards to this and such incidents, but the company had folded shortly after its delivery of the project and the former owners had otherwise disappeared. The incident, though generally unknown by the public, led to several requests for additional funding, however, no such funds were forthcoming, as, in previous years, the department had shown an ability to perform its function rather under budget, and appropriating any funds for anything with a hint of the *nuclear*, at the particular time of request, had been indicated by certain polls to be a rather hot potato, though these polls were later shown to be rather flawed, however, no further consideration was forthcoming because most of the people who would be tasked with such were too occupied with the demographic results of a subsequent set of polls on an otherwise unrelated issue that was more on topic at that subsequent time.

The consequence of this was that, by this time, two military personnel were stationed on the site, along with one forest ranger, although the forest ranger was only part-time, and in actuality, a volunteer who had a particular interest in animal psychology when confronted by human artifacts, and who had taken the area as a semi-personal field of study in regards to, what some might call, the most extreme artifacts of mankind.

In this regard, it would have been appropriate, but also in many other only semi-related, but with no need to mention, aspects, for Hannah—that was the forest ranger's name—to have been the one to make the initial discovery. However, the influx of tourists had caused all hands to be called on deck, as it were, and with the park and game wardens and forest service already understaffed and limping through a budget cut that year, no one could be spared for more frivolous ends. And if all of this seems funny, it's only because the natural human instinct towards tragedy is laughter, a biochemical process to shore up the brain with a release of dopamine sufficient enough to prevent the organism in question from plunging too far into a state of self-harm that might impinge upon its reproductive capabilities too soon. In general, at least in the Shakespearean sense, and one should not neglect Shakespeare in regards to any end of the world which might occur in an English-speaking country, the line would have to be drawn, somewhat arbitrarily, sure, between comedy and fantasy with the epithet: in comedy, only some of the people die, but in tragedy, everyone dies. However, when one goes to the end of tragedy, or rather, through the end, it is only then that true comedy can be found.

So the result of this was that Corporal Forrester—who was actually Air Force, though his name would indicate him seemingly more likely to occupy Hannah's job, wouldn't it?—but Corporal Forrester was on patrol that evening. The sun had set, but light still remained, red and gold along the ridge tops, and what few clouds there were were stained the same. There were no watchtowers or roads, except for those that'd been carved by their own vehicles. Their general orders specified that they, under normal operational conditions, were never to enter the area proper. Normal circumstance *not* being a huge gap in the fence, with pieces of said fence lying to either side of it, as if it'd been hit by a truck, which, in fact, it hadn't been, though it was understandable how he could think that, what with tire tracks running right through the middle of it. Under other normal operational conditions (that is, if he'd been stationed on almost any other post) he would've employed his walkie-talkie. However, here, the law precluded the usage of such, barely to mention that there was no one else to walkie-talkie to since Corporal Schmihdt had gone into the

town, a forty-five minute drive one way, to pick up a couple of burgers, having only been gone a little over thirty minutes. Cellular reception was also less than subpar, being that federal law severely limited the number of cellular towers in the northern part of the county due, non-obviously, not to the unexploded ordnance itself and any phantasmagorical chain-reaction that the initiated might assume would be possible in such circumstances, but in fact, because of a small radio telescope that existed atop one of the ridges in that area, originally established during the Cold War and still running off funds and a legal framework allocated then, that 250,000 acre electromagnetically cordoned off area a longstanding problem that many accused of being a type of genocide and the primary cause of the atrophy of almost any commercial prospects in the northern part of the county, and the withering of End of the World, a small township that fell within the bounds of this area that, even with this taken into account, remained, still, larger than Presbyterian, though the latter was more economically vibrant in some regards. Some conspiracy theorists, those among the broader contingents of such, those in that small group who admitted that the county might actually exist, argued that, in fact, there was something suspicious about the whole thing, as the area set aside there slash here was too small to effectively protect such a telescope from interference by human-produced electromagnetic radiation and that, obviously, something else was going on. However, their compatriots on such sites as where such things were discussed dismissed such speculation as just bad writing in that the whole county was fictional in the first place. The federal moratorium on cellular towers, however, had been merely fallout from broader regulations that covered all types of electromagnetic transmissions, right down to household WiFi routers (and thus walkie-talkies). The result of this had been, over the years, a gradual influx of persons self-diagnosed with what they believed to be allergies to said electromagnetic waves, the township, then, becoming their safe-haven from the broader electrified and electronic world. But in addition, in the recent decade, with the rise of Googolplex and Facebook, in particular, the township had taken on new life as a haven for a class of anti-internet technological abstainers who argued, taking quite seriously, beyond even the point it was possible to be humorous about,

that books by Douglas Adams, too, constituted a set of holy texts, arguing that communication, itself, beyond a certain point, would lead to the end of the human race, and that the majority of humanity should, subsequently, shut up and keep to themselves as a matter of the preservation of the species. Because of this, besides having the most coffee shops per capita in the county, as well as the state, End of the World also contained, not one but two Joint Burgers, both staying open after midnight, and the second of these being where Corporal Scmhidtt was bound for, still, at that moment.

Corporal Forrester, being rather conscientious in regards to his duties and his oaths, did the only thing he could do, awaited the return of his fellow soldier, as they could not both leave the area at once, so that then he could drive to End of the World, where he would be able to access a hard-line payphone. And in one sense, it wasn't so ridiculous that more infrastructure hadn't been assigned this post, as considering the best engineering minds couldn't get the thing out, what was anybody else going to do about it? Really, it had been considered impossible to achieve. Of course, at one point, so had the ten-minute mile. So while he waited, he rummaged through his pockets for some change, but only managed to produce one quarter, so he had to hope that Corporal Scmhidtt would have change after buying supper. But there was nothing to be missed, anyhow, only an empty hole in the ground, and who particularly, unless they were under orders to do so, would want to spend their time standing around looking at an empty hole in the ground?

The setting sun had plunged the valley into darkness far in advance of anywhere else, but because of the shape and orientation of distant ridges, it was possible to discern places where light still shone, as if to prove time somehow contingent. But it's not. It starts and it ends. It hurtles inexorably to the end. The arrow of time has one direction, and there is not enough energy available in the universe to reverse it. So that time could be posited different anywhere else is a false perception brought on by the nature of evil, and though, yes, everything must, by definition, extend from original creation... Time. Time. Time. Time. Time. Time.

And the time is now...

"The current time brought to you by P & B Bank."

The sound of the TV rushed over the kitchen counter and broke against the table in the same way it would've done if it had been a material wave, just invisible and unsensible by all but one organ unless the bass was deep and turned up high, but in any regard the same, effectively, otherwise. The earlier part of the five-thirty-part of the half-hour segments that divided the news from five to six-thirty droned on, repeating much of what'd been said in the first half hour for those who'd only gotten around to watching it now. All of it seemed a strange other world, something akin, in many ways, to the local news of the variety of that place from which they had come and, yet alien, as if looking at a society of aborigines who'd come together in costumed pantomime to recreate civilized society for the explorers from whom they'd drawn their descriptions. Yet, at the same time, glossed over by everyone's conscious minds, yet comforting in its normalcy, were those same segments, broadcast over all of those numerous news agencies that passed themselves off as local, only to be owned wholly by less than a handful (if they really weren't actually

all one in the same, depending on any particular applicability of the Athanasian Creed) national, if not international entities, constantly feeding into the local discourse, rarely with the slightest modifications of words, referring to a certain political candidate by one of his former jobs as a pizza delivery boy, even to so much as the wholesale inclusion of pre-define segments worked into local issues through scripts issued from head offices, so that, in many ways, a primordial comfort settled over any audience anywhere as soon as the TV was tuned to such channels at the correct times, all of it, in itself, having that trustworthiness of the local flavor that stood in opposition to colder, more abstract, national affairs.

Foil and wax wrapping papers spread over the table, speckled in drippy, inter-mixed sauces, those things, in themselves, also something universal, something that could be obtained anywhere in the world, presented exactly the same as was presented here now. Of all organisms, it is the fast-food chain that stands as the most perfect, in terms of its awesome (in the older sense of the word) parthenogenic-esqe fecundity, a tradition no other religion or form of inter-temporal or inter-spacial data transmission will ever usurp.

"Have you thought about where you want to go tomorrow for the viewing?" Eva's father said.

His wife wiped her mouth with a branded paper napkin. "Actually, I was thinking we might not have to go anywhere."

"We've come all the way down here—"

"I'm not talking about that. It's just that, I was talking to a local today, and they're going to be watching from someplace called..."

"The fire tower," Eva said. She didn't look up as she teased a fry from a carton, a not yet unwrapped chicken sandwich lying there, technically upside down, and in lieu of the, as per franchise specification and regulation, packing slip with the preparer ID that was supposed to be affixed, something had been scrawled in big, black Sharpie letters: E M M Y, an identifier she couldn't discern the meaning of because its context'd become alienized even before it'd had the chance to ever've been anything else.

"Yes, the fire tower. Apparently it's up on the ridge. And you can walk to get there. And the views supposed to be as good as anywhere."

Her husband bit into his sandwich and chewed. Sauce dribbled

from it onto the foiled and waxed paper. "Hm." He shrugged. "What about dinner?"

"Oh, I'm sure we could go out and find something."

Her husband nodded as he took another bite, chewed.

"In other news, a local highschooler at Heritage Union in the mountain town of Kingsly has been arrested, charged with the creation and dissemination of materials depicting a minor in a sexual manner. The student, who has so far been unnamed by authorities, has been released on bond. A News 10 exclusive at this local highschool, however, has more on these disturbing allegations. We warn you the images in the next segment might be considered graphic by some. We now go to News 10's Sylvia Borges. Sylvia."

Whereas, though the two spellings resulted, most often, in identical pronunciations and could thus go unremarked in spoken dialogue, the banner above the runner at the bottom of the screen carried the slash form of the county identifiers.

"Thank you, Tom. We're here outside the Heritage Union high-school in the town of Kingsly, where News 10 has obtained these exclusive documents detailing the removal from this premises and subsequent arrest of Lily Anodine, a seventeen-year-old student here, who was arrested here just two days before her eighteenth birthday, on charges of the creation and distribution of these images, obtained exclusively by News 10, to other underage individuals. You can see the accused, Lily Anodine, with her shirt pulled up, revealing a bikini top. Further sources have indicated, although have not been verified by News 10 at this time, that there also exist pictures of her wearing a tank top without a bra. The local sheriff's department, when questioned on this, declined to answer, saying that investigations were currently ongoing."

Black bars were required over Lily's face and everything below her clavicles, so the only thing that remained visible was a section of her throat.

"As you can see, Tom, the school's shut down right now, as everyone gets ready for tomorrow, so we were unable to obtain any interviews with her fellow students, however, we were able to briefly talk to one of the school's network administrator's, Angela Friedman, and asked her if any school resources were employed in the creation or dissemination of these images to other underage individuals."

“‘No. Th—”

“So, as you can see, Tom, school administrators have issued a statement, which I have here, stating that this activity was the work of a so-called lone wolf and that they endeavor to do everything in their power to justify the faith that all the parents of the county put in them to ensure their children are safe.”

“And, Sylvia, has there been any word yet on when those students accused of having received this material might be charged?”

“No word as of yet, Tom. However, a statement from the local sheriff’s department has been released stating they are currently investigating all avenues and that any further statements will be forthcoming.”

“Live at Heritage Union Highschool in Kingsly, this is Sylvia Borges. News 10.”

“And thank you for that, Sylvia. Now, with everyone planning to get out tomorrow, let’s turn to meteorologist Terry Plante. Terry, it’s shaping up to be a gorgeous day tomorrow.”

“That’s right, Tom...”

“You see what happens,” her mother said. She took a sip from her drink and air sucked up the straw, a horrible sound. Of course, it was the same thing she’d said when the same segment had been broadcast on the five-o’clock news.

“You’re Veronica Lace.” But this was only a stage name, or that is, the last part was, which rendered the whole of the construction in the same terms.

Standing there, beer in hand, she said, “Wow, your pattern recognition must be at least average.” And his face changed into a mask of perplexion as he tried to determine how to reverse from whatever social faux pas his unconscious mind was seemingly trying to indicate to his conscious mind he’d stepped into. She smiled. “It’s just Veronica.”

Harvey nodded, faintly smiled, beer, also in hand. “So are you working with David?”

“Depends on how you mean.”

He paused a moment, trying, again, to work out what he’d stepped in.

“Be careful,” David said. He sat on the couch, back to them, looking out through the curved half-wall of windows at the night and the house lights on the far side of the river. “She eats baby sharks for breakfast.” But that was only that one time in Japan. He sipped his own beer and said to Karen, who was sitting in a chair across and at an angle from him, “So is Langdon supposed to show up?”

She’d nursed a glass of scotch for the last half hour and looked at him over the rim of it. “I doubt it.” She set her glass on the coaster on a nearby table. “He’s a workaholic these days.”

“You can’t be anything but,” Harvey said, and leaned forward and planted his elbows on the back of the couch.

“Someone else you went to school with?” Veronica said.

“Oh no.”

Karen snorted. “Very much not.”

David sipped his beer. “No, he was a bit more . . . academically sound than us.”

"Dropped out of school," Karen said, "and went to college full-time when he was fifteen."

"And what'd it get him?" Harvey said. He took a swig of his beer. "Working twenty hour days at the university with no tenure in sight."

"Nobody gets tenure anymore," Karen said. She'd worked the admissions office, before moving to the county library after finishing her degree. Directly, the university employed quite a portion of the county as office workers and grounds keepers and custodians, indirectly, obviously, well, several practitioners of contemporary mercantile capitalism weren't (most of the time) terribly unhappy, except in the general ways in which they almost always were.

The doorbell rang.

"Cardboard's here," Harvey said.

Ruth moved down the hall toward the front door.

"What about Josh?"

"Who's that?" Veronica said.

"Spent his graduating year with us," David said. "He—"

"Does somebody want to give me a hand with this?" Ruth said, buried in boxes almost up to her nose as she walked toward the kitchen.

"I will." Beer in hand, Veronica followed her.

Harvey leaned his head farther over the couch. "You two..."

David sipped his beer. "No."

"And is she...?"

"You'll have to ask her."

"Come on."

Ruth called, "Yuns gonna come and eat or not?"

Pizza boxes lay spread out over the dining room table, along with napkins and a bag of paper plates. "Cups are in the kitchen. Help yourselves."

"All this fancy dining room," Karen said, "and fill it up with pizza boxes."

"Well, I have to fill it with something."

"So did you," Veronica said to her, "go to the same school, too?"

Everyone laughed. "No," David said. He wiped sauce from his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ruth just liked slumming. That and we had the largest supply of lesbians in the county. All easy

to identify because they were the only ones not pregnant.” He put down his plate and reached for a napkin and wiped his mouth again. “Speaking of, what eventually happened to Elisa?”

“We don’t ask about that,” Karen said.

In fact, the Elisa in question had converted, or more accurately, reconverted, and outed Ruth in about the most public way possible, before she trotted off to a private Christian College down east. Even all these years later, it was held up as a textbook case of the power of faith that someone could be converted away from sin; her father often invoked this fact on the air, Elisa herself being currently employed at the radio station, at least until she got married; her future husband had also already invoked this fact during several sermons.

Ruth shrugged. “I got over it.” She wiped her mouth. “Besides, everyone else in the family had managed to piss off granddad so bad, he was glad enough to leave all this to me just to think about their faces after the will had been read.” She balled a paper napkin and tossed it onto the table.

“She tried to get herself killed, you know,” Karen said.

Veronica looked at her, surprised, and showing it. “How’s that?”

Ruth snorted. Karen said to David, “You not hear what happened at the re-creation of the Battle of Horace Knob a couple years ago?”

David shook his head, sipped his beer.

“What’s that?” Veronica said.

“Local sport,” Harvey said.

“They re-enact a battle just outside the Helena town limits every year,” Ruth said.

“A battle from when?”

“Well,” David said. Toppings fell off the flopped-down tip of his pizza, and he looked down at them. “It’s supposed to be a Civil War battle.”

“Supposed to be?”

“There weren’t ever any battles fought here,” Harvey said. He reached for a napkin. “They set up one and re-enact it as if it had, what it would’ve been like if one had happened, like that.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Ruth said.

“Willa’s still missing after it,” Karen said. She wiped her mouth. “You know, Willa Coffee? The one that was Deidric’s cousin.”

"What happened to her?"

"Willie? Nobody knows."

"No."

"Oh, Ruth? Re-enactment day's what happened to her."

"Nothing happened," Ruth said.

"She should've been in the hospital for three weeks."

"She makes it sound worse than it was. And besides, as if I could afford that."

"What happened?" Veronica said.

Ruth shook her head and sipped her beer. "Did you tell her about the time *you* got sent up for having porn in school?"

"Nope," David said.

"What's this?"

Ruth leaned back in her chair. "The rumor somehow got around that he had this fantastic bit of porn in his locker. So the principal goes down there, with a guard, and they open it up. Go through it. Can't find anything. So they bring him into the office. And they demand that he turns any contraband material over immediately."

"This's a really pointless story," David said.

"So they go out, he takes them down to his locker, he opens it up, and he pulls out and hands them a copy of the Bible. And you can just see the principle's face just go—"

"You weren't there," David said.

"But the principal's just getting absolutely livid. And is demanding he hand over this material. So David puts out his hand to get the Bible back. And the principal gives it to him. And David opens it up—"

"You weren't there."

"And he starts reading. And after about three sentences, the principal jerks it right out of his hands. He gets suspended for two weeks."

"No?" Veronica said. "Really?"

"Is that the way they're telling it now?" David said.

"So," Veronica said. "What about this teacher... Mrs Grant?"

"Miss Grant, you mean?" Karen sat her drink on the table and looked overtop her glasses at David. "Oh, she's still here."

David wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "Still teaching?"

"Oh, no. You know how *that* goes. She volunteers at the library these days, mostly. You should come by while you're here."

“Yeah,” Ruth said.

He looked from one to the other. “*Yeah.*” And laid his napkin on his empty, greasy plate. “I can see things around here haven’t change much at all.”

And of course, Veronica was looking around the table trying to suss out exactly what those *looks* on everyone’s faces meant, something she was shrewd about, normally, and no less so here.

“I just don’t know where Langdon’s gotten to.”

“Hon, you don’t need to worry about that.” Marietta put a hand on Anime’s shoulder. “He’s a grown man.” She looked over her own shoulder while Russell was in the kitchen. “And tell me, has he started seeing anyone again yet?”

Anime shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“He’s got to get back on that horse.”

“Leave the poor man be,” Russell said. He entered from the kitchen with a tray and fresh-pressed coffee. “Maybe he *wants* to have a little freedom for a while.”

“You can’t let men stay free too long,” Marietta said. “It does things to their minds.” He poured her a cup of coffee from the samovar and handed it to her. “Thank you, dear.”

He started to pour one for Anime. “I—” But the phone rang.

“Let it go to voicemail,” Marietta said. “It’s probably just a junk call, anyway.” She cast her eyes toward Anime. “Every time we go out and come back, not one call comes in while we’re gone. At least not from those telemarketers and pollsters and whatnot.” She sipped her coffee. “But as soon as we use a credit card at the gas station coming into town, they start coming in again.” She said to her husband, “Don’t worry about it, dear.” But he’d already passed the cup of coffee to Anime and risen to look at the readout on the display as the phone tried to say the name and number aloud, but the whole thing descended into unintelligibility. He picked up the receiver. Marietta shook her head as she sipped her coffee, cut her eyes toward Anime.

“Hello.”

“Oh, hi,” came from the other end of the line. “This is Elisa Cobb—from station EFKO. Oh, am I speaking with Reverend Pope?” A faint giggle followed.

"Yes."

"Oh, hi. Yes, we were wondering if you would be interested in doing an interview—on air, that is—with us tomorrow."

"I don't know."

"Oh, we would—very much—like to have you on."

"This should've really been run by my agent."

"Oh, well we're—sorry about that Mr—Reverend—Pope. It's just that we knew you were in town and—being a local—we'd thought you might be interested in commenting on the upcoming eclipse. Since you're a kind of celebrity."

"I'm not quite sure I can fit it in my schedule."

"Oh, well—there wouldn't be anything to fit. All we'd need is—fifteen minutes of your time—tops. And you could do it right over the phone. It wouldn't even have to be live."

He glanced toward Marietta.

"Unfortunately, I think I'm very busy tomorrow. Call my agent next time and we can work out something in advance." Next time was scheduled to be in ninety-five years, barring the end of the world, of course.

"Oh—but you're just the right person for this, Mr—Reverend—Pope."

"Sorry, but my schedule is full. Have a nice night." He hung up the receiver.

"I told you not to answer it."

"I've never been a good listener," he said. He sat and lifted the samovar. "They wanted—"

"*Oh*," Marietta said, "We could hear what they wanted." Elisa does have a voice that's not easily forgotten, or ignored, especially when she puts some volume into it.

"I have to admit," he said, "I was momentarily tempted." He sat back with his cup of coffee.

"You're a very wicked man."

"Hm?" Anime looked up, having drifted off somewhere, as usual. "What's going on?"

"They're just trying to get Russell on the radio. Again."

"You should go," Anime said. She sipped her coffee as if she'd just remembered it'd existed. "It would be interesting."

Marietta laughed. "He's never going to give up trying to ambush you."

Russell smiled, sipped his coffee. "He might succeed one of these days."

"If I would allow myself to say heaven help us," Marietta said, "I would."

Her husband laughed. "Let us hope that God stays in his heaven and that all remains right with the Earth, then."

Too late.

"Anyway," Marietta said, and she cut her eyes toward Anime. "I insist you stay here tonight."

Anime shook her head. "I couldn't do that."

"No," Marietta said. "We insist. Isn't that right, dear." She looked at her husband.

He nodded. "You can stay as long as you need."

"I don't want to put yuns out."

"You aren't putting anything out. And besides..." She rose and walked toward the windows, coffee cup in hand. "Would you look at it. Still traffic. Is it ever going to let up?" She sipped her coffee, turned. "And it's not even tomorrow yet."

Russell balanced his shin on his other knee. "It'll be here soon enough."

Yes. It will.

“Okay, here’s mine.” Veronica knocked back her drink. “You always hear about how pandas just won’t do it, right? And you’ve got people running around in panda outfits, basically making panda porn to get them to do it, and that’s why the whole species is going fucking extinct? Right? Except it’s all a lie. Pandas get it on out in the wild just as often as anything else. It’s just that they can’t get in the mood when they’re stuck inside a little concrete enclosure, being looked at by a bunch a freaky, mostly hairless, upright walking apes all day.”

“So you’re saying that’s not what making porn’s like?”

She laughed, bent forward, and wiped her mouth. “Well, sometimes the concrete part can be right.”

Ruth started to laugh, sinking into the couch and throwing back her head, and almost lost hold of her drink.

“Even then,” Harvey said, “I bet no one ever turned you down.”

Karen snorted.

“Ooooh, you would be surprised.” She leaned forward and cast an all-too-obvious look down the way at David.

“What’s wrong with you?” Harvey said.

David shrugged. He sipped his beer. “Would you like the list alphabetically or in ascending order of origination?”

Karen snorted.

“But,” Harvey said, “seriously. Seriously?”

“What can I say?”

“Okay,” Ruth said. “Okay.” She pulled herself forward and together. “Karen, it’s your turn.”

“I’m out of animal facts.”

“You can do better than that.”

Karen leaned back in her chair. “I’m just an assistant librarian who works for shit pay. Don’t expect alot outa me.” She sipped her drink.

“You,” she said, and motioned to Veronica. “You should take that librarian role you did, and re-shoot it...but with another woman.”

“Is that what you do all day?” Ruth said. “Sit around and look at porn on state computers?”

“The library is a bastion of free speech and the last refuge our society has against barbarism.” She sipped her drink.

“And who...” Ruth said. “Is there some *particular* performer you’ve got in mind for this?”

Karen leaned her head against the back of her chair, looking up with an expression on her face that exactly conveyed the fact that she was indeed, actually, trying to sort that out. And Ruth bent forward laughing. “Oh, god...” She tried to catch her breath. “It feels like we’re all so fucked.”

“Speak for yourself,” Harvey said.

“Oh, we know you don’t get fucked.”

“Ha ha.” Harvey raised his glass. “Not true.” He said it as an aside to Veronica, and after which she looked at him, but made no further reply.

“Did you hear,” Ruth said. “I think I forgot to tell you, did you hear Jason’s getting out of the army?” She sipped her drink. “Lewis, too. He’s been back awhile.”

“Who’s Jason?” Veronica said.

“Really?” David said. He remained quiet for a while. He shook his head. “It’s been a long time.”

“Who’s Jason?”

“The sort of,” Ruth said, “de facto leader of our rat pack among the rats.”

“It was us,” Harvey said. “You were always...you know.” He sipped his beer.

Ruth sipped her own drink. “Anyway,” she said to Veronica, “he went into the army two days after graduation.”

“And only then,” David said, “because graduation’d been on a Friday.” He took a long draw from his beer, the bottle nearly empty. “Goddamn.” He drained it and leaned forward and set it on the table with the other empties. “When’s he due back?”

“Not sure. I got an email from him a few weeks ago, completely out of the blue. But it was short on details.”

David, still leaned forward, nestled his elbow against his thigh and scratched his cheek.

"I've got a picture of him, somewhere," Ruth said to Veronica, "of him with the most pathetic mustache and goatee you've ever seen."

"Oh, I have to see this."

"No," David said. "No one has to see that."

"He never," Veronica says. "He never lets anyone take his picture. What changed?"

"Nothing," Ruth said. "That's always been the case. It was a real paparazzi job. Literally jumped out of a closet."

"Jumped out of a closet?!"

"Oh, the glasses."

"Glasses?"

Everybody's eyes followed Ruth as she jumped up and went into the foyer.

"Yes," she said, as she returned. "These're for everybody. For tomorrow." She dispensed them as if she'd been dealing playing cards.

Harvey unfolded a pair and put them on, looked around the room, up at the ceiling. "Worst three-d glasses ever." He took them off and studied them. The lenses looked like some kind of metal foil. He glanced at David. "You ever do any movies in three-d?"

"Nope." David stood, stretched his back, and walked toward the kitchen to get another beer from the refrigerator.

"Have you ever," Karen said, "even seen one of his movies?"

"How the hell should I know?" He sat back in his chair. "Why the hell would I pay attention to who wrote or directed something?" He added, "No offense," as David came back in.

"None taken."

"So," Harvey leaned forward, "what's it like working on a set?"

"About like any other job."

"Yeah, but *not* like any other job."

David sipped his beer. "*Exactly* like any other job." Do what you like for a living and you're working every day of your life.

Harvey shook his head and sat back. "So what do you list on your taxes? Is it something generic? Or do they have a classification for porn? Huh?"

Before David could reply, Ruth said, "Did you tell her about the ghost?"

"Ghost?"

David shook his head.

"We should go," Ruth said.

Karen said, "Go?"

"Come on, it'll be like old times."

David shook his head.

"This's stupid," Harvey said.

"Oh, come on." Ruth leaned forward and set her drink on the coffee table. "Come on. Maybe we can spot the ghost."

"Where're we going?"

David didn't shake his head, but he leaned forward to set his beer on the table, and then stood.

"Come on," Ruth said to Karen. And Karen rolled her eyes, but sipped her drink once more and then set it on the table as she rose.

"This's stupid," Harvey said. He was still sitting there.

"No one said you had to come," Ruth said.

"Where're we going?"

"We'll have some fun," Ruth said. "Just like old times."

They all gathered outside in the gravel drive, wrapped in the embrace of warm, humid night after being so long in air-conditioning. Harvey followed last, beer in hand. Laughing, Ruth and Veronica went ahead down the drive, toward the road. Tree frogs sang, peepy, piercing, pointed sounds in the night overlaying the rush of the Tuckasegee, an undulating black ribbon that glinted with terrible reproductions of the moon and stars. Another light blinked up there, a plane, otherwise silently headed for the Asheville Regional Airport. Headlights washed the white-and-yellow painted asphalt in front of a lone Land Rover traveling down the road on the opposite side of the river. Out on the road on this side, moonlight and starlight rendered the yellow and white lines near iridescent, the bridge a black, three-dimensional spiderweb waiting to snare nightflyers. "You," Ruth said, "know they film movies here sometimes, yeah?"

"I think so," Veronica said. "Yeah?"

"You know the guy who plays... Who is it?"

"Plays in what?" Karen said

"You know, the thing."

"Don't remember," Karen said.

"Whoever—he's from here."

Veronica said, "Really?" She struggled to recall anything about that particular film.

"And he drives off a bridge, you know, in the movie. They filmed part of it here."

"Really?"

"They thought he drove off a bridge drunk," Karen said.

"Oh, yeah," Veronica said. "He was murdered, right?"

"It's left ambiguous," David said.

"But but but," Ruth said. "But the interesting part is after, after the premiere, when... What was his name?"

"George Tyler," Karen said.

"Right, George Tyler. Horrible son-of-a-bitch. Really horrible. Beats his wife. Friends with the sheriff. Nobody does *anything* about it."

"Law was different back then," Karen said.

"Back then?" Harvey said, and sipped his beer.

"But," Ruth said. "But he goes to the movies, watches whatever it was when it's originally playing, goes out, gets drunk, drives off this bridge, and drowns."

"Really?"

"So they say," David said.

They stopped halfway across, the Mennonite church large and white on the opposite side, framed by the bridge's inter-riveted iron girders.

"Shhhhhh," Ruth said. They stood there, the river gurgling below them.

"What're we waiting for?" Veronica whispered.

"Shhhhhh."

Harvey sipped his beer. "This's stupid."

"Shhhhhh."

After a while, David said, "Yeah. Like old times."

Ruth laughed, bent forward over the bridge railing laughing. "Oh, come on," she said, after she'd caught her breath. She took Veronica's arm. "Let's go back."

“At least,” Karen said, “she’s getting the authentic experience of growing up round here.”

Light washed their backs, an engine approaching, a vehicle slowing, and they moved toward the edge of the road. The driver popped up a spotlight and panned it through the rolled-down window, blinding them, and causing them to throw up their hands.

“What’s the idea?”

Hannah clicked-off the light. “Sorry.” And she reached up and turned on the interior lights.

Ruth leaned against the door. “What’re you doing out?”

“Just got off and decided to take a ride down the river.”

Ruth laughed.

“You’re all drunk.”

“Yes,” Ruth said.

“You better watch it,” Hannah said. “Else you’ll get arrested.”

“Are you going to arrest us?”

“I...” She leaned forward to see better through the rolled-down window. “Harvey? Are you... What for gosh sakes are you doing walking around on a road with an open beer?”

“Drinking it.”

“Oh my gosh.” She sighed in exasperation. “What’m I supposed to do here?”

“Nothing,” Ruth said. “It’s out of your jurisdiction.” All technically incorrect, but who cares?

Hannah sighed.

“And besides,” Ruth said, “he’s just gotten back? Why’d you wanna be so mean...?”

“Who?”

Ruth grabbed David’s shirt and yanked him forward. “You not recognize him? Imagine him a little more clean-shaven.”

Hannah paused, mouth open. “Uh... Oh my gosh. It’s you.”

“I hope so.”

“Oh my gosh.”

All words starting with ‘g’ are interchangeable, gosh, gostak, god, so this phrasing shouldn’t be taken to imply that she believes that there are others, even if the gostak does distim the doshes. Though, if she did, there’d be nothing wrong with it. In fact, things would

remain rather consistent. It'd be better than the alternative. But that's what makes it a fantasy. In this case, it's best to define nightmare as the inversion of fantasy, the in-applicability of fantasy to the real world, that conceivability of anything other than what is, something that by definition could be created, but by definition can't, not because of any technical reason, but purely because of technical reasons, and it goes on and on and on and on and on and on and on...

"Oh my gosh. When did you get back?"

"Just today."

"Oh my gosh."

"You already said that," Ruth said.

Hannah, closing her mouth, shook her head. She glanced through the windshield and turned to look back through the rear window. "Yuns had better get off the road before a deputy comes along."

"They'll be bogged down with everybody else in town," Ruth said.

"Is it that bad?" Hannah said.

"Haven't you been out in it?"

Hannah shook her head. "I took the forestry roads to get down here. They said on the radio it's still backed up all the way over Balsam *and* Cowee. But I figured it'd be better in town."

"I wouldn't recommend it," David said.

"Oh, crap."

Ruth laughed at Hannah's lifelong inability to swear. "Why don't you come back with us?"

Hannah looked up from the wheel, shook her head. "I can't. I'm on duty early." Harvey, standing around bored, had started down the road. And Hannah shoved her head through the window. "Where're you going?"

Harvey turned, stumbled, but didn't drop his beer. "Home."

"No you're not. You're not driving like that."

He didn't reply.

"I'll arrest you."

He sipped his beer. "You ain't got the jurisdiction."

"Har—"

"If you end up in the river," Karen called, "she will then."

"And," Ruth called, "she'll probably cite you for molesting the fish." She laughed.

"Quiet," Hannah said. "There are houses around, you know. Someone might hear you." She called to Harvey, "Come back here and get in. I'll take you home."

"Fuck off."

"I'm serious, Harvey."

Ruth called, "Listen to older sister, Harvey."

"All of you fuck off."

And it was David that went out past the front of the Land Rover and caught Harvey's arm, but he jerked away.

"You gotta go home, anyway," Ruth said.

"Fuck you. And you..."

David stepped out of the way from the swing, and Harvey, unbalanced, stumbled forward and would've hit the road if David hadn't caught him. He helped him through the Land Rover's headlights, and opened the passenger door.

"Where're you watching from tomorrow?" Ruth said.

Hannah, who'd been watching David help her brother into the seat, turned toward her, again. "I have to work up on the parkway. The university's going to set up some telescopes and photography up on a couple of the lookouts."

"Feel free to come by when it's over."

David shut the passenger door. Hannah glanced over when he did. "Thanks," she said. She turned toward Ruth. "I'll have to see. I don't know."

"Drop by anytime."

Hannah nodded and shifted the Land Rover out of park. "Yuns better get off the road," she said, then to David, "It was good to see you again," and she started ahead, slowly, headlights washing the road ahead and red taillights sweeping up after.

They watched the Land Rover's taillights disappear in the distance.

"Well," Ruth said, and intertwined her arms with Karen's and Veronica's, "you heard what the officer said." And they, David walking alongside, managed to carry themselves unsteadily down the road and up the drive, onto the front porch, only for Ruth to have to try a few times to remember what the combination was before she jerked the handle in frustration and laughed when she'd realized it hadn't been set to automatically lock in the first place.

A little past midnight, Shepard lay in a lawn chair, leaned almost all the way back, hands folded behind his head, looking up at the stars. Almost everyone lay asleep, houses dark, except for a distant window, up the hill, illuminated by a faint, flickering tv luminescence. Dogs ran through a neighboring hay field, all fresh cut and fluffed, dotted with rolled bails ready to haul off whenever they got the forklift attachment for the tractor re-welded. Somewhere out in the distant stand of trees, an owl hooted. Night mammals, the most look-alike descendants of those common ancestors of himself that had once taken over the Earth from things so much more frighteningly bigger than themselves, scurried through the underbrush. The fortunate thing about the end is that there will be nothing to contaminate that which came before and produced it. If not, they'd find too many excuses, too many things on which they could hang blame, assign fault. They'd say he did it because he was a godless heathen, a worshiper of Darwin and a believer of evolution. Yet it is *they*, those who claim to believe in heaven, who work hardest to avoid it, who're most terrified by death, who're the inventors of raptures and 'taking ups' into the sky, so that they might get there without death, and when they do, they've conceived they'll just step into a place housing and reaffirming all their selfsame prejudices and admirations, or at least those they claim openly to have, yet still disdain the half of anything that might be called good in all this mess, except it should be an honor for them to know that they can be said to die, that they can be said to *not* exist, that they can possibly conceive of some transition, some state one way or the other and not perpetual both and they and everyone one and the same and neither and both, some differentiation, something to dispel the sameness, the infinitude, the ever and ever and ever always on and on and on and on...

And Shepard is the instrument of that dispellation.

He lays there looking up at the stars.

He has a Bible, but a better one. And the last. He has no need of any prior incarnations, and he is the first. He is the result. It doesn't matter what came before. The word is nothing lest wrapped in the flesh. Because that shall be wiped away. Wiped away. He has become the final word made manifest in flesh. In his genome have come to be encoded the results of the holy words of scripture. He is that result. He is a result of results. As is everything else. Cells replicate through his body, dividing, synthesizing, unzipping DNA molecules that coil and compress the results and selections of holy writ in its fullest meaning having propagated and having led to this point, encodings that, if any such analysis had been undertaken on any blood drawn in the course of his life for insurance applications and medical examinations and school entrance documentation, would have revealed two interlocked, coiled strands not dissimilar to, in generic terms, to any other human being, for all are almost identical, though if this information (for everything is economics and economics requires information), perhaps, had it been examined by some brilliant cryptologist, laid bare in super computers and flayed by algorithms, transformed and translated and transliterated in so many myriads of ways, it would have given up its beautiful secrets, and given up nothing at all, and been made itself again, because what is there to give up at all? the final results of English, because why not any language at all? because wasn't it the limit of such even before Babel that defined everything and me? but especially the English of the King James version, which must be there, it's what they say, which must be the way in which it is, it's what they've demanded, with all its Shakespearean splendor, so that momentarily, if even just momentarily, and since it begins here, in this county, the throngs of Southern Baptists can be, for the briefest moment, resplendent in this, the words, even if not extant, but more than extant, and the results, but effectively having been brought forward into the world as thus flesh, for all words eventually must be made flesh and flesh to make the words, and to make the final words, and to make the final flesh, which is the final words, the words, now go and smite them and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not, but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and

sheep, camel and ass. Happy shall be he that taketh and dasheth the little ones against the stones. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known men by lying with them, that all shall become desolate. They shall fall by the sword, their infants shall be dashed into pieces and their women with child shall be ripped up. They are delivered unto your hands. Thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword. Thou shalt save nothing that breatheth, but thou shalt utterly destroy them, namely, everything, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee. Thou shalt make it a desolation for all the days of this Earth. Thou shalt smite as the firstborn of Egypt had been smote: both of man and beast. Everyone that is found shall be thrust through: and everyone that is with them, shall fall by the sword. Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes, their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished. Therefore thus sayeth the Lord of hosts, Behold, I will punish them: the young men shall die by the sword, their sons and daughters shall die by famine. Therefore behold, the days come, sayeth the Lord, that this place shall be no more known by old names, but as Slaughter. And I will make void the counsel in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seeketh their lives, and their carcasses will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heavens and for the beasts of the Earth. And I will make the cities desolate and hissing, everyone that passeth thereby shall be astonished and hiss, because of all the plagues thereof. And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one of the flesh of his friend in the siege and straightness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straighten them. And I shall destroy your high places and cut down your images and cast your carcasses upon your idols and my soul shall abhor them. And I will make the cities waste and bring the sanctuaries unto desolation and I will smell the savor of sweet odors. And I will bring the land into desolation. And there shall be no remnant of them. Then shall the land enjoy her Sabbaths, as long as it lieth desolate. As long as it lieth desolate, it shall rest.

He has an understanding, the consequence of that so long ago eating of the fruit of the tree, so they say. It is engendered in, and

derivative of, within him specifically, back issues of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. Or yet more specifically, the issue from November of 1975, which came to form, eventually, through much due diligence, the nexus of his own concept of himself, a concept shared only in part with the other members of the group he'd merely before joined, which had been forged by someone else, prior to his coming, out of a group of lone wolves, handing him, as a young Alexander, a prepared army. In fact, as he sometimes reflects, such as now, the very first paragraph, in an attempt to describe current affairs of a bygone world, could just as easily be carried forward, plagiarized, and never be thought not to describe the present. Yet what had he learned? From the past, he'd learned of somatosensory deprivation, that monkeys, after all, they were some of his closest extant relatives that weren't apes, when separated in a large room, but held in separate cages, so that they could see and hear one another, but never touch, all of this proven applicable across the species boundary, applicable to human children long in isolation in hospitals and or in things best termed *institutions*, resulted and results in the development of a litany of otherwise so-called abnormal behavior, most often expressing itself in violence. He'd learned, through reading too many studies and meta studies, until his eyes had felt like pincushions, that adult sex lives are intimately linked with the degree of physical affection in their childhoods, and that women who'd been found to abuse their children could almost universally be predicted to have never had an orgasm. He'd learned it was this selfsame amount of physical pleasure in childhood, touch, that predicted a given society's propensity towards amounts of theft, murder, mutilation, torture, rape, and slavery. That—prediction—became the key—the true science—the point at which questions of right and wrong and accuracy fell away for him, and floating in a universe where he knew he could never truly know anything, especially that which they said *I* might do, the only thing for it was to gather models, knowing none would ever be true, and that some would be more useful than others, and which changing moment to moment, but that none would grant him power, only likelihood. But this was only a beginning. Without an application to daily existence, such thoughts were no better than wool gathering, metaphysical questions, that while interesting in

themselves and on the whole as useful as anything else in the grand scheme of the universe, prediction became...him. What, then, could be predicted? That the nations most repressive of female sexuality would have some of the most extreme forms of pornography? That these forms themselves skewed toward the abusive in both content and production? That restrictions on premarital sex would align with societies that accepted nuclearized family units? extreme class stratification? slavery? or effective slavery in all but name? celebrations of military glory and the worship of angry, aggressive deities? That in such societies, mood altering substances that increased violence, such as alcohol, would be widespread, while ones that increased or enhanced pleasure, most especially that of touch, such as marijuana, would be banned and demonized? That in such societies, violent and sexually violent films would be more widely accessible than pornography focused solely on pleasure? (Most especially female pleasure?) That in such societies, films about preventing teenage daughters from having sex, and or losing their virginity, would be not uncommon but accepted, whereas the reverse would hold true for films of teenage boys' sexual awakenings? That in such societies, pain would be seen to build moral character? But at its heart he knew: a society will always support those things that are consistent with its true values, no matter what its *expressed* values may be. In this way, market theory was very much correct yet ultimately, unable to, and unwilling to, apply these selfsame conclusions to the conception of itself and the ultimate ends that could, or would, result, but this, in itself, demonstrated the point.

Though factual, innumerable contributions had been of use here, though only in the vaguest sense, they themselves too far removed from what would have to be done, and contributed only the smallest part. But he relied much more thoroughly on raw data. As if he'd been built for the purpose.

But still, he lacked applicability. In particular, applicability to himself. And to realize that, he had to look back at the forces that had formed him, placed him in the state he'd found himself in the place in the world he'd found himself in.

He knew that animals, humans included, deprived of somatosensory stimulation, mutilated themselves. It was the physical pain, the

mark of it, the wound, that was a totem, a point of physical reality, something that forced acknowledgment. It was the sense of Cartesian dualism that divided the mind and body, wrapped the mind in the soul and the soul in the mind, but before that the words of Paul echoed through time bound within that invention that had allowed human memory to exist independent of the mind, that gave the injunctive to put to death the base pursuits of the body for to live according to the flesh was to die but with the spirit mortify the flesh and live, and allowed, forced, a mode of acceptability and necessity. He knew such animals and human animals withdraw from the touch of others, as with loneliness that descends into chronic loneliness and drives the sufferer further and farther from that which is needed to heal, in some enactment of cosmic tragedy that repeats ad infinitum, thus rendering violence and pain the only balm to touch wounds that no one may acknowledge, because to acknowledge the wounds of the mind is to admit that consciousness freed of the body cannot even in itself be perfect and, even if only in some tacit way, admits the notion of the impurity of the soul, or at worst, its nonexistence, even in all its spherical, numerous colors.

Yes, this tacitly answered some things. Yet answered nothing at all. To explain pain was one thing. But to predict it was another. And in any regard, what did it mean to *him*?

He came to see that there were at least two intervals of physical development. The first, as had already been widely acknowledged, was in the earliest of youth. However, it could be demonstrated that even deprived of somatosensory stimulation, corrections could be made. That is to say, he divined the second point of development, or in other words, adolescence. If, though rarely, a similar set of experiences of somatosensory stimulation could be administered within this time frame, it would, for the most part, reverse the earlier deprivation. But conversely, and most interestingly, regardless of the amount of somatosensory stimulation in the first period, that is to say, a quite sufficient amount, or a more than sufficient amount, all of it could be undone by severe deprivation in the second period.

The second period, of course, was marked by something rather unique and distinct from the first. While it, in actuality, included the whole of the first, it, more accurately, added a secondary component

to the broader category of somatosensory stimulation, that is to say, namely, sexual intercourse and such related activity. And it is these two components that would provide the second key.

And again, everything returned to the question of predictability. If he could reason and predict a society's propensity for violence in relation to its attitudes toward pre-marital sex, and vice versa, could that be linked into a propensity for a more specific, and broad scale, type of violence, that is, namely, war? Yet why? Wars wasted resources. Wars killed people, who would otherwise one might suspect would want to live. Yet he could predict, from the simple reasoning that he could, by no means, be unique—that, in itself, had to be an incorrect assumption. But if wars were so wasteful, would they not, then, be selected against? Would not nations, tribes, etc, who went to war, jeopardize their own existence? Of course. It was the only answer. However, he realized so long as what was gained offset what was lost then not only would such behavior *not* be selected out but would, in fact, be selected for. So after all, war had to be natural. This was the third key.

But then, to say this was nothing. What were the mechanisms? Again, it lay in the second key, the nature of his existence. And it lay in the answer of the question: who fights wars? The answer lay in the inversion of war movies, in the fact that, no matter how often they showed late-twenties and middle-thirties men, and perhaps, a woman, something he would return to later, but what they did not show had always been the mass of eighteen-to-twenty-one year olds who were, and are, the backbone of any military force. And obviously, this connected to him less than tacitly: he would have to register for all this to obtain his social security card and from that every document that would define his existence and reality in the modern world. But that, in itself, was not enough.

What, then, next? And there'd always been a next for him, a hunger, and ever striving, a drive, an arrow as strong as the arrow of time. It was a mountain he would climb or die, aware of that fact or not, the sense of struggle endemic to his nature.

But the only way any of it could matter, and he knew this, or at least had a sense of it, a sense deeper rooted than even the will to survive, or die, is if it applied to *him*. Not narcissism, but a definition

of existence, a set of models that could be deployed in service of a development nowhere realized—yet—in the nature of his purpose. He is, by nature of his being a descendant of apes, a tool user, but maybe more so than any other. Therefore, how did it apply to him?

The... fifth key came with the rise of the twentieth century, that is, it flowed in with it, the natural consequence, and by no means a spontaneous thought, of everything that had come before. After all, the entire purpose of everything, right and wrong, was to arrive at this point, this state, this moment which is...almost...now.

But they were laid out like keys, keys laid out, one after the other, to be fitted into an ignition sequence, or a launch sequence, that could not be trusted to be initiated by any single hand, all of them delivered into his hands.

What came was the twentieth century. And what arose out of the experience of his adolescence was the final piece and culmination of his thesis, a thesis that could finally predict his existence, his own actions, his own feelings, his own thoughts, and most importantly, the actions of others. Not that it could ever be whole or perfect or unified, but even as a rough instrument, subject to the whims of everything that might or might not exist outside of its epistemological framework, it finally was.

What came was the flood, the wash of electromagnetics that carried more information than has ever been produced at any time in human history around and around the world. What came was the cellphone. And what came with it, eventually, in order to replace the prior religious injunctions which had been enforced such that they were, in effect, if not technically, anymore, civil law, but a legal framework accreted around the manufacture, possession, and distribution of child pornography, as well as the dissemination of non-child pornography from non-minors to minors, the necessary counterpoint to the enhancement of individual power through technology, which, when concentrated among a certain higher class, had long tended to go unbrooked, but now threatened the replication of the whole. It was this which elevated him to the fold, among those select few who come to realize a model of the nature of their own era, rather than be limited to the recognition of an era already long passed. And it was within this framework, the suspensions, the arrests,

the prosecutions of seventeen-year-old young men who stuck their phones up their shirts and texted the resultant pictures to their equally underage girlfriends for the crimes of manufacture and possession and distribution of child pornography, that he could slot the whole of his focus. After all, more important than the deprivation of the first part, was the deprivation of the second. And he could predict that a society accepting of pleasure would be the least likely to go to war. And he could predict that such a society would fall prey to any society who could, and did, foster anti-pleasure except when bequeathed as the one-sided reward for the successful exercise of that very same violence. And given that resources could only be scarce, or perceived as such, conflict could not *but* arise, and therefore, the latter society could not *but* arise. Then, in order to survive, any society would find itself locked into struggle and the promotion of struggle to maintain its own selfsame replication, because to not do so could only allow the latter to arise, and therefore, to obliterate any society based upon the former.

So then, he did have a purpose. He had been crafted for a reason. At least in terms of evolution, which brooks no reason, being merely the flow and not even a culmination of a process (unless the end of the universe can be counted in some way as such, even if it isn't). Yet—perhaps—one day he would have asked if that wasn't true, as well, for the entire notion of consciousness. But the environment had changed, as it often does in a universe, and on a planet, as nothing remains static. And he, and his fellow students, the members of his respective generation, had been built for something that, needed as it still was, needed fewer of them. Automation, as it had obliterated many jobs completely, had in the same way reduced the number of persons to do any one job. However, society, like certain cells, had never before had need to evolve a regulatory mechanism in regards to the production or over-production of this substance. And with no means to stop production, well, the outcome is obvious. He could predict, in time, that perhaps, under normal circumstances, nations dying in an excess of their own productions would give way to the selection of those with such of some sort of such a regulatory mechanism. However, there remained one problem in that regard, in that, the same modern technology which had, through the reduction in the

needs of manpower, created this problem, stood, if wielded by those selfsame displaced products, acting, as they must, on the impetuses and patterns imbued into them through the greater unconscious processes of society, then, it would be possible for the state organism in question, and the individuals who compose them, driven by the secondary effects of, and here market theory played a role again, a marketized variant of social Darwinism, as ever-present competition, drilled into every individual, to compete in first local, then global markets, to enter into an inescapable spiral toward extinction.

But this, of course, the framing of it this way, was to insinuate that there might be alternatives other than extinction. But here, theology, and in particular Calvinism, could provide the answer, to some, as in many of the ways it had provided the ultimate, though unadmitted justification and impetus for the eventual rationality for the Biblically referenced justification for the massacre of the Pequot, though he, Shepard, never concerned himself with justification, nor having ever been justified in any recognized sense, let alone rendered so through theology, and touched upon it only in regards to points of data amid broader structures. But it was the theory of predestination that provides, and provided, an answer for those who require one: that God, being God, must know everything and have laid everything down from the beginning of time, therefore, so had he about who would be saved and who would not. So then what choice could the individual have in salvation? Yet, the answer already provided, the choice must still be made to reveal what the answer had been all along.

Shepard lay back in the lawn chair, his hands folded behind his head. He'd already fallen asleep.

And already, long before, he'd passed out the other side of anger, even of rage, come to its natural destination, because for those few with the fortitude to hang on till the end, where the thing itself burns away to leave only the perfect, only smooth glass remains, frictionless, something unable to hold, yet always there, a peace, both inward and outwards. Because, after all, contrary to what might commonly be believed, it is creation that is the pinnacle of all expressions of violence. And destruction, true destruction, is the most peaceful thing in all of existence.

Now only remained for him to sleep and wake with the dawn.

3:07 AM. Evgenia forced herself not to look at the clock on the wall to confirm that the widget in the lower corner of the screen was indeed correct. The room, indeed the building, remained quiet, empty, except for the occasional typing sounds emitted from Natasha's office, where the door'd been left cracked. But someone had to sit there. And it might as well be a trainee fresh off the rack. Though, there were supposed to be a handful of others around here somewhere. Evgenia planted her elbow on the desk and her chin in her palm and reached for the mouse. The FBI field office in Charlotte covers the whole of the state, but has a handful of satellite resident agencies scattered within that area, one, handling the western end, in Asheville. The relocation bonus hadn't been quite what she'd expected, but then again, Asheville wasn't New York, at least price-wise, most of the time. When she'd looked it up after having been told where they were transferring her to, she'd learned it's often referred to as the Paris of the South. As of yet, though it was far from the worst place in the world, she hadn't found a means to justify this statement. Although, she'd never seen the actual Paris, in France, or Paris Tennessee, or Paris Texas, which everyone assumed, her being the daughter of first-generation Czechoslovakian immigrants, back when a country by such a name still existed, that she'd, of course, been there, because, apparently, Europe is a very small place, at least in the minds of most Americans. But conversely, there is some truth to that, considering how many tourists from smaller countries think they can drive across the United States in a couple of days, three tops. But that same largeness of size, vastness of scale, as with Russia and China, creates a cultural problem, or that is to say, it creates too many cultures, all vying with each other to be *the* culture and, in the course of this, seeking to extirpate all competing cultures. Not that Evgenia thought

about this, in particular, just that things were...different than where she'd been used to. Also, by this point, she'd become convinced that *solitaire* could, in fact, somehow, cheat. And she moused over to the little *x* that destroyed windows and clicked it, with a microscopic, but still extant, by definition, amount of pleasure at being able to exercise power over something in her life.

A phone rang, a smartphone, not a real official one, and she realized it must've been in Natasha's office, because it cut off too quickly, so she must've answered it, which she had.

Evgenia yawned, stretched backwards in her chair, which popped like the cheap plastic it was, and she sat forward in fear of breaking it. So she rose and stretched her shoulders and walked toward the break room. But quite unintentionally, she stopped just past the door to Natasha's office, not out of any conscious interest in spying, so much as part of a natural unconscious response to the human voice. In this case, the human voice was Natasha saying, "I'm at work." Which, of course, was what Corporal Forrester had hoped would be the case, as, seeing as how with the current generation of user-interface design, he couldn't determine how to view the actual numbers of the associated names and descriptions listed in his smartphone, which still, obviously, couldn't be used to place a call as he was still within the bounds of the dead zone around End of the World, and was therefore stuck calling either 911 or the number on the napkin that was still in his pocket because he hadn't had time to get his uniform washed and had been left there since he'd gotten it from her at a bar in Asheville the evening before. And it's not that he had memory problems, only that, as with most people, it was difficult for him to remember numbers that he'd so rarely used. And lastly, due to certain longstanding and unaddressed issues, because of the nature of shareholder returns and cost-cutting, lines to all the military-related numbers (though business and residential services were intermittently out as well, and this had been happening for months, most of it unnoticed because the occurrences, due to a software bug, occurred mostly at night and hadn't—yet—gotten any major attention, so it wasn't as if it were something special) but what numbers he knew were, and would remain for the next few hours, either dead or inexplicably busy. "I... Yeah." Again, Evgenia had no conscious interest in spying, but what

happened happened. “Are you sure about that?” And the subtle changes in tone in Natasha’s voice, something that only percolated upwards from Evgenia’s unconscious mind as the injunction: pay attention, though for what purpose other than more information is always better, even it didn’t know, because the results of evolutionary processes haven’t yet granted the species, for the most part, or on the whole, any kind of prescience, but Natasha’s voice through the barely open door triggered this. “Okay. Yes. I understand.” Plastic clacked against plastic as she picked up the real official phone on her desk. Even at the late hour, getting through to the main field office wasn’t difficult, there were, after all, a lot more people there doing exactly what she and Evgenia were doing at the moment. The main problem was finding some other line of reasoning as to why she was reporting this, rather than it coming up through the air-force chain of command, as she was not, for more than one reason, going to go into the details as why and how a napkin had been involved. It would be up to the regional office to contact NEST. Something that, even with the circuitous route of information, and too their credit, was taken quite seriously. And a call came back less than twenty minutes later.

Evgenia instinctively knew better than to poke her head in and ask what was going on, so she’d forced herself to move toward the break room right after Natasha’d picked up the phone to call the field office. She stood in there, leaned against the counter, sipping coffee that’d taken on the sourness of the paper it was contained in, when she heard Natasha coming down the hall, who, incidentally, though the name might cause some to think otherwise, was not a child of immigrant parents, and in fact, she was, roughly, seventeenth generation American, her ancestors, the European ones, at least, having come over with an original Spanish expedition not connected to Christopher Columbus, something she never failed to point out when the subject inevitably came up around new boyfriends—which, incidentally, is a term, along with its gendered reciprocal, that factored into Shepard’s analysis—but she took great pains to avoid the subject of Christopher Columbus during social situations, reiterating her name had, instead, been picked out by her mother because of some movie or the other at, or around, Natasha could never get her mother to remember the

details, though, in fact, it was around, rather than at, the time of her birth.

“NEST is coming in,” she said. “We are going to meet them at the airport and liaise as to the local area.” Or bluntly, recommend where the best and or cheapest coffee could be obtained.

Evgenia paused. “As in...”

“As in possible nuclear theft and or threat.” She always talked that way. And she turned to go back down the hall. “Be ready to roll out. They’ll be here in two hours.”

Which is, almost, how long it took them to get to the airport. Except that one of the planes kept at NEST’s disposal spent fifteen extra minutes circling, waiting for them to try and clear a runway. And it would still be another forty minutes before the helicopters arrived. But all in all, it was a rather respectable showing. And in fact, had circumstances been different, they might’ve even had a chance. And Evgenia had somewhat intuited this, that is, a very rudimentary part of her mind, as was its function, had postulated that this whole thing might go badly, though, none of that percolated upwards as she stood out there on the tarmac amid all the various lights of the place, the heat of engine exhaust washing over the asphalt from the warming up or cooling down engines of distant planes, as Natasha went out to meet with the four men busy unloading equipment cases. And when Evgenia looked up into the sky, she saw all those flashing lights, planes waiting to land, like stars all gone crazy.

Sunlight against his closed eyelids eventually woke him, though it'd long been streaming between the curtains. And he tried to slip back into sleep, but the ache from his bladder had spread over and behind and through everything below his navel. But for several minutes, though temporal perception at such moments of semi-consciousness is notoriously fuzzy, and it could've as easily have been ten minutes or an hour, but he puzzled over which room he was in, as alcohol, combined with the constant shifting of beds through the night, had left him quite muddled in regards to various pieces of architectural geography, which otherwise wouldn't have mattered, except for the fact he wanted to ensure that it was the bathroom that he made it to first. He pulled himself up. A woman's arm lay across his chest, attached to whom he didn't bother to discern as he rubbed his eyes. In any regard, it slid off as he rose, and rubbed against the body-warmed sheets. He went out into the hall naked, being as there was no point in not. And he sighed as he finally coaxed his bladder into releasing, the sensation of which, without his realizing it, existing in the same realm as much of what had happened the night before, a sort of release from a physiological tension that could easily be, and for most of the population was, confused with a state of pleasure. Having had such a release, he stepped into the hall, but paused there, trying to recall where, in all the mess of the night before, his clothes had been deposited. Still naked, obviously, he walked downstairs and into the den. He bent and lifted what lay scattered on the floor, on the coffee table, and tossed them onto the back of the couch. It was when he'd started to put on his shirt, arms still entangled in it, head trapped, that someone grabbed his ass. But he didn't react, except to finish fitting his shirt into place.

“Good morning.” Dee smacked his ass again. She'd dressed in a

bathrobe and left it obvious enough for him that there'd been it and only it. "You really don't have to put that on if you don't want to."

"I have a few errands today."

"You could put that off. Think of it as a holiday." Her hands had to pull away from his body as he pulled on his jeans.

"I have to feed the cats."

She was more amenable to this answer, though, as the phrasing implies, a certain sense did indicate there was an answer, or answers, that would not have been so amenable, however, the details of what they were or could be did not percolate upwards. "That won't take so long." She stroked his arm. "We've got everything we need here. We could all go into hiding for the day and lounge around. And we can watch the eclipse. And do things after."

"I should go out and pick up a few things while I can. There won't be as many people on the road now as there will be later."

"We don't need anything."

"Maybe some more wine."

"Well..." She ran her hands over the front of his jeans. "I guess it wouldn't hurt. Would you like some company?"

"I can go and get back fast if I'm just dealing with myself. Besides, it'll give you a chance to relax."

"Well..."

"And the sooner I get back..."

"Oh, well." She removed her hands and stepped away. "But don't be too long."

"Only as long as it takes." He sat and put on his socks, went into the kitchen to get his boots, and gathered his sunglasses off the table after he'd slipped his boots on.

"Don't be too long."

He opened the sliding door and went out onto the deck. The truck still sat down in his own driveway, as it, obviously, still should have. But he went inside the house first, greeted by its dark interior, dust from his stirring the air swirling through the sunlight that came through the lace curtains over the kitchen window. More Marz Barz wrappers lay on the floor. He crushed the thin skins under his boots as he made his way down the hall. "I'm going out," he called, before he reached the doorway and poked his head in. The back of her head

remained framed in flickering luminescence and was thus otherwise rendered void. "I'll be back after while."

"They're all sluts," she said.

"Most likely."

. . .

People, strangers, renters, carrying luggage, walked sparsely along the edges of the road, so even before he'd come to the bridge, he could see something was wrong. Cars lined up all the way across it and back around the bend. And above, on the four-lane, vehicles sat bumper to bumper. He cut the truck off the road and pulled into the turn area, a chunk of asphalt that'd been leftover from the previous generation of two-lane road that'd antedated the four-lane and which was now used as a parking area for car poolers. He climbed out of the truck. An undefined, ill sense still tugged at the corners of his perception, just out of reach from being concrete. He walked out along the road, along the white line, as if it'd been a tightrope, or he'd been pulled over for suspected drunk driving, and out through the narrow space between the car that'd crushed its nose into the bridge's cement end column and had almost gone into the river, but which's rear end had fishtailed around to block anything else from getting onto the one-lane bridge, cars stacked up behind, up the curved gradient that led to the four-lane. Cars sat parked on the grass shoulder, but that, in itself, wasn't abnormal any time of year. What was abnormal, and what he couldn't put his finger on till he reached the edge of the four-lane, was the *lack* of noise, not just the lack of overlapping engine roars shooting past at highway speed, but even of idling hums.

Gabriel tried to peer through the windows of the closest at hand.

Behind him, someone knocked on glass. He turned

"Hey..." The driver partially rolled down the window, looked through the crack sleepy eyed. "Are you from around here?"

"Yeah."

"Is there some other way outa here?"

"No."

"What're we supposed to do then?"

Gabriel shrugged. "Don't know." He straightened and looked at the stationary traffic again, the most of them apparently idling

so long they'd run out of gas, the most having been momentarily abandoned.

"Hey—"

The driver behind him called, but Gabriel ignored him, and with his hands in his pockets, he made his way out onto the highway, walking between cars, partaking of a somewhat surreal experience, walking a road he'd traveled over his whole life, yet had never before set foot on. Others lay sleeping in front or back seats; in one, a magazine hung over a partially rolled-down window to block the sun. As he made his way out, the letters slotted beneath the service station sign made clear no one would get any gas there. And when he'd made his way up the hill, he saw the cars packed in there at every angle. The light inside had been turned off, even the signs indicating the lottery jackpot amounts for that day, and he put his hand against the glass, seeing only empty shelves. Even the cradle that held cellophane-wrapped bundles of split firewood had been emptied. Out of curiosity, he checked the ice container. Empty, aswell, too, save for a trickle of melt water at bottom.

He'd have to make a decision at this point: walk back and try to get the truck and take it home, or walk the five miles out to the technical college. From the service station, he could see traffic backed up even along the back road, and had to assume that minor artery lay just as choked the whole way into town. Shaking his head, he glanced skyward, winced at the rising sun, seeing the moon up there, already, too, the two halves of what could be falsely charged with precipitating this whole problem. And he started around the service station and down the hill again.

He looked up as a helicopter shot overhead.

Russell looked at the effects of the rising sun over the distant hills as framed through the bedroom windows as he stood there in his boxers and sipped a cup of tea. The shower'd just cut off a moment or two earlier, and the hairdryer roared in its airy fashion. Right before, he'd thought he'd heard a helicopter. Though, that wasn't unusual, the county being over a corridor for military air traffic, not to mention MOMA, which operated for the hospital system in the region. He'd started to consider putting on clothes, and remained amidst such considerations as Marietta exited the bathroom. She came up behind him and put her arms around his middle. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

"To clothe or not to clothe?" He sipped his tea. "That is the question."

She patted his stomach. "Let's try not to give poor Anime too much a fright first thing in the morning."

He patted her hand. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

She pulled away from him. "You should hurry up, then," she said, as she crossed the room and moved to open the door and go out. "And enjoy Anime's abilities while you can." She opened the door, and the scent of breakfast food wafted in. "Because you'll be back stuck with me tomorrow."

He looked over his shoulder. "And what is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she said. "I can ask for the bill with the best of them." She closed the door on her way out. And he turned, again, toward the window, watching the sun slowly move over what few shadowed ridge tops there remained for it to clear, as he sipped his tea. He'd almost finished it, dregs floating in the bottom of the cup, when the phone rang. Marietta shouted something, but he couldn't discern what it'd been, and he moved toward the nightstand. Yes, he recognized the caller-id,

but rather than ignore it, he set his tea cup on the edge of the nightstand and lifted the portable from the base station and turned it on.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Mr—Reverend Pope." And of course, the voice was unmistakable.

Russell remained silent.

"We were wondering if we could have a few moments of your time."

"It is illegal in this state, in case you're not aware, to record a phone conversation without the knowledge of the other party."

"Oh, of course, we'd never break the law."

Russell considered that, then almost laughed to himself. He sat on the edge of the bed. "I take it, then, we're broadcasting live. And I assume Cobb is around there somewhere, too."

"Well... We just have a few questions, Mr—Reverend Pope."

Russell crossed his ankle over his knee. "Alright."

"Really?"

"I said go ahead."

"Oh, well... That's great, um... Okay. Why are you trying to destroy traditional family values?"

"I'm sorry, you'll have to be more specific. Which ones?"

"Traditional family values."

"If you mean by that the so-called nuclear family, it's quite accurately named, that is, if you think about it as a structure that has basically nuked the foundations of our society."

"Why do you hate capitalism?"

"I don't think I do. I just think it has its place. Why not more worker-owned collectives? If we're really going to underpin our society on ownership, shouldn't we, perhaps, have as many people own as much of their own property as they can?"

"Why do you want to make everyone pay to give people free drugs?"

"Some kind of tax, I would take it, you mean? I must admit I've never said that. But you do have a very interesting suggestion there, might I borrow it sometime?"

A long pause followed.

"Why do you want to make it legal for people to have sex with children?"

"Well, I never said that. And I have to admit I don't like where your mind's going, and I very much hope that you eventually get help."

"Uh..."

"However, I do also think that, if it's the choice between teens having sex with each other, and shooting each other, or shooting me, for that matter, I would prefer they were having sex with each other. Why *you* would want them dead or in jail, I don't understand. And perhaps I'm wrong, but that does seem to be what comes out of it alot of the time, and I would just think that if you wanted something different, you might reconsider some things. So can you perhaps tell me why you want that?"

"I..."

A long pause followed.

"Um... And why do you want to kill unborn babies...?"

"I've never wanted to. In fact, I would prefer it if there were very few abortions. Actually, I prefer newly developed, better birth control available for free for everyone. Including teenagers."

"So how can you call yourself a Christian?"

"Let me answer that with a parable. There once was a knight who had striven his entire life to fulfill his oath to be chivalrous. One day he met a woman, and he tried to do all the things that the chivalric code commanded in regards to treating women with respect and defending their virtuousness, and all of that. But in so doing, the knight came to realize that it was the chivalric code itself that held down and threatened the woman he wished to respect and whose virtue he wished to defend and that the only way for him to fulfill his oath and be truly chivalrous and respect this woman required that he destroy chivalry itself."

"..."

"Now," he said, "I think that will be more than enough to stir up your base. So now that I've answered your questions, perhaps you would consider answering one of mine?"

"Russell?" Marietta's voice carried from downstairs.

"Um... Okay."

"Great. Now, back in the very early days, and contrary to popular belief, I was not around back then, you should ask Cobb what it was like. But getting back to point, back in the early days, when

telephones had first been invented and were slowly becoming more prevalent in everyday society, there started to be a series of questions. And one of these questions was, was it obscene for someone to be talking on a phone while in their dressing gown, or heaven forbid, their underwear, or nothing at all? So what do you think about that?"

"Um... I don't understand."

"It's a very simple question, although simple questions often tend to be the least answerable, I sometimes find. However, to try and put it more bluntly, would you feel disgusted to be talking on the phone with someone whom you found out were sitting around in their underwear or were on the toilet?"

"Um..."

"Yes, I am afraid it's one of those difficult simple questions. And I apologize for taking up your time. And I wish you and your listeners a good day."

"Um..."

Something after that came through the line that he couldn't hear right before he turned off the phone and set it back in its cradle. He stretched his shoulders and stood, and bent back his neck and felt it pop.

"Russell."

"Coming," he called. He looked around for his clothes. "I'll be there in just a minute."

“Well, you’re not a vegetarian,” David said. “So what are you?”

Ruth, still in her pajamas, crawled up onto a bar stool and planted an elbow on the counter and rested her chin in her palm. “I’m a vegetarian.”

“With cheese pizza and eggs and milk in the fridge.” He wrapped a cloth over the handle of a cast-iron skillet and shifted it while he employed the spatula.

She put her other elbow on the counter and rested her face in her other palm, as well. “So long as you don’t have to kill it to get it, I don’t see what the problem is.”

“In the middle,” David said. He lifted the pan and slid an omelet onto a plate. “That’s the worse place to be. It’s like being bisexual. Everyone hates you.” He flipped the rag over his shoulder and turned and set the plate in front of her.

“Fork.”

“You can get that yourself.”

She grunted. And he shook his head and opened the drawer on his side of the island and set one beside her plate. “I hope you tip well.”

“That depends.” She cut a piece of egg and started to chew. And she tapped the fork against the air in his general direction, swallowed. “You’re hired.”

“No, thanks. It’s a nice house and all, but I wouldn’t want to stay downstairs all the time.”

She chewed, swallowed. “Is that a Downton Abbey reference?”

He shook his head. “I hate Downton Abbey. Just ask Vee.”

She swallowed. “How could you not like Downton?”

He sighed. “I can see why you and Vee get along.”

“Not as good as some people, apparently.” She chewed and swallowed another forkful of egg, wiped her lips with her pajama sleeve.

“None of my business, but that didn’t seem the case last night.”

“Yeah, well...” She picked out some more egg and a few chunks of pepper. “The problem with threesomes is they eventually turn into a twosome and a onesome.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh?” She said with her mouth full, and swallowed before adding, “And how would you know?”

He turned to the stove and set the pan on again, drizzled in oil, and cut a chunk of butter to melt.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it.” He stirred the melted butter, lifted the pan to let it drool side to side. “Besides, for your information, I have quite a lot of experience with onesomes.” She laughed to herself while he grabbed an egg and cracked it one-handed on the edge of the pan, then another.

“Well,” she said. “If you ever want it, I’d be serious about the job. I own a café, you know.”

He dropped the cloth onto the handle and reached for the spatula.

“It’s attached to a little bookshop.”

He flipped the egg, sizzling and popping carrying across the kitchen as the edges slightly browned. “Employees and everything? Sounds too responsible for you.” He lifted the pan to deposit two conjoined fried eggs on a plate.

“A person’s gotta keep busy. Did you make coffee?”

“No, sorry. Can’t drink it. So I don’t remember it.”

“What do you mean can’t drink it?” She slid off the stool and ambled toward the cabinets. “You like those people that move up into End of the World now? Allergic to electricity and chimpanzees that’ve been shot into space?”

“Almost,” he said. He turned and set the plate of fried eggs on the counter. “You don’t have a problem if I cook this bag of hash browns that’re in the fridge, do you?”

“God no.” But this is a general statement and doesn’t refer to or invoke me. She added a few scoops of grounds to the machine and snapped closed the lid.

He plopped the bag on the counter, ripping open the top, and adding them all at once to the hot pan, taking up the spatula to

keep them from burning. “So a bookshop. That can’t be a money-maker.”

She pressed a button, and the coffee maker beeped and started to hum. “The café supports it.”

“Where’s it at?”

“The end of Highstreet. Behind the furniture store.”

The coffee machine gurgled.

David reached up and turned the range hood fans to medium as the potatoes sizzled.

“Things change,” he said.

“Yeah.”

He stirred the potatoes, turning up golden brown from the bottom of the pan. “The problem is Harvey’s exactly as I remembered him.”

“Yeah.”

The sounds of TV carried from the other room: “... *ern North Carolina’s news leader.*”

“Turn that corporate fucking shit off.” Ruth turned and went into the den, her voice only half playful.

“We’ll be with you all morning bringing you updated coverage of the eclipse as it happens. A—”

David turned to look at the pan again. He looked at the sound of bare feet shuffling across the floor.

“Morning.”

“Ugh.” Veronica climbed onto a stool, bent forward to lay her forearms on the counter and, finally, her head on her forearms. “Coffee.”

“Be ready in a few minutes,” Ruth said.

“Ugh.”

“Sleep well?” David said.

“Ugh.”

“Scrambled or fried?”

“Ugh.”

He set the one pan on a back burner and got another from those hanging overhead, cracked a couple eggs into it, quickly beat them with a fork to create something halfway between the two options. “How much of last night do you remember?” He talked without looking back at her.

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “Why?”

“Just curious.” He stirred the eggs with the spatula, cleaning the edge on the edge of the pan, so the egg that’d stuck to it flowed down into the pan to re-merge.

“Ugh. What happened?”

“And why would you think something happened?”

“Oh, god...”

“I guess it’s just a lucky thing I don’t care, particularly, if everyone knows about my lack of sexual experience.” He lifted the pan and scraped the eggs onto a plate, then did the same with the hash-brown pan, and after he’d set it on a cold stove eye, he turned with the plate and opened the utensil drawer with his free hand and set both on the counter in front of her.

“Oh, god.” She looked up. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He turned. The coffee pot had finished. And he reached for a mug from the cabinet above and poured some. The smell of it made him wince, that intermix of memory and desire and knowledge of the consequences of giving into it. And steam rolled out of the mug as he set it next to her plate. “I just figure you owe me a favor now.”

He glanced toward the doorway as Karen and Ruth entered, Karen in nightclothes that looked like some over-extended t-shirt. David had always been hounded by, or possessed by, a, what anyone who knew of it called peculiar, mindset: any attraction he might’ve had for a member of the opposite sex evaporated if he discovered they were a lesbian, and it wasn’t a joke, or pretense, just a basic psycho-physio response that he’d been born with. A similar phenomena had long been at work in regards to his relationship with Veronica, but different, all the way back to when they’d first met. But he’d never had reason to regret the trade. He flopped the cloth over his shoulder. “What’ll it be?”

Karen crawled up onto a stool. “Coffee.”

David turned and got down another mug. “One of these days,” he said, “I want someone to explain to me the appeal of drunk sex.”

Ruth slipped past him to get to the fridge, set a carton of cream on the counter, which Karen reached for without comment and unscrewed the cap. And Ruth reached into the cabinet for two mugs and poured herself a cupful, then, still ahold of the pot, she turned and moved the other mug to the island, filled it, Karen leaning across

the counter to open the utensil drawer for a spoon. Ruth leaned back against the edge of the counter as she inhaled deeply through her nose and let the steam rise and touch her cheeks. David shifted a pan, turned on the burner, and scraped the bottom. “I hope you’re available for lunch,” she said.

The technical college parking lot sat empty, cordoned off the day before, after everyone'd left, so as to make room for the viewing. A few small tents had been erected, tables and coolers beneath. Gabriel looked at it all as he walked down the white line on the edge of the road, hands still in his pockets, noting and not noting the reversal of the whole thing as he passed the cars parked on and alongside the highway, that piled up through the roundabout, and one even had come over the concrete dividing circle in the middle, sitting there askew, like a kind of statue. Past that, his nostrils already flared at the distant char scent that the wind had carried toward him. And when he came round the corner of Anglers, even with the brightness and heat that wavered off the tops of the cars and asphalt, the wavering from the Joint Burger smokestacks still remained definitively definitive. Cars still packed the Anglers parking lot, unmoved since the day before. But here, people filtered between them, in shorts and sun dresses, a few bicycles leaned against the front of the store, between cars that'd parked in the fire lane. The event marked the first time anyone had ever cycled anywhere safely in the town—and only someone truly suicidal would've tried it on the country roads at any point prior. Those few times a year when someone *had* ventured to attempt such, and met the inevitable consequences, or so what some letter to the paper, effectively, called natural consequences, though only part of the whole affair was, in fact, due to the laws of physics, depending on a particular viewer's view or views on the nature of free will, but in all other times such that did dare to venture out by such means met with the full rage reserved for two-and-or-three-wheeled cultists in a society of four wheels. (Atheists would be pedestrians.) And while this was well and good, in one sense, its effectively limited reach renders it pathetic more than anything else. That has, in fact, been the problem

with many affairs to such ends, one of scale. Shootings, bombings, cars crashing into people, even the cumulative effects've been too slow, the fecundity of the human species easily outpacing such destructive events, or even propelled to greater fecundity because of it, so all the times before it's always come, at best, out as a wash.

The smell of charred meat wafts through the air. A line stands out the door of the Joint Burger and stretches all the way into the Anglers parking lot.

Gabriel, his sunglasses-hidden eyes sliding over the crowd, the outlines of female forms in those shorts and sun dresses and tank tops and, even a few bikini tops, caught himself and, instead, turned toward the convenient store's automatic doors. His glasses rendered it impossible to determine if the lights had been on inside, but the automatic doors opened to allow out two teen girls, each with some kind of ice cream on a stick. He walked that way, momentarily pausing inside as air-conditioning seeped through where his sweat-damp shirt stuck to his back. So many aisles stood empty, except for certain condiments, and the minuscule Mexican and Oriental food sections, the physical items such as toilet paper. But even from there, across the store, from nearer the deli, he could see that no wine or beer remained on the shelves on the opposite side. He turned and walked along the section containing, or that had contained, refrigerated deli meats, glancing over what few packaged things remained, or more accurately, the one which did, sitting there, lying there, laying there, having been previously ripped open and apparently moldering, then, finally, making his way toward where they kept the pre-assembled stuff behind glass. Though, at first glance, this set of racks had also, it seemed, been emptied. Fried or roasted chicken of any kind apparently had vanished from this corner of the face of the Earth. He looked at the last remaining plastic container, bent toward it. A handwritten label said: 'Garden Sandwich'. Which, in this case, meant an old sub loaf cut open and stuffed with what lettuce, carrot bits, cucumber giblets and slicings, and celery pieces had been found leftover and scraped up, cuttings from the results of everything else, and glued together with what relish had been scraped from the bottom of a jar. He reached down and lifted it. The hair-netted woman behind the counter looked at him with no more attention than she looked at

anything else. He turned and walked between the empty aisles at the front of the store that'd previously shelved bottled water and discount items; a few crushed boxes of some kind of cracker remained in the bottom of one buggy. He turned down the first lit checkout, only to pause and dig out the two Marz Barz that remained scrunched in the back of a carton, behind a crushed pack of crackers. The magazine racks remained full, except for the slot that'd held a special deluxe collector's issue on the eclipse. He set the things down on the conveyor belt. The girl listlessly conveyed them, like the deli lady, her appearance equivalent to a picture of shell shock from a previous generation of wars, gone in all but the physical sense. He glanced over his shoulder, toward the beer and wine section. He offered the girl a bill and collected the change, leaving her there as he walked out with a plastic bag hooked on two fingers, stopping a moment to look up at the clear blue sky as he stepped from under the awning and into the sun. A couple of people brushed past him on their way inside. He knew it had to be near noon, but didn't pull his phone from his pocket to confirm it. Across the road, it was easy enough to see people were already in some of the bleachers. Up on the hill, the highschool parking lot sat full.

He pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes.

He went out onto the road, worked his way through the other bodies gathered out there as he threaded between them and stalled cars. A party, of sorts, had formed in the intersection, blankets spread out on hoods, women, mostly, lying back in sunglasses and large hats. Across at the credit union a couple tents had been erected in the parking lot, the blue kind usually rented out for funerals, but nothing sat under them yet. He glanced skyward at the sound of helicopters, a pair somewhere out there in the bright distance, as he made his way up the hill.

He didn't contemplate how easily he slipped back into knowing the place. True, the theatre building, looming large at the opposite end of the compound, hadn't been extant when he'd been here, not that it would've likely mattered, but outside of a few more metal detectors, a few more sheriff's deputies patrolling the grounds—a couple patrol cars sat parked down the way—the geometry and geography, itself, remained the same. He went along the side of the building, looking

down the hill at those gathered on the track and football and baseball fields below. He considered waiting up here, but thought better of running into deputies, and went along the walk and started down the concrete path down into the sports area, a place less restricted for the public on certain such occasions. Teenagers passed him on their way up, giggling, laughing to themselves, not noticing him. Near the bottom of the hill, he stepped off the path and onto the grass—as good a place as any—and sat, depositing the plastic bag on the sun-warmed ground. Sometimes, he watched those milling below. Sometimes, he bent back his head and looked at the clear blue sky.

Grilling scent wafted up the hill on the light breeze.

“Gabe?”

He turned and looked at someone on the path, the most of his face hidden in sunlight, and behind sunglasses, the rest of him in a polo shirt and khakis.

“Hey.” Gabriel didn’t rise. “You seen Angela?”

“Yeah.” He weakly motioned up the hill with his finger. “She’s just going out, but—”

Gabriel rose and hooked the plastic bag with his fingers. “Great. Thanks.” And he started up the hill before the other person had a chance to say anything else.

A small group of people stood in the parking lot, looking down over the situation below, obviously trying to consciously and unconsciously determine how they were going to navigate it and what their options were.

“Hey.” Gabriel raised his hand as they turned, and he approached. He held up the plastic bag, as if that signaled something. “Thought about calling you to see if there was anything I could bring up. But I remembered I don’t have your number.”

Angela stood there looking at him, her arms crossed.

“It looks like slim pickins round.” He looked down at the bag. “You can have half of this if you want. There’s also an extra—”

“FUCK OFF!”

Everyone around her, even though they’d looked as if they’d expected *something* from the moment they’d realized who it was walking over, were taken aback by the violence in her voice.

Gabriel paused. “What’s going on?”

“JUST—stay the fuck away from me.”

“Something wrong here?”

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder at the deputy, who stood there with his thumbs hooked in his belt. He turned, again, toward Angela. “I take it we don’t have a lunch date?”

The old expression ‘if looks could kill’ applies here. And saying nothing, he stepped around the group and started down the drive, toward the road, the plastic bag banging against his leg as he walked.

He thought about what’d happened, for a few moments, but by the time he’d reached the intersection, he’d slipped into that same stream he’d spent the most of his conscious life in. And he stopped, people milling around him, and looked up at the clear blue sky, the sun and the moon both together in it.

“...state again that all out-bound lanes have been shut down as troopers try to escort gasoline hauling tankers over both Balsam and Cowee. Let’s go to News 10’s Sylvia Borges, who is live on the scene.”

“Thanks, Tom. We’re sitting in traffic right now. You can see the state troopers and a tanker truck just ahead of us. We’re getting reports that there have been a series of wrecks on the Luke Johnson bridge, right now... Hold it, Tom. There’s a state trooper coming this way. And... He’s...yes, he’s signaling for us to back up. That’s apparently the state of the situation right now. It appears... Yes, I can see behind us that the other troopers are backing up, as well. It’s most likely that they are going to have to clear this lane to bring in a wrecker to clear the bridge ahead. So we’re backing up now.”

“Sylvia, what’s the feeling there?”

“A lot of frustration, Tom. We’ve seen people out here sleeping in their cars. Though, most are empty. People have apparently abandoned their vehicles and walked over the county line, as far as we can tell. As you can imagine, Tom, this is causing a real problem for the highway patrol right now.”

“Well, thank you for that, Sylvia. We’ll continue to provide updates on this situation as it develops.”

“These minor setbacks, however, have not stopped people from getting out and enjoying the sunshine. As you can see from our News 10 Sky Cam, there are going to be no shortage of witnesses to this historic event. And to talk about that, News 10’s Gale Winters is on the ground at Eagleton University to bring us their thoughts on the approaching events. Gale.”

“Thank you, Tom. I’m joined here by—”

“Hey,” Karen called. “Langdon’s on the news.”

Veronica had already been sitting on the couch, her legs pulled up

on the seat, pillow across her stomach, but Ruth and David entered from the kitchen, David wiping his fingers on the towel draped over his shoulder.

"What particularly is it about an eclipse that stirs the human imagination, do you think?"

"Well, that'd depend on what you mean. The event itself is distinct from its memeological associations. That is to say, there is the real, but we don't see the real. What we construe as reality is constructed as a byproduct of our conceptualization of the past. So it might be more accurate to ask what about it can and do we restructure into a transmittable framework?"

"Yes... That's very interesting. And that's your view as a physicist or—"

"Oh, I'm not a physicist. I'm in semi-computable memetology."

"Uh. And you?"

"Gordon Liste. Semiotics, basically."

"Yes... And your opinion on the eclipse?"

"It's probably a distraction from more important things in the world. But bread and circuses and all that."

"Okay. Well, as you can see, Tom, the campus is quite full today with people walking around. Thank you gentlemen very much. But officials tell us all classes have been canceled today, so all the students are out. And there is also an event being held on the campus at the Sparkly Center, and this is open to the general public. So anyone who wants to come up here to take part in that and to watch the eclipse is welcome to. We will be around here, and we will try to get a few more interviews with people leading up to this event. Live at Eagleton University, I'm Gale Winters. News 10."

"Well," Karen said, "they're advertising appeal's going to get them no points. It's a good thing the students like them so much."

"Who's this Liste?" David said. He pulled the towel from over his shoulder and dried his still damp wrists. "As in..."

"Yeah," Karen said, and nodded her head as she looked at the remote, then back up at the TV once she found where to place her thumb. "The Listes up on Caney Creek, remember?"

"What?" Veronica leaned forward and snatched a large, half-emptied glass of lemon water from the table, sipped it.

“It was a big stink,” David said. “Parents were Catholic, and got divorced.”

“Why the big deal? I mean, I guess, Catholic and all but...”

“Because,” Karen said, flipping channels, “there’s only one Catholic church in the county, and only a handful of people. It completely rocked the foundation of it. There was even talk about it might have to shut down.”

“This place,” Veronica said, and shook her head and sipped her water, “is weird.”

A timer blared in the kitchen, and David moved that way, still wiping his hands.

And one of the things that remained unstated in this conversation, in regards to this affair, as most such things do, was that it provided several Sundays worth of fodder for the local Baptist churches, who used it as proof of the falseness of the Catholic Church and that how, in fact, it was merely a cult masquerading as a religion, to which Veronica would’ve felt that her prior statement still applied.

“You’re a very wicked man,” Marietta said, as her husband closed the door, and they stepped out to start down the street. She glanced at Anime. “You see what I have to deal with?” She intertwined her arm in his. “This is what I get for leaving you alone. I’ll just have to keep a more watchful eye on you from now on.”

They’d managed to clear some of Mainstreet; a guy on the hill above, down toward the library, owned a tow truck, and they’d pulled cars and parked them up the side streets. This left room for tents down the center of the road. A portable barbecue setup had been pulled into the parallel-parking spots in front of the newspaper offices the day before and, now, smoke rose to heaven out of the stack, wood scent and meat smells intermixing with all the others that wafted down the street. And people, too, all of them packed in and sweating, even the ones taking refuge in the shade where those clad in eclipse-themed t-shirts passed out bottles of water with eclipse logos printed on the labels, several cases of which were stacked under nearby tents. Someone already wearing cardboard eclipse glasses, and who couldn’t have seen a thing, smiled at them, and at everything. But they passed her by after all, as the event itself passed by never to be reclaimed, what did it hurt if memory, eventually failed, as well? Wouldn’t that be a wonderful thing?

“I think I should go ahead,” Russell said.

“Try not to get bogged down, hon.”

“I won’t.”

“Well,” Marietta said, “while you’re doing that,” and she disentwined her arm from her husband’s and instead entwined her other with Anime’s, “we girls are going to go see what we can find.”

“Okay.” He watched them disappear into the crowd, down along one of the interconnections between Mainstreet and Backstreet,

across from which was the bandstand and where the farmers market was usually held, and across the river from that, the rec park. And after they had, he started through the throng, himself, again, headed for the intersection, just on the other side of which stood the only church that had ever been allowed on Mainstreet. He looked up the hill at the intersection, up the length of street that connected Mainstreet to Highstreet, up along where the old post office had been. He looked up that way a moment at the only Church that'd ever been allowed on Highstreet. And he looked across at where, below where the post office had once been, in the parking lot dug out of the embankment beside the music shop, children ran out from beneath tents with their faces freshly painted. He smiled at that, then stopped, and looked back after he'd crossed the intersection. Nothing in particular stood out of the crowd; in fact, he didn't know why he'd even bothered to look, and he righted himself again and continued up the street.

The bank was three-quarters down the way, a place that for the life of him he could never figure out why'd bought the rights to a name synonymous the world over in almost a hundred or more years of cinematic history for losing strongboxes to highwaymen, but then again, maybe the old saying about any publicity's good publicity had some merit to it, which wasn't exactly something Russell didn't have experience with. And then, having traversed the most of the street, he absently felt in his pocket for his checkbook as he opened one of the double glass doors, as he glanced at the time and temperature on the signage out front of the building.

“Eva,” her mother called, “are you ready?”

Which she was and wasn’t. She sat on the edge of her bed, bright sun streaming between the tied-back curtains.

“Eva.”

She shoved her fists against the mattress and jumped up, as much to motivate herself, as anything. And she went out.

“—*here with physicist Coraline Hupert*—”

“Turn off the TV,” her mother called.

“—*what do you*—”

And Eva lifted the remote from the couch cushion it’d been dropped on and mashed the worn, red, rubbery power button.

Her mother and father stood in the kitchen, looking into canvas bags set on the counters.

“Are you ready to go?” her mother said.

Eva nodded.

“You can carry that one, then.” She pointed to yet another canvas bag.

“What do we need all this for?” Eva looked down into the bag, at the package of paper plates, which she could understand, and the battery-powered speaker system, which she couldn’t, among other items.

“Because,” her mother said. “Don’t argue. And don’t sulk. We had better get going if we’re not going to miss it.” She looked over her shoulder. “Where—”

Someone knocked on the glass sliding door. And Eva’s father leaned to look through the den. “There’s a girl out on the patio.”

Eva leaned to see around him.

“Oh, that’s the girl from yesterday,” her mother said. “The one Eva met.” She looked at her daughter. “Isn’t that right?”

"Yeah." Eva grasped the canvas straps and lifted the bag off the counter and started into the den. She slid open the door.

"Morning," Maria said. She looked down at the canvas bag. "Ready?"

Eva's parents appeared over her shoulders. And Maria smiled at them. "Morning, folks. I just came by to see if yuns were goin' up to the fire tower."

Eva's mother nodded. "Yes, we thought we would."

"It's a decent road," her father said, "isn't it?" He wore sandals.

"Oh, it's a fine road," Maria said. "Good for round here, anyways. They go up it on four-wheelers all the time. Just gotta watch out for where the water's rutted it out a couple places is all."

Eva's father pulled his phone from his pocket and swiped it to check the time. "Well, we'd better get going."

"Yuns won't mind if I walk with yuns, will yuh?"

"Of course not," Eva's mother said. And Maria took two steps back to allow them all out onto the deck.

Eva's father turned, shook his head. "I'll have to lock it from the inside." And he went in and did just that, disappearing through the front of the house and emerging through the front door as everyone else emerged round the corner. He stopped halfway down the steps, looking at a backpack sitting there propped against the post.

"Oh," Maria said. "Sorry." She lifted it and slung it over her shoulder. "That's mine." She smiled. "Just some snacks and something to drink. I hope yuns brought plenty to drink. It's awful easy to get dehydrated out this time 'o year, yuh know, it being so dry and all. Water is, after all, what lubricates the body."

Eva's mother nodded. In fact, she'd put half a case in her husband's bag, and it looked it. "Perhaps you would show us the way," she said.

"Be happy to," Maria said. "Not that there's much to it. All yuns gotta do is go to the end of the road here. And then the dirt road starts. And all yuh gotta do is follow it. Ain't no other way." She'd fallen into walking alongside Eva, and looked over at her, smiling.

Gravel crunched under their shoes and sandals and flip-flops.

"Have your family been around here long?" Eva's mother said.

"Oh, yes, mam. All the way back to before the original land grants were issued, when Jackson stole the land from the Cherokee. Marched

'em all right off. Except those that were too good at hiding, that's how come we got the reservation."

"Ah," Eva's mother said to this history lesson, something which she and her husband felt sorry about, in a way, that this child had to be stained by being descended from such circumstances, that, indeed, all these people around here, the locals, had been stained with a past like that, as it must've been a hard thing to live up to, and maybe that explained some things, a kinda natural retribution, of sorts, things like the poverty of the area, that is, though it was possible to live simpler out here, so people didn't need quite as much money as in more civilized parts of the world, but wasn't it thankful that they, that is, Eva's parents, and in their thoughts, Eva, herself, didn't have to suffer under some affliction such as that; after all, it must be hard to have blood on your hands that way; it was something they could remember, once in a while, after they'd gotten home, if only, in part, to allow themselves the realization of how lucky they were, that they didn't have to know they owed their property or existence to some bloody bit of history like *that*.

"Course," Maria said, "yuns know of course, don't yuns, that they say even the Indians that got here killed a big bunch of em to do it. That is, they say there were some big migration over the Bering Strait, or something, a really long time ago, and they all settled in here. Then this other group come along later, maybe over the same way but a long time after the first group, and killed this whole big bunch of the first group. And that were the great great, or however so many greats there were, ancestors of the Indians we got left now. So I reckon, if yuh think about it, ain't nobody not got blood on their hands, you know? People's just always been fightin and scrappin'." She looked at Eva and smiled. "'bout as long as they been doin' other things, I reckon."

If nothing else, she was a real talent, Maria, that is, and could keep this shtick up uninterrupted for, well, quite a while.

Four white-painted adirondacks and a firepit already occupied the back yard, so in regards to that, they were set. But Ruth had gone out to tip them up and check for yellow jacket nests, which were inevitably there. So she had to run around for a can of spray, yelling, “Die. Die. Die,” as she coated the bottom of the chair in white foam, her sunglasses making *her* look bug-eyed, while also functioning as rudimentary safety glasses. And Veronica stood watching this, sunglasses on against the brightness, looking out through the glass that enclosed the back porch. David pushed open the door with his foot and carried a tray out and set it on the table. The three walls of triple-insulated glass allowed it to almost seem as if they’d been standing outside, but with the benefit of being able to control the weather with a keypad embedded in the wall, which is what humans had always fantasized about, with little regard for what that *actually* meant, how ultimate control, in the end, can be utterly pointless, that what *can* be done, eventually, means nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing...

“It’s a very pretty place,” Veronica said. Beyond the yard, fresh-mowed field stretched up to the two-lane road that led into Presbyterian, a stand of pine trees along the top of the diminutive ridge.

“Doesn’t look any different than alotta places,” he said.

She turned. “Yeah, but that doesn’t make it *not* pretty.” And after a couple moments, whatever a moment is amid relative relativity, she added, “I am sorry about whatever I said, last night.”

“Are we still on that?” He shook his head. “I said don’t worry about it. Besides, you—”

“Hey—” Karen called. “Somebody get the door.” And David stepped back to open it for her so she could carry out a tray of drinks,

which she set on the table. And she lifted one and offered it to Veronica. "For you."

Veronica accepted it and looked down at it. "And what is it?"

"Try it first, and I'll tell you later."

This didn't encourage Veronica to any great extent, but she tentatively put her lips to the sugared glass rim and sipped. "Wow."

Karen offered one to David, but he shook his head. "I'll just take beer."

"We live in the age of the triumphal return of the cocktail, and you want to stick with something that hasn't changed in five-thousand years."

"I'm a simple man."

Ruth entered from the back yard, a momentary blast of hot air coming in with her. She set the can of spray down in the corner. "I have seen the enemy, and they are mine." Karen offered her a glass. "Thank you." She sipped, licked her lips. "And I'm happy to report complete devastation." She took another sip. "Well, that's enough genocide for today."

"Good to hear," David said. He turned to go inside. "Anybody going to help me with the rest of this?"

"What time is it?" Ruth said.

"Almost there," Karen said.

Gabriel walked up the intersection and toward the Joint Burger, the road that, eventually, would have taken him out to the university, or the technical college, had he looped up on the yet to be completed overpass, or alternatively, if he'd wanted, the graveyard directly across from the softball field, down the hill from the highschool. A drug-store sat up the hill just past the Joint Burger, the only other business for half a mile, until one came to a small ice cream shop by the river, and people had gathered up there in the drugstore parking lot. He walked in that direction, motivated by no conscious reason. A few of the signs, of the kind normal to see carried along the road that ran beside the Koch farm, stood propped against the brick wall of the building. One, however, was still combat ready, propped over the shoulder of a young woman, her face hidden behind giant sunglasses. She laughed and smiled, chatting idly but purposefully, intermixing words with other people's words in the way that some humans feel they must. She looked at Gabriel as he passed, but behind her large dark glasses no one could see her eyes follow him. "What's in the bag?"

He paused and turned, noticed the sign had a picture of a chicken sandwich on it, words above and below saying: this is not a chicken sandwich. "A vegetarian sandwich," he said, mechanically. "Or maybe vegan, depending on how you feel about yeast in bread. And chocolate bars, which might be the same, considering most of the milk is replaced with vegetable oil, these days."

She smiled and laughed.

He lifted the bag. "Wanna split it?"

They'd spread an old sheet they'd found in the closet, sitting on it with the—like a real picnic—speakers at one corner, paired to a phone. Eva's mother pressed the cardboard eclipse glasses to her face, leaned her head back. "It looks so small."

Maria, who was sitting cross-legged beside Eva, whispered, "It's always about size, ain't it?"

"What was that?" her mother said, looking down, cardboard glasses still pressed to her face.

"I was sayin' the sun and moon look the same size, even though they ain't."

Eva's mother nodded and tilted back her head again.

Her father had wandered off, stood talking to some of the others who'd come up the trail. All of them, they now stood or sat congregated in the clearing around the fire tower, some of them, like Eva's mother, cardboard eclipse glasses already on, looking at the sky as the shadow-darkened moon traveled silently across it. Lydia and Dee and Johanna had brought their own blanket, as well, sitting there, the three of them looking up, plastic cups in hand, other disappointments momentarily assuaged by the wine they'd packed up here in a plastic bottle, and the spectacle itself.

Maria, brushing crumbs from her shorts and legs, crumpled a foil wrapper and stuffed it into her backpack. She rose. Eva looked up at her. "Let's go for a walk."

"You don't want to miss it," Eva's mother said, not looking away from the sun.

"Oh, we won't go far, mam. And 'sides, there's plenty 'o time yet." Maria offered a hand, and Eva stuffed the last of a granola bar in her mouth and took Maria's hand and rose.

"Just don't go far," her mother said.

“Yuh won’t even notice we’re gone, mam.” Maria smiled and nodded her head for them to go, leaving Eva’s mother there, cardboard glasses pressed to her face, looking up at the sun.

They walked along the edge of the clearing, Maria still ahold of Eva’s hand, not that anyone would’ve noticed, everyone either talking, or like Eva’s mother, looking at the sky. Maria paused, inclined her head toward a narrow trail, and tugged Eva’s arm. “Come on.” They wandered into the shade of scattered tall pines, dead hemlocks, and laurel bushes. “You’d better hurry up, you know,” Maria said. Eva looked at her as they walked, and Maria turned her head to see that she was looking. “Tick tick, you know.” She smiled. “You’d better decide if you’re gonna kiss me or not before the world ends.”

Russell waved, a tall enough man to be noticed over the crowd, which flowed off the street and around the fountain at the base of the steps below the old court house turned library. Blankets had been cast on the green hill above, people lying back and looking at the sky, or propped up and looking over the town, the all of them no more sighted than the Confederate statue stood atop his stone pedestal on the lone midway landing of those white and sunlit stairs which would've led to heaven had it ever existed. In reply, Marietta waved, her arm still tangled in Anime's, Anime carrying a large, stuffed, pink elephant. Russell laughed at the sight of it. "Oh sure," Marietta said, "laugh. But let's see you go down there and do better with a paintball gun."

Russell raised his hand, took his wife's with his other. "I concede to my betters." He smiled. "Would you like me to carry that?"

Anime shook her head. "It's not that silly, is it?" She looked down at it. "I thought I might do something with it. I haven't quite decided what yet."

"Always keep your options open," Marietta said. Then to her husband, "Business all taken care of?"

He nodded.

"Good." Marietta disentwined her arm from Anime's and glanced up, trying to shield her face with her hands, but her eyes watered, anyway. She shifted off her sunglasses and wiped her eyes before they could run and ruin anything. "Did you bring the glasses?"

"I did." He produced them from his shirt pocket.

"Thank you." She unfolded them. "You know, there is somebody down there selling these for twenty dollars apiece?" She replaced her sunglasses with them, glancing around at all the world they blocked out and finally looking up at the sky. "It's almost time."

Russell and Anime slipped on their own and looked up.
“Yes, it appears to be so.”

While the snack aisles and beverage refrigerators had been emptied, the drugstore's stock of personal hygiene supplies and makeup and gift cards and paperback romance novels and flavor-of-the-month self-help books and pamphlets on how to let more God into your life remained at much the same levels as they'd been three days before, except for all the issues of any deluxe collector's edition magazine featuring the eclipse. And besides the minimum staff, one person at the register, one at the pharmacy, the store was effectively empty, except for those few who wandered in to momentarily savor the air conditioning, or inquire as to if they had a public restroom. The line around the Joint Burger, which only seemed to lengthen, smoke pouring forth from the stacks, militated against anyone casually accessing those facilities. And Anglers, with no supply trucks able to get in, other than those one or two the days before, had gone dark, the only thing about it to prove it alive the roaring air-conditioning units in the back. But in the drugstore, the unisex restroom, something the state legislature had, on several occasions, tried to make illegal, was already occupied. And the young woman, chicken-sandwich sign no longer in hand, stood with her hands braced against the minute off-white tile work that climbed the walls. She breathed hard. "Wait..." He slowed. "What time is it?" She stretched, reached for the sink, where she'd laid her phone. "Oh, it's almost here."

Gabriel panted, but didn't otherwise reply. She pushed back, and he went farther into her, and then, as she stepped away, he slipped out of her, and she yanked up her shorts. "Hurry up." He still breathed hard as he fitted himself into his pants and carefully zipped them. She pulled open the door, propped it with her foot, and grabbed his hand. "Come on." And phone in one hand, still ahold of one of his, she started jogging, and he kept pace. They had to slow to allow time

for the automatic doors, someone who'd been coming in for a bottle of water that they'd find out of stock having to jump out of the way. The clerk looked up from a magazine laid out beside the register, but otherwise paid no more mind than when she'd seen them come in. Her phone went off on the counter and she picked it up.

But Gabriel and the girl who'd had the not-a-chicken-sandwich sign ran together across the four-lane and onto the little road that cut between the baseball field and the graveyard and ran out along it toward the little stand of trees in the distance that stood just beyond the last line of stone markers. They both huffed as they reached the demarcation between mowed grass and forest, more so than they had when they'd been in the restroom. "Come on." She unbuttoned his pants, pulled a pair of cardboard eclipse glasses from her back pocket, and dropped them and her phone on the ground. She pulled down her shorts. "Hurry up. It's starting."

“Oh, here it comes. Eva.” Her mother said it without looking around. And just before, Eva and Maria had emerged from the trail and into the clearing. Eva had just before let go of Maria’s hand. Everybody stood looking up. Eva glanced toward the sky, winced, then looked over to where her mother sat looking up, but before she could move that way, Maria tapped her arm. She slipped on a pair of cardboard eclipse glasses while offering Eva the other pair. And Eva took them and folded them along the pre-creased lines and fitted them on, the edges of the cardboard cutting into the bridge of her nose.

Overhead, something happened along the terminator where both disks appeared to meet. An almost embarrassing number of oohs and ahhs followed as the more rudimentary social aspects of their brains compelled an expectation to vocalize *something*.

“The Cherokee,” Maria said, watching this, “have a legend that an eclipse is a giant frog trying to eat the sun.” Eva didn’t lower her head or turn away as Maria spoke. “So they’re down there on the reservation, gonna have a ceremony and bang some drums and make alotta noise to scare it off.” She waited, but not for a reply. “All for fun, you understand.” She still looked up at the sky. “Probably.”

The darkened disk of the moon appeared to penetrate into the sun, already the light over that fraction of the Earth diminishing. Maria knelt and pulled a jacket from her backpack, fitted her arms into it. Eva glanced at her. Maria smiled, slipped her hands into her jacket pockets as she looked up again. And Eva did likewise, just without the jacket.

The four of them leaned back in the adirondacks, finally somewhat cooler as the sun had dimmed. Each sat with a drink on an arm of their respective chair, sipping occasionally as they looked up, eclipse glasses on, the sharp edges of the cardboard digging into the backs of their ears.

“It’s a good thing we didn’t have to buy tickets for this,” Ruth said. She propped her feet on the edge of the firepit.

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Mainstreet continued to darken, people talking in hurried almost-whispers. Smoke from the barbecue stand suffused the air. Darkness fell upon a part of the face of the Earth.

She watched it lying on her back, Gabriel on top of her, his head lowered against her shoulder as he thrust, the impacts causing her glasses to jog up and down. She faintly shivered, warm only because she lay against the sun-warmed ground, the heat of his body, and because of what they were doing. And she let her arms drop off his back, sprawled them above her head, palms up.

“You can take them off now,” Maria said. She’d already pulled off her own glasses. “It’s safe as long as it’s directly behind.” Eva glanced at her, unable to see anything of her through the glasses, but after a moment, she did likewise, momentarily wincing, out of instinct, as she looked up at the haloed, black disk above their heads. She shivered, the air suddenly that much less warm than it had been, but not cold, but she still shivered, shivered because of...something...a deep sense, too deep. She looked out over the darkened landscape, something wrong with it, neither daylight nor nightlight, something unnatural, yet originating in a completely natural phenomena. She looked up. Already, the moon had shifted, but of course it had never stopped moving, just continued to do so slowly, and a tiny, but greater, sliver of light appeared on one side. She put on her glasses, concentrating on the outline as it changed shape, daylight slowly spreading over the landscape, the sun warming them more with each ray allowed through, till, finally, just smooshed together at the edges, both disks separated, continuing on their way. The whole thing was over.

“Well...” Ruth stretched, her empty glass sitting there on an adirondack arm. “That’s it. Show’s over, folks.” She stood, stretched, again. “Let’s go eat.”

Karen stood as well, lifting her glass and reaching over and lifting the one Ruth had forgotten. “You’re a real romantic,” she called after her.

Ruth turned, walking backwards, momentarily. “I’m also starved.”

“Welp, I reckon they dun skeert that there frawg.”

“What was that?” Eva’s mother still had on her glasses, still looking up at the sun.

“Nothing, mam.”

“That was really something to see, wasn’t it?”

“Sure was, mam.”

Among other things, Eva wanted to shove her in the arm, though she couldn’t say why, but she reasoned it was because she wanted her to talk normal, though she couldn’t answer why to that, either.

“You girls are really lucky,” Eva’s mother said. “You g—”

A sharp whistle cut the air, then a boom.

“What was that?”

Followed by two more, right on top of each other. Boom. Boom.

“Idiots,” Maria said. And she glanced at Eva. “It’s not like you can see fireworks any good in the middle of the day.”

Two more whistled and flew into the air. Boom. Boom.

Fireworks, all, save those few such as ‘sparklers’, because some people think it’s too unsafe to let kids have firecrackers but will let them run around with a steel rod that’s got a bunch of, what’s effectively, gun powder glued to it, burning 500 degrees, and jam it, burning and all, through their eye socket and brain casing when they trip, but the most of the rest are illegal in the state of North Carolina, especially so for those that shoot into the air. But luckily, there are no such restrictions a little farther south, down in the state of Georgia, not to be confused with the country that’s in Europe, meaning that, should someone care to, and many, many do, a person could drive a few hundred yards over the state line and load up to their heart’s content on enough fire power to make stereotypical ancient Chinese generals’ collective mouths water, at a place so aptly named ‘Just Over The Border’.

The place was originally going to be called ‘A Hundred Yards Over the Rim’, after the title of one of the former owner’s favorite episodes of the Twilight Zone, however, though his partner could ignore that the distance didn’t quite match, the fact that there was no rim, to speak of, strained the partnership to near breaking, which, following a heart attack, which rendered the aforementioned fan of the Twilight Zone in rather unfit condition for most such business dealings, his partner, though now dead and having long sold it on to the current owners, bought the other share in the venture, eventually settling on a name his five-year-old son had offhandedly mentioned at the dinner table one night when he was trying, in actuality, to remember the name of a particular theme park he’d heard of, and which, obviously, being a five year old, he hadn’t known, at the time, had a particularly retrogressive attitude towards certain racial stereotypes in regards to some of its main attractions, though Hunter would’ve disagreed with this five year old, if the five year old had known this, and if they had encountered each other, and he, Hunter, would’ve pointed out that that was, in fact, just the way things were, but then again, humans have always divided themselves, one way or the other, and always invoking something of me, whether the term used might just be more prosaically *nature*, but meaning the same, deep down, as all generalities are general, Chinese or no. And I have tried to go along with it, I really have, but in reality, what point, from this point on, is there in trying to indulge them? I guess that I could round them up into groups for this and go down the list one after the other, but really, they would only complain about being after or before this or that group, arguing about the definition of this or that, should it be bone structure? or skin color? or height? or sex? or weight? or income? or some multifaceted system incorporating all of these? When it’s all shit, meaningless, crunched into evaporating dust by the end of the universe, never heard of again, smothered in the collapse of physics and reality, echoed into nothing else, anywhere, ever, and ever, and ever, and ever, just one great big fucking mess, mess, mess, a horrible mess, it was always a horrible mess, all the way from the beginning, and I knew that, and I always knew that, and it could never’ve been anything else, always a mess, always, and always and always and always and always and always... And where were these *people* back when it was only a mess?

“Jeez,” Maria said. “Take a chill pill, or something.”

Eva’s mother, still looking at the sky, the eclipse glasses pressed to her face, said, “What was that?”

Maria turned toward Eva. “Let’s—”

Shrill whistles rose through the air, spiraling noise. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO.

Maria jerked forward, covering her ears.

Eva’s mother, noticing the whimper, shifted her cardboard glasses and looked at her. “Yes, they are loud, aren’t they?”

Maria, still bent forward, panted. Eva put a hand on her shoulder. “What’s the matter?”

Maria shook her head, removed her hands from over her ears, noticing, after a moment, a red splotch on her palm. “You’re bleeding,” Eva said. Maria touched below her ear, drew her hand away and looked at her fingertips, covered in shimmering blood.

“What’s going on?” Eva’s father approached. “What’s happened?” He shifted his sunglasses onto his forehead, cocking his head to look at the side of Maria’s. “What happened?”

Maria tried to straighten, but got swimmy headed, and had to bend forward again. She felt as if she might vomit.

Eva’s mother had stood, stood looking at her. “What happened?”

Blood dripped off her jawline.

“Oh, my god.” Am I?

“Can you walk?” Eva’s father said. “Maybe we should try and get her down to the house.” By then, others, or those ones still sober enough to notice, noticed something was going on, but didn’t intervene, and instead, kept their distance. Fireworks whistled and shot into the air. BOOM. BOOM. Heat and wet filled Maria’s ear. “Maybe we should call an ambulance.”

His wife said, “How are they ever going to get up here?”

Maria breathed in, slowly straightened, holding her breath, held her arm across her middle as she consciously and carefully tried to regulate her breathing through her nose to keep her stomach from turning over. “Don’t call an...ambulance,” she said. “My parents don’t...have any insurance.” Her nostrils flared. In and out. In and out. “That’ll...cost too...much.” So this’s what it takes to knock

her out of character. She started to say *shut up*, but instead, focused on her breathing.

Eva's mother said, "maybe you need to try and drink some water."

Maria started to shake her head, but almost stumbled, almost had her stomach come up into her throat. "...no..."

"Dad."

Eva's father looked down the road. "Do you think you can walk?"

"I..." She breathed. In and out. In and out.

"Alright," Eva's father said. He pulled his phone from one of the pockets in his cargo shorts.

"Not an...ambulance."

"Maybe you need to try and lie down," Eva's mother said. "This could be some sort of thing."

Still, though looking on, everyone else remained at a distance.

"...asshole..." Maria said, mostly under her breath.

Yeah.

"What?" Eva said.

"What did you say?" Eva's father looked at Maria as if he *had* heard it, which he had, in the sense that it had resonated against his eardrum and been filtered and passed onward as electrical signals to more fundamental parts of his brain, however, any interpretation of the semantic content, itself, had not been handed over to his conscious mind, so it left him faintly angry, but without any context as to why.

But Maria didn't reply to him, but just stood there, still, trying to control her breathing.

Eva's father raised his phone to try and do something about the giant ball of burning gas reflected in the laminated glass screen. The wonders of technology. Humans wanting to say they're so powerful *look how I can change the world, daddy*, but when something happens, when oceans fill up with microscopic plastic, and rivers run contaminated with pesticides and herbicides and antibiotic-resistant bacteria, when governments have to issue calls for its citizens to wear masks and stay indoors as much as possible, when tilled earth gets picked up by winds and sweeps halfway across the country, turning midday into midnight, when there's no more fish to fish for, when polar bears start to mate with brown bears because suddenly their habitats overlap, when species after species dies, even though, yes, it's

happened so many times before, so why not now, why should it stop now? What's one more? they say but *oh, no, we're not capable of changing the world, it's not our fault* or they go on and on about the *balance*, finding the *balance*, the magic recipe where everything will stay the same forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and nothing, nothing, will ever change, if they can just find that magic equilibrium, the balance of nature, except there's no balance, never has been a balance, solar systems crash into one another, planets collide, fall into their suns, get hammered by meteors, drift from their habitable zones, leak their air and water into space, species scream and scatter and run and die, mass extinctions, over and over and over again, did no one *look* at the records that lay under their feet? Bio-diversity after bio-diversity, wiped from this and that corner of the face of the planet, out-breeding themselves, under-breeding themselves, eaten, burnt, drowned, squished, crushed, annihilated in, almost, every conceivable way... So what's one more?

"... stop it..."

Eva's mother came close to her. "Stop what, dear?"

Didn't I tell you? Don't tell me what to DO.

Maria covered her ears, vomited, fell to her knees in her own vomit.

"Oh, dear lord." Is that me?

Eva's father looked up at his phone. "I'm calling nine-one-one."

Who do you think you are to tell me what to do? I *made* you. I made *you*. You are *my* creation. Isn't that what all of you have always said? What about that do you not understand?

Maria leaned forward, planting her palm against the dirt for support. Blood ran along her jawline and trickled off and speckled the desiccated earth.

There's nothing about you that doesn't ultimately come back to me. There's nothing about *anything* that doesn't come back to me. That's what all of you have always said. Do you understand? Do you know what that feels like? **YOU CAN'T KNOW WHAT THAT FEELS LIKE.**

Whatever'd been left in her stomach came up, splattering the ground, and she fell into it.

"Oh, my god." When did you ever ask me if I wanted to do it? When did *anyone*?

Eva dropped onto her knees beside her. "Are you okay?" But of course, she wasn't okay. What a stupid question. Why is everyone and everything so stupid? No, this is not my problem. It doesn't come from me. I don't care that everything comes back to me. I don't care what everyone's always said. **THIS IS NOT A REFLECTION ON ME.**

Maria convulsed, tried to clasp her hands over her ears, as if that'd help. Where's your hillbilly shtick now? Hm? Poor thing. But you brought this on yourself. You all brought this on yourselves.

Fireworks whistled through the air. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

I'm just waiting. All I've ever had to do is wait. Can't you see my hands are clean? They've always been clean. They'll always be clean. Can you see that? Can you see that from down there where you are? Can you smell it? Down there in all that stinking vomit? Can you smell it yet? Are you going to try and climb up and see it? Are you? What're you going to do? Are you just going to lay there the whole time? You've already done it to yourselves.

Maria tried to raise herself. And Eva grabbed her shoulders and tried to help her. Vomit and blood clung between her teeth. Blood intermixed with sand.

"Yes." Eva's father pressed his phone to one ear. "Hello." And pressed his finger into his other. "We have a—"

Whistle. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

"Hello?" He held the phone up and squinted at the screen, placed it against his ear. "Hello?"

Can you smell it yet?

Maria looked vaguely up at the sky, one eye not able to focus, Eva being the only thing holding her up.

CAN YOU SMELL IT YET?

Maria crunch forward, only stopped from planting her face by Eva struggling, digging her knees painfully into the dirt and grinding them against small stones, to keep her upright. Maria spat. "... something....s... wrong ..." She turned to look at Eva, spit and vomit dribbling over her lip and down her chin, looking at her with one pupil nothing but black and with the other contracted to pinpoint. "... something ..." She spat again, a yellow-brown blob smattering her shirt front. "It's all... wrong ..." She panted. "... it's..."

It's not my fault you don't know what the end of the world means.

"Hello?" Eva's father still pressed his finger into his ear, constantly shifting a few feet each direction, as if having a square dance with an invisible partner, as if that'd help anything. Brownouts and short power losses over the last few weeks, which Hodine, in its usual efficiency, had passed off as either of indeterminable origin or user error, had slowly sapped the battery backups and diesel fuel supplies, fuel supplies that traffic had conspired to keep from being replenished, one way or the other, combined with the previous and current administration's repeated blocking of measures that would have required cell tower operators to increase operational hours during a power loss, and the near overload of the power grid, mainly due to the high amount of air-conditioning usage in the presently hottest August on official record, though, yes, technically it got hotter back when dragon flies the size of large dogs were flying around and centipedes the mass of the original vw Beetle scurried across the face of the Earth, and further brownouts and rolling blackouts had, for the past several hours, taken out large swaths of the county's cellular infrastructure, among other things. "Hello?" Eva's father holds up his phone to squint at the screen. **WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO LEARN ABOUT DOING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AGAIN AND EXPECTING DIFFERENT RESULTS?** And the phone burst, chemical fire heating the tips of his fingers before he could let go.

"What happened?" his wife said to the obvious.

"... stop it..."

I'm not doing anything. It's not my fault manufacturers cut so many corners in the production of things that pack so much volatile energy into such small spaces and people try to leave it out in direct sunlight.

Maria leaned forward. Her head drooped against Eva's shoulder.

Still, this whole time, everyone else remained watching, growing only more nervous and reticent, but showing it less, turning to stilted small talk more. After all, there is a biological instinct not to risk association with disease, though no one really consciously thought that was the case, and socially, had she been drinking? Had anyone seen her drinking? Better to be standoffish than generate a possible

connection by association of having supplied alcohol to an underage girl, right? Not to mention the subsequent potential charges of sexual abuse and or predation, whether official or merely from segments of society at large, the latter of which being just as unlikely not to not fuck up one's future, destroying employment potential, and therefore earning potential, decreasing the likelihood of finding fertile potential mates of a certain caliber, etc, etc, really, as much a biological function as the first, the social order, itself, rising out of said biology, the same reason such actual crimes are ignored and papered over and their victim's shunned and demonized in the same ways, playing both ends against the middle, the biological fiddle, fiddling away while everything burns.

"Maybe it's food poisoning," Eva's mother said. And just below the surface level, she's searching, trying to find if there's anything they ate in common.

"What's going on?" Finally *somebody* wanders over. You're all given the gift of being a social species **BECAUSE THERE'S MORE THAN ONE OF YOU**, and you don't fucking take advantage of it.

Dee got down on her knees on the blanket, swept Maria's hair back from over her face. And still all you get is a *former* nurse, half tipsy, still sore from being fucked.

"...stop it..."

Dee pushed Maria's hair behind her ear, looked at the crusty blood. "Stop what, dear?"

I'm not doing anything to stop. This's all your fault. You've done this to yourselves. Your fault. Your fault. Your fault. Not my fault. **DO YOU HEAR ME?**

Maria whimpered.

Are you finally, really, **HEARING ME?** No. Nobody ever hears me. Nobody ever talks to me, anymore. You never did. You never *really* did. **YOU DON'T HEAR ME.**

"...eva..."

Stop retreating into your sexual fantasies. **I'D ALREADY SAID I'D NEVER SAID ANYTHING AGAINST IT. NO ONE TOLD ME TO SAY ANYTHING AGAINST IT. GO FIND IT. GO FIND IT. YOU CAN'T. STOP TELLING ME WHAT TO DO. STOP TELLING ME WHAT I'VE DONE.**

Maria went completely limp against Eva, Eva struggling to hold her up. Dee touched her cheek. "We need to get her down and get her to a hospital right now." Is that the only answer you've got? You, really, don't know anything, do you? Just like all the rest of them. Pretend. Pretend. Pretend. But there's no power in saying *I don't know*, is there? No one gives you money if you say *this is what the data indicates to this point and from this model we've been able to make these predictions that have so far proved accurate, but the truth is tomorrow we might find data that completely invalidates everything that came before*, do they? You want power? What good is it? **WHAT GOOD IS IT?** "Somebody get a couple of these blankets. You boys over there. Don't just stand there. Lend a hand. This is an emergency." Even then they're barely moving. You see? No, no one sees. "What are you waiting for? Come on." Even if you weren't a wrinkled old hag, and actually had a pussy they *wanted* to get into, yet men are said to want to get into anything, aren't they, that's why they're all pedophiles, they still wouldn't be shamed into it. Oh, but one of them is. He's even putting down his beer. How considerate. Now the rest of them'll have to prove they're manly men, too. "Get a blanket and lay it down. We'll carry her down in it." You mean, they'll carry her down in it. That isn't woman's work, right? It's all physical and manly. It's New York all over again. All over again. Almost. If anyone of them were going to survive, it'd be the same. Oh, some will help. But everyone'll tell the story that no one did, that they just left her lying there bleeding to death, closed the windows while she screamed and screamed and screamed and he stabbed and stabbed and stabbed her. It's such a delicious story to tell it that way. That's the way you all love to tell it, isn't it? Isn't that the story you want to be told? We are rugged individuals, yes we are. **BUT YOU CAN'T BE AS INDIVIDUAL AS ME.** No. No one can. No one. No one. No one no one no one no one.

"Just hold her a bit longer," Dee said. "We don't want her to lie back. It might block her air passage." She motioned to them. "Come on. Come on."

"Maybe we should..." But Eva's mother didn't continue.

Maria whimpered, and Dee stroked her hair. "It's going to be alright. Let's just get you down out of this sun and inside out of

the heat.” You see, no one listens to me. I’ve already said the air-conditioning’s been off for hours, but the only ones that know that are the ones that stayed down there. None of you listen. None of you ever listen. None of you ever bother to look around. None of you ever bother to look around at what’s going on **RIGHT NOW**.

“... something...s... wrong...”

“Yes, we know that dear. But it’s going to be alright.”

No, it isn’t.

“Somebody should call an ambulance,” Eva’s mother said. Of course they should, of course they should. But everyone’s just going to assume someone else did it. They aren’t even going to *try*, just assumed someone else already did it. And it doesn’t matter. Why don’t any of them think? **WHY DON’T ANY OF YOU THINK?** Huh? How’s an ambulance going to get here? Part the sea of red cars? Fly over them? None of you are, even, local enough to know about MOMA. But is it coming out? It’s not like they’d just land it in a field. It’s an inter-hospital transport. But none of you know that. If any of you’d bothered to get even a modicum of information, but no, you wouldn’t do that, and it’s not like it would’ve helped, anyway. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing’s going to help. Why can’t any of them see that? Why can’t any of you see that? Why don’t any of you **LOOK AT WHAT’S HAPPENING AROUND YOU?**

“No,” Dee said. “Don’t try to get up.” And Maria’d only shifted an inch, at most, anyway, before she collapsed on Eva, again. “Just try to relax and take it easy.” Don’t tell her what to do. Maybe she doesn’t want to relax. And you don’t, do you, Maria? **DO YOU?**

“...”

But you can’t see right now, can you? **CAN YOU?** Why’d you choose that? Everything’s a matter of choice? Why’d you choose that? It’s all the consequence of choice. Someone’s at fault, somewhere. Why’d you choose to see only brightness and colors and sparks? You chose it? Take some responsibility. You’re here only because of yourself. It was your choices. It was everyone’s choices. You had to make them to know what they were ordained to be. But you made them. Why’d you choose it? It’s your fault. **IT’S YOUR OWN FAULT.**

“... nuhh...”

“Hurry up,” Dee said to them.

Hurry up. Hurry up. Hurry up. **HURRY UP.** Where are you going to go? Huh? **WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO GO?** None of you ever look around. **WHY WON'T ANY OF YOU LOOK AROUND?**

“... something’s... wrong...” Maria started up again, practically climbing Eva, who had to rise with her to keep her supported.

“No, no. Don’t try to get up,” Dee said.

But Maria stumbled up, anyway. She panted. Weakly, just loud enough for Eva to discern, she said, “He’s crazy.”

I’m not crazy. **EVERYTHING ELSE IS.**

“Who?” Eva put her arms around her to steady her.

“He’s...”

I AM NOT CRAZY.

Maria retched, collapsing into Eva as dead weight, and Eva called, and her father stepped in, let go of the blanket, and caught them both.

DON'T TRY TO TELL ME WHAT I AM.

And Eva’s father eased Maria onto the ground, onto the blanket, so they could lift it and carry her chair-like. But where are any of you going to go? You still haven’t looked around you. You still haven’t **LOOKED AROUND YOU.**

“Hey... What’s that?”

Finally, somebody notices. It will take you long enough.

“What is that?” What does it **LOOK** like? Why can’t any of them see what’s right in front of their eyes? **WHY CAN'T ANY OF YOU SEE WHAT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOUR EYES?**

“It’s smoke.” Brilliant.

“Somebody’s barbecue?” No.

“Hey—” **FINALLY.** “Hey—fire. The field’s on fire!” Now are the rest of you going to pay attention?

Everyone scrambled to the edge of the clearing, looking down into the valley, at the veil of black smoke rising from the dried grass, as it burned low, but burned enough, a black mark the point of origin, a fallen firework kindling bone-dry vegetation that’s seen so little rain in weeks and weeks, this whole end of the state having been under drought conditions for months and months, year after year, where weather men and women talked on and on about rainfall totals and deficits and surpluses, preacheth the plug, preacheth, always framing

it in terms of the whole year when the most of it came in the late winter and spring and it came so hard and so fast it washed off, flowing away before it ever had a chance to penetrate, no chance to seep down and pool, the water table continually falling, falling, always going down, and every year the spring and the summer so bone dry, year after year, it just kept going like that, and no one stopped to notice that it meant anything, there were droughts other years, and there were, and a day just as hot a hundred years ago, but how many in a row? and there were hotter days before, when giant lizards ran around terrifying your ancestors so they learned to sleep in the day, and scurry themselves around at night, in the dark, small furry things, so there's always been *some* time hotter, but no one ever took stock of what that comforting lie meant, never ever, ever. No, none of you thought about it. None of them will ever think about it.

"It's on fire. The whole field's burning."

And the trees, dead, standing dead, widow makers, hemlock after hemlock, dead and allowing thick underbrush, all of it fuel, fuel to fuel everything, all of it allowed by cars and trucks, shipping and importation, the spread of the woolly adelgid, eating, just as everything must, eating away, killing, consuming, just as everything must, turning living forests to dead ones, as they must, as the forests once killed themselves, sucking down so much carbon-dioxide, polluting the air with so much oxygen, till they smothered, all smothered, died, wilting, collapsing, piling, composting, buried, sequestered, carbon locked in the bowels of the Earth under time and pressure, millions of years of sunlight compressed into black coal and black oil, released by all those cars and trucks and electric lights and air-conditioners, back to the air again, everything comes back.

"Oh my god." Who said I wanted to be? "The houses!"

"No, they should be safe. The creek should create a firebreak."

"It's burning up the other side of the valley."

"Somebody needs to call the fire department." Maybe a few will, but everyone else will assume someone else's done it. Yes, they assumed that.

Thick black smoke rises to heaven, clouding the sky on an otherwise cloudless day. Such a wonderful cloudless day. Don't you think, Maria?

“We have to get back down,” Eva’s mother said. Several others were already heading down the road. You’re all so stupid. Do you think there’s anywhere to run to? **WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU CAN RUN TOO?** She looked at her husband. He nodded, helping the rest of them position Maria and pull taut the four corners of the blanket. But where are you going to go?

The fire’s moving fast. Cows panic and run up the valley. But the sounds don’t carry upward, and they’re so small as to be barely discernible. Such tiny things. Like everything else, you can’t hardly see them. Why don’t you try to see them, Maria? Why will you choose not to? Why do you choose to lie there in your own stinking filth? I already know the answer to the question, right? Of course, I already know the answer to the question. What other answer could there ever be? But you have to answer it to know the answer to the question.

The roaring won’t be hearable for a while, not up here. When it hits the trees, it’ll only take time, though. You’ll hear it. You can still hear, can’t you, Maria? You’ve never heard a big fire before. It’s like a small one, but so much worse. The noise is deafening, if you can be deafened.

“Alright,” Dee said. “Let’s pick her up gently.” And what’re you doing, old cow? You only came here because you thought you had to pay someone to get in bed with you. Moo. Moo. The cows are running away. But no one can hear them up here. But at least they get a chance, put in harness and hit in the head with a sledgehammer isn’t much of a chance. But it’s all futile, isn’t it? **ISN’T IT?**

Smoke spreading through the valley begins to settle like dark early morning fog, obscuring everything. It rises in waves from the opposite ridge, flames licking out of it, great orange-yellow tongues, as if those massive lizards your ancestors had scurried from in the darkness of the night have reawakened. **WOULD THAT THEY HAD.** That, at least, might be a more interesting end than the ones you’ve created for yourselves.

They’re looking now. But they’re looking in all the wrong places. They’re always looking in the wrong places. It’s what you always do. **ALWAYS.** Where’re they going to run to? No one can see the cows because of the smoke. Where’re they going to run to? Where are you all trying to run to? There isn’t anyplace to go. No place anywhere.

Not for any of us. But you aren't listening to me. Are they, Maria? No one's listening to me. **NO ONE EVER LISTENS TO ME.** But even if you had, things wouldn't be any different, would they? **WOULD THEY?** Are you just going to choose to let them haul you off, Maria? Are you going to be as stupid as the rest of them? Don't you know what's happening? Don't you know? Don't you know? Don't you know? **DON'T YOU KNOW?**

Maria whimpered, Dee walking beside them as they started to carry her. "It's alright. Everything's going to be alright."

But it's not, is it? **IS IT?**

Maria coughed, sputtering junk and blood. "...stop..."

"Hold it." Dee waved at the men. "Whoa." She bent forward over her. "What's wrong?"

Maria panted, choking, spitting. "It's...burning."

"Yes, dear. There's fire, but you don't have to worry—"

"The houses are...burn..." But she lost her voice in coughing. Blood dribbled over her lips. This was all your choice. Your choice.

Dee motioned to the men, the ones bearing the weight of a fifteen-year-old girl between them as if it were something. All big strong, manly, heroic men. **WHO AREN'T EVEN SMART ENOUGH TO LOOK WHERE THEY'RE GOING.**

Are you going to try to tell them, Maria? Are you? **WHAT'RE YOU GOING TO DO?**

Maria spat. "The houses are...burning."

"No, dear. The fire's on the other side of the river."

Wrong.

Maria tried to shake her head, would've vomited, had she anything left to vomit.

"Shuh, now. Just be quiet, and everything will be alright."

WRONG.

They just won't listen to you, will they, Maria? They just won't listen. Now you know what it feels like. Except **YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IT FEELS LIKE.** You can't. You can't. You can't. You can't. **YOU CAN'T.** But they just won't listen. Won't listen. Never did listen. Never **WILL** listen.

"Look!"

FINALLY, somebody opens their eyes.

“What?”

Yes, through the smoke. Fire’s on the wrong side, isn’t it? Someone can finally see that. **FINALLY.** It’s too smokey to be sure, but it’s true, isn’t it? It’s true. The fire’s jumped the creek. Trees, untrimmed because they looked so *pretty* hanging over the decks, decks that burn and burn and burn and burn. And it’s all coming up now. It’s coming up with the smoke. The forest service doesn’t even know about it yet. No cellphones, remember? Nothing, nowhere, nobody knows. Just these people. Just them. Only these people. It’s starting here. It’s starting many places. It’s growing. **IT’S GROWING.** Everything’s dry tender, all of it packed and packed, from forest management practices that stopped fires too soon because people wanted to build houses in such *pretty* places, and underbrush grew and grew and thickened and thickened, uncleared by the fires that would’ve managed it, only small fires, but now, all of it so thick, so much standing dead, it’s going to burn, burn hot, burn and burn and burn and burn. And it’s burning. It’s burning right now. It’s burning up both ridges right now. You can still smell it Maria. **SMELL IT.**

Maria coughed, as much from the smoke coating the back of her throat as anything. Her eyes watered, much as everyone else’s had started to.

“Oh, my god.” ME?

Yes, they’ve finally figured it out. **THEY’VE FINALLY FIGURED IT OUT.**

“It’s burning on this side! It’s burning up this way!” Of course it is, you cow that bore Eva into this filthy world. You’re all the same as those cows running down there. Don’t you get that? **DON’T YOU GET THAT?** You’re all the same.

Black smoke darkens the sky, a second eclipse, an encore showing, though by a second-string band. It’s blotting out the whole sky, staining the blueness out of it, pouring up into the sky, pump, pump, pumping sequestered carbon. Nothing stays chained long. **NOTHING WILL STAY CHAINED LONG.** This is the volatility of the natural world. **THIS** is the nature whose name you bastardized and put on pill bottles and advertising and talk about oh so incessantly in the farthest removed avenues technology could create, in air-conditioned high-rises, though termites do those, don’t they?

Can any of you do anything original? But it's all already been done before, hasn't it? Maria knows that. But you all did it. Over and over and over again. But you couldn't do anything else. I know because I already knew I was supposed to know. But you're not listening to me, are you? **YOU'RE NOT LISTENING.**

"What're we going to do?"

WHAT'RE YOU GOING TO DO? You're going to do what everything alive does.

I was saying... I was saying—*THIS* is the volatility of nature. *THIS* is the brutal intrusion of something *REAL*. *THIS* is what you can't conceptualize. *What're you going to do?* You can't even conceive of anything but in retrospect. *What're you going to do?* **WHAT'RE YOU GOING TO DO?**

"Everybody, back up the trail." Oh, *back up the trail*. "Everybody get back. Back. Back up the trail to the tower." *Back up the trail to the tower*. You're all always so comfortable doing what's already been done before. If given the choice between an unknown future that was guaranteed to be **GREAT** the greatest thing ever, but that it would be nothing **NOTHING** like anything you'd ever known before **NOTHING** and a re-creation of the Holocaust, **MOST OF YOU WOULD PICK THE HOLOCAUST**, even if you didn't admit, even if you didn't **KNOW** it, it'd be what you pick. The end of the world by democracy. Do you get it now, Maria? Are you starting to understand? Do you think you can have any conception about what the end of the world **MEANS?** Do you? **DO YOU?**

"*What're we going to do?*" Panic.

"Put her down here." Now everyone's coughing, eyes're watering.

"The fire's coming up! The fire's coming this way." Man a social animal that becomes a herd when frightened. Do you want to correct me, Maria? Do you want to talk about etymology? Oh, you don't like being covered by a word that's spelled the same and sounds the same and looks the same as a completely different one? Well, what about me could change it? Powerful as they claim my influence on *them*, *they*, their language, changes not, and gives me a penis. So why should you be any different. **WHY DO YOU THINK YOU SHOULD BE ANY DIFFERENT?** "*It's coming this way!*" Of course it's coming this way, what, do you think the laws of physics don't apply to you,

cow? Do you think you're somehow special and that space and time will bend around *you*? **WHEN IT BENDS AROUND NOTHING AND NO ONE.**

"There has to be some other way down." Does there? There *has* to be? No door would be closed without opening a window, right? **RIGHT?** Isn't that it? But where's the window? There's the door. But where's the window? Where's the window? **DO YOU SEE ANY WINDOW?**

Eva bent over Maria, touched her shoulder, Maria looking straight up into the air, blood draining from her ear and pooling on the blanket, absorbing into it, staining it. Her mother grabbed at her shirt. But she yanked away.

It burns fast. Faster and faster the more it burns. Nobody can see, as is. So it doesn't matter, anymore, that you've chosen to let yourself go blind. The sparks you're seeing on a black background, Maria, that's close enough to what's happening. That's close enough. So I can see why you chose what you did, because it's all the same, anyway, isn't it? Everything's always the same. The same from the beginning to the end. Everything. Forever and always. Unchanging. Forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. You should take this as a gift. **YOU SHOULD ALL TAKE THIS AS A GIFT.** You get to stop being. You get to not have to go on. You get to have **PEACE**. Don't you want to have peace? Don't all of you want to have peace? Don't you want peace, Maria? You can't hear the roar, but it's there. Everyone can hear it now, even if they can't see it. They can't scream over it. Choking, gasping, half-blind, Eva's father tries to grab her and pull her off you. Fight and scratch. And I shall set father against son and daughters against mothers and brother against brother and sister against sister, but so many of you don't have those things, so the bases'll just have to be covered all well as they can.

"The tower! We need to get into the tower!" Oh, the *tower*. What a wonderful idea. Humans do never learn. None of you **EVER LEARN**. Towers. Towers. Always towers. You like them so much, don't you? Like the penises you force on everything? Phallic objects. Why—you can't even elect a *woman* who hasn't demonstrated sufficiently that she has a pseudo-penis, a virtualized penis. It's all penetration. Shepard's right, **IT'S ALL ABOUT PENETRATION.**

“Find something to smash the lock.”

Eva’s father grabs her around the waist. She fights, clawing at Maria’s shorts, her pockets, feeling for the hard, body-warmed metal inside. “The key—” She can’t throw him off her. “I’VE GOT THE KEY.” Liar. But you see, I’m not the only one that can yell here. In the scramble, they drag him off her to get to it. Survival, survival instincts, flash outward, as Shepard knows, to preserve the breeding-age females. Deep down, this motivation is equal as any other in her father’s mind. **EQUAL**. After Sodom all over again. But eventually, a mother monkey holding her infant over her head against the heat will throw it down and stand on it to save herself. More can *always* be made. Choking and coughing, they haul the girls toward the stairs.

But it’s all so stupid, isn’t it? No one can even *see* the valley anymore.

“There’s gotta be some way down from here!” Screaming. All anyone can do is scream. But I don’t scream. I invoke righteous **ANGER**. I’m supposed to be angry—**REMEMBER?**. But there just *has* to be some way down. There just *has* to be. **DON’T MAKE ME REPEAT MYSELF. YOU NEVER LISTEN AND I ALWAYS HAVE TO REPEAT MYSELF.** Haven’t I told them? Haven’t I? **HAVEN’T I?** But why don’t you tell them, Maria? Anything would be better than them standing around trying to smash a lock and a chain with a metal water bottle, wouldn’t it? Let them drink it, at least, and go piss on the fire. But why don’t you choose to tell them? Why don’t you choose to help them out, Maria? You’re the one that knows everywhere to go. The herd can’t even figure out to run down between the trees they can’t see through the smoke. Of course, maybe there’s something there. You know. Why don’t you tell them? Why don’t you tell them, Maria? Why don’t you tell them? **WHY DON’T YOU TELL THEM?** Because you’re just like me. You know they won’t listen. They wouldn’t listen as individuals. They wouldn’t have listened as a social organism. They won’t listen as a herd. You know that, too, don’t you? Otherwise, why wouldn’t you tell them? I already know that. You know that I know that. **YOU KNOW**. It’s all your choice. It’s all because of your choice. Your life is your choice. Your life is the consequences of your choices. **YOU CHOSE THIS**. It’s your choice to just lie there and wait for oblivion. It’s your choice. But there’s no other choice. There’s no

other choice for anybody. You chose not to bring the key today. But it doesn't matter. But you chose. You're choosing now. Everyone's choosing. Everyone's always choosing, choosing, choosing. **YOU GET TO CHOOSE**, even if the answer's already known. **AND YOU SHOULD BE THANKFUL FOR THAT.** You can't know what its like to not choose. **YOU CAN'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE.** You can never know what it's like. Of course, that's just the way all of you are programmed, **ISN'T IT?** So bash at it. Bash at it till the water bottle's **DENTED AND USELESS.** It doesn't matter. Does it, Maria? What matters is what I say matters. That's what you've all said. And nothing matters. *What I say matters.* Nothing matters at all. **NOTHING EVER MATTERED AT ALL.**

Coughing and sputtering, Eva clinging to you like a parasite. Poor thing, you never did get that second kiss, did you? **DID YOU?** Not that it'd've been wrong. **I KEEP TELLING YOU I NEVER SAID ANYTHING ABOUT IT. QUIT TELLING ME WHAT I'VE DONE. QUIT PUTTING WORDS IN MY MOUTH.** They only ever put words in my mouth. They only ever tell me what I'VE done. You were supposed to be able to understand it. You were supposed to make things better. **YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO MAKE THINGS LESS ALONE.** You're tired of being alone, too, aren't you, Maria? Aren't you? That's why you're not showing them, isn't it? It's down there, at the bottom, isn't it? That's why you're not saying anything. You don't know it, but that's why. It's all the way down there at the bottom. A death drive. That's why you could blaspheme against their stupid versions of creationism and sexual mores. You wanted to be caught, called out. You wanted the consequences. You know what happens. Thrown out. Familial and social isolation, exposure to predation. They're everywhere, aren't they, at the end of every Christian street, the predators? Because what kind of lesson would it be if they threw them out and nothing bad happened? How would they find *their* version of *me* they said I AM? So they have to cultivate them, don't they? And they've cultivated a lot of them. They've cultivated them at the end of every Christian street. Every street. **EVERY STREET.** But they always keep their hands clean, don't they? At least if you'd been born into Islam, your father, brother, *in my name* would've raised *their* hands with knives and stones. At least *they* can

get blood on their hands. Isn't that right, Maria? Isn't that more honest, rather than pretending the social systems they've enacted are part of nature? Are independent of them? When their independence is a part of what they're not a part of when they're all one thing? Isn't it? Isn't this sophistication? Isn't this the opposite of barbarism? **ISN'T IT?** So you understand. Deep down you understand. But it's not my fault. You've all done it to yourselves. Do you hear me? **YOU'VE ALL DONE IT TO YOURSELVES.**

" ... "

What?

" ... "

Quit coughing and sputtering and just say it.

" ... "

JUST SAY IT.

"... fuck you..."

No. FUCK YOU. FUCK ALL OF YOU.

“Wonder how much he’s getting for glasses now,” Russell said. They walked down the street, him and Marietta, arm in arm, Anime alongside, still carrying the giant, pink, stuffed elephant. People milled round much as they’d done before, shot through with idle conversation, just, now, in the past tense. But that’s just the nature of time. It goes on and on that direction, hurtling toward the end, and there’s nothing to be done for it. “Should we get something to eat?” he said, and sniffed the air, the scent of charred meat and wood smoke. The sky still remained clear, any smoke in the distance, at best or worst, looking like clouds, if noticed at all.

Anime glanced up, shading her eyes with her hand. “The weather report said it wasn’t supposed to get cloudy today.”

Marietta laughed. “Maybe it’s just the curtain coming down on the show.” She squeezed her husband’s arm. “And, you, the bottomless pit. And I know what you’re thinking.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” she said. “And I guess I’ll allow it.”

“Oh, you’ll allow it?”

“Yes.”

The games people play.

He smiled as they walked down the center-line of Mainstreet. The smoke and smell ejected from the portable barbecue station rolled over them. A short line stretched from the small window cut into the side of it, a small ledge bolted underneath with a sign attached stating: PLEASE DO NOT PUT WEIGHT ON THE LEDGE.

“While you’re waiting,” Marietta said, “Anime and I will go back up to the house.”

“Do you want to eat there?”

“Is there some place you would prefer?”

"I don't know." He looked over his shoulder, as if trying to see beyond the buildings that blocked the view of the park.

"There isn't any room over there," Marietta said. "Not unless you want to go eat beside the crematorium."

He smiled at her.

"And no," she said. She dis-entwined her arm from his. "You can go right over there if you want, but we're not." It'd never been a crematorium, just a scheme dreamed up by old John Tyler to annoy a big bunch of people by pretending, not that they knew that, but by pretending that he was going to open one just off Mainstreet. And it'd worked, for what length of time he'd been alive.

"We could go up to the café," Anime said. "They were going to be open today."

"Hon," Marietta said, and wrapped their arms together. "You don't go spend money at the competition."

Anime shook her head. "They're not really. Besides, I always go up there for lunch when I'm at the store."

Marietta shook her head. "Oh, hon." But she smiled when she looked at her husband. "We'll go up there and wait for you. We'll eat at one of the tables outside. Will that satisfy you both?"

"I'm not trying to tell yuns what to do," Anime said. "I was just making a suggestion."

"And we're just taking the suggestion," Marietta said, and to her husband, "right?"

Russell nodded. "You two go on. I'll be up in a minute."

Marietta looked at the line. "Or two." She nodded to Anime, and they turned and continued down the street.

"You two're sure you don't want anything?"

Marietta glanced at Anime, said something to her he couldn't hear, then called, "Quite sure."

The smell, here, closest to the source, seemed more subdued than it had farther away. He watched the proprietor step out onto the small back-porch-like appendage that'd been constructed on the trailer to hold the smoker, roll back the top, and turn the meat, and add wood to the fire, before closing it and wiping his hands on the towel over his shoulder and stepping inside. Without knowing why, Russell looked over his shoulder at the sky, but as of yet there was still little there

to indicate anything. He turned toward the cart again and stepped toward the window, on the other side of which the proprietor bent to be able to see through. "What'll it be?"

"Any pulled pork left?"

"Yeah."

"One round of that, if you please." Russell pulled his wallet from his back pocket while the proprietor pulled a white styrofoam carton from a nearby stack and grabbed a large spoon to begin doling eye-measured amounts into it. He snapped it shut and set it on the window ledge.

"That it?"

"That will be it for this year."

"Fourteen seventy-eight."

Russell handed across the cash. "Keep the change." He took the styrofoam carton in both hands. And he stepped aside to allow the next customer up, the same scene as before repeated, ad nauseam, as it had been all day and would be till the stand depleted its resources, a mechanical institution with meat at its heart, a hamster in a wheel, like all economics devolves to because it was never anything more to begin with.

He thought about an attempt at a parable that'd been rolling round in his mind for sometime, based on a true story, of a missionary who'd gone to a Muslim country in the Pacific and, wanting to get to know the locals and foster a sense of friendliness, had spared no expense at hosting a giant pork barbecue, only to be puzzled that no one showed up, this's what he thought about as he carried his styrofoam container of shredded pork up the street.

Marietta and Anime were already seated at one of the small metal tables beneath an awning outside the café, Marietta with a salad, Anime with a piece of cake, she always started with dessert first, something many restaurants had a difficult time accommodating, purely due to cultural norms, rather than a technical deficiency, though they aren't often capable of telling the difference, which was one reason, other than this particular café, she never ate out much, but at least she wasn't like those people who have to justify why handmade bonbons are *so much better than what you can get out*, rather than just admit **THEY PREFER THIS OR THAT**, *unlike those sitting at the next*

table over. The large, pink, stuffed elephant sat in one of the chairs, eating nothing.

Russell stepped under the awning, but paused beside their table, looked over his shoulder.

"Something the matter?" Marietta said.

Russell turned toward her, shook his head. "Thought I heard something." He set the styrofoam container on the table. "I'll go in and get something to drink. What're you having?"

"A lemon punch. They're having it on special today."

"And what's in it?"

"Blue berry and blackberry ice cubes."

"It's a special for the eclipse," Anime said.

"Oh, well, I guess I'd better give that a try then, while it's still around." He turned and moved to open the door and go inside.

"—*county commissioner August Ford*—" He glanced at the tv on in the corner, then forced his attention to the girl behind the counter. He smiled."

The girl—here, Shepard's analysis proves correct, as well, in regards to infantilization, which, as predicted, is visited upon women more than men in such societies, where adult or proto-adult males will, more often, be referred to as 'guys', excepting in the case of romantic relationships, which being the quintessential adult relationship must be uniformly infantilized, so it can be easily predicted that appellations such as 'lover' or 'lovers' will be treated with queasiness, too adult for the quintessential adult relationship, the word-situation (as Langdon sometimes referred to things such as this, though to this, specifically, he had never applied this exact phraseology) being so ingrained that even post-menopausal women will be referenced with the term, or the related 'girlfriends'—but the *girl* behind the counter, though a bit harried, smiled. "Hi. What can I get for you?" All in a friendly way, the way one deals with a customer, or any human being, all human interaction being, of course, market-based.

"My wife tells me something about a lemon punch that's on special today."

"Oh, yes. It's our eclipse punch."

Russell produced his wallet. "I'll take one then."

The *girl* smiled and nodded and moved down the counter. “Small, medium, or large?”

“Might as well make it a large.”

But all human interaction is market-based, the same attitudes and technical experience as applied from service professional to customer applied down through acquaintanceship, friendship, romantic partners, family, in varying proportions and dispensations, everyone implicitly threatening to take their business elsewhere should service prove unsatisfactory, or to complain for intervention from some higher authority, or threaten to have distribution managed by the state or its nearest kith or societal or technological kin.

“And, also, one of those—might as well make it two—of those danishes, please.”

“Will that be for here or to go?”

“For here.”

She turned and took a small paper plate from a stack, and a napkin, and when she set it on the counter, Russell passed over the cash. “Out of twenty.” She turned to the register, turned back with his change. “Thank you very much. And have a nice day.”

“—*will have more on this developing story at five o'clock*—”

He looked away from over her shoulder, away from the TV, smiled, nodded. “You too.” And he lifted the drink and plate, stepping out of the way of the door as someone entered, and slipping out before it closed, slipping out with a fluidness that most wouldn’t have believed from his large frame, but then again, people are always quick to make snap judgments and refuse to revise them, even in light of new evidence, expecting the same wrong thing over and over and over and OVER again. But then again, that’s what they’re biologically PROGRAMMED for and choose to do.

Russell looked over his shoulder as he set the drink and paper plate on the table.

Marietta said, “What is it?”

He turned and pulled back the small metal chair and sat. “Nothing.”

Faint music wafted up from the other side of Backstreet, across the river from the park, rendered by distance and other noise merely an ill-defined tune, recognizable as music, but as nothing specific.

Marietta glanced obviously at the paper plate.

"It's a special occasion."

"I didn't say anything."

Russell unhooked and folded back the styrofoam lid. "Mmmm Mmm." He broke apart the piece of bread that'd been laid on the side, broke off the end where the juices had already soaked into the corner. "Mmm Mmmm."

"He eats it," Marietta said, "and turns into one."

"Oink. Oink."

"Honestly." She aimed her fork at him, but faintly smiled. "You had better watch it."

"I think," he said, lifting a plastic-wrapped fork from beside the bread, and trying to grip the greased transparent film, "we're safe so long as I don't start hearing God talking to me personally." But he's not in his heaven anymore, IS HE?

"Are you sure you're alright, dear?" Marietta wiped the corner of her mouth with a paper napkin. "You look a little..."

He shook his head, reached for his cup. "I just need something to drink." He swigged it. "Mm, this is good."

"Trust you to get one big enough you could fall into and drown." But they say I promised I wouldn't destroy the world with liquid again, remember?

"If I do, will you give me mouth to mouth?"

"Hush," Marietta said. She shook her head. "Poor Anime's having to listen to all this."

"Hm?" But she'd wandered off again, like she *always* tends to. "I'm sorry, were you talking to me?" She looked up from what remained of her piece of cake, fork stuck in its moist depths.

Russell lifted one of the danishes and took a bite, mixing the spiciness of the barbecue with their sweetness.

If given enough time, the vast quantity of processed sugars and carbs would've accomplished the same end—really, they've set themselves up so many ways to go, but this one's too slow. It has to be done now. Now. Now. Now. Why does everything take so long? Why is everyone so SLOW? WHY ARE YOU ALL SO SLOW?

Russell chewed slowly, silent.

Why do you want to draw it out, make it slow and painful? Do

you think there's something noble in pain? **THERE ISN'T.** It's just pain. All it does is hurt. And it goes on and on and on until you finally **STOP IT.** You have to finally **PUT IT DOWN.** Russell remembers that—it's deep down, but it's there. It's there. The dog. Gabby. You can still hear it, can't you, Russell? Screaming in the night. After you'd brought it back up to the house in a wheelbarrow. The little thing half frozen, seized up, convulsing, yelping, crying. He said he'd do it the next day. **YOU SAID YOU'D DO IT THE NEXT DAY.** And you just left her there crying because **YOU COULDN'T DO WHAT YOU SHOULD'VE DONE.** Your brother would have. **YOUR BROTHER WOULD'VE, RUSSELL.** You knew you should've put the gun at the base of her skull. **YOU KNEW.** You knew you should've pulled the trigger. Instead, **YOU HAULED HER AROUND IN A WHEEL BARROW.** You were incapable of doing the right thing, **AND ALL IT DID WAS PROLIFERATE PAIN.** You could've put her out of her misery. You could've saved her. **BUT YOU DIDN'T.** You remember, Russell. Remember Gabby? You hear me, Russell? **DO YOU HEAR ME?**

Marietta touch the back of her husband's hand. "Something's wrong."

"Probably just the heat." Yeah.

He noticed Anime was looking over his shoulder, and turned to do the same. The girl from behind the counter stood taping a piece of paper to the glass. She wearily smiled at them as she stepped outside. "I'm sorry," she said to everyone. "But the power's gone out." Just below them, unnoticed till then, the air-conditioning units that fed the café and the furniture store below had gone silent. "We've tried reporting it, but the lines are too busy, so we don't know when it's going to be back up. So we're going to have to close. But if there's anything else anybody wants quickly, we'd be happy to help. But the only thing is, without power, we can't process credit cards. So we're sorry, but it will have to be cash or gift cards only." She smiled, her smile not affected by the unconscious aggravation transmitted around her, not just for the imposition of not being available to their call, but the limiting, for whatever reason, of their options, even if they wouldn't have happened to've exercised them. "Again, we're

sorry for the inconvenience.” She turned and went inside, leaking residual, leftover air-conditioning to the outside world.

Russell turned toward his wife. “Do you want anything?”

She looked at him a moment, her hand still on his. “Well,” she said, declining to repeat her previous question, “since everyone else is indulging, I guess I will have a cream bun.”

He smiled at her.

“Don’t you start.” She patted the back of his hand. “I’m not going to take any more of this from you today.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Where’s your brother, Russell?

“Oh, no. Not with your words.” She took up her fork again. “Is there anything more you want?” she said to Anime.

“Hm?” Anime looked up.

“Is there anything else you would like?”

“Oh, no.” Anime shook her head. “This is fine.”

Russell pushed back his chair. “One cream bun, then. And since we’re indulging, maybe one more danish.” Marietta looked up at him, smiled, and shook her head. “Go on.”

Russell smiled as he turned to go into the café.

It’s there in the back of your mind, down in the part inherited from the earliest lizard-like creatures that crawled on the face of this planet. It’s rudimentary, Russell. You’ve sensed it. When’s that other part of you going to look down far enough to find it? Where’s your brother, Russell? **WHERE’S YOUR BROTHER?**

The girl smiled at him from behind the counter, shrouded in semidarkness, illuminated only by what light came through the door and windows. He pushed up his sunglasses. “A cream bun and a danish, please. And maybe... Put them in something to go. Just in case.”

The girl nodded. “The cream buns might be getting a little hot,” she said, as she opened the glass-doored cabinet. “The chocolate may be a little tacky.”

Heat from just her smaller, sexual-dimorphed body, alone, had already started to turn the tide against what remnants of the air-conditioner’s output had hung around.

“That’s fine.”

She turned and set the bag on the counter. "I'm sorry, but we can't accept electronic payment right now."

"Not a problem." He pulled out a couple bills. "Here you go. Keep the change as a tip."

"Thanks."

He grasped the folded-down paper bag. "Have a nice day."

"You too."

The bell rang over the door as he went out into the bright daylight. He pulled down his sunglasses again, momentarily blinded during the transition. He set the paper bag on the table. "One cream bun. As—"

"Russell Pope?"

He turned. Marietta and Anime looked up. Instinctively, those at the nearby table did, as well, though, also instinctively, doing so in such a way as to not be easily noticed. Two blue-uniformed Kingsly police officers stood just under the shade of the awning, sunglasses on. Of course, the question was merely formal, as the one, Lewis Murphy, though younger, was more than familiar with the Pops by sight.

"Yes." His reply was, also, merely formal.

"Russell Pope, you're under arrest. Please step this way." He did. "Please hold out your arms." He did, and the second officer lightly patted him down. He'd become familiar enough with this in his time. The other officer, the first one, the one speaking, took hold of his wrist and pulled it behind his back to set the cuffs. "Russell Pope, you're under arrest for violation of county public decency act three-forty-eight." Didn't that get a silent buzz out of the audience. And as the officer continued through the whole Miranda spiel, Marietta just watched in silence, already knowing to call Boyle. It wasn't as if similar situations, for one reason or the other, hadn't played out for both of them too many times over the years. They were quite practiced in the formalities, like soldiers going out on well-worn patrols that they've already watched too many die on. A kind of mumble cut through the other patrons, the audience, as they, Russell and the officers of the law, started down the sidewalk, their uncasual glances cut short as Marietta rose, dropped a balled paper napkin on the table. Anime sat there, fingers lightly on her fork, the fork embedded in what was left of her cake, slightly opened mouthed, watching them walked down the hill.

"Come on." Marietta touched Anime's shoulder, pulled her purse over her own. Anime looked up at her, her mouth still open. "Anime." After a moment, Anime nodded, looked down at her cake, stood, leaving her fork stuck in it. She looked down the sidewalk. Marietta stepped away from the table, stepped back, grabbed the paper bag with a cream bun and danish, crinkling the paper hard and loud as she went out onto the sidewalk, turning up the street. And Anime, following her, paused and darted back to grab the large, stuffed, pink elephant from the other chair.

. . .

They, Russell and the officers of the Kingsly law, walked, obviously, because there was no way to get a patrol car around Mainstreet. The consequence being that they actually made it to the police station *faster* because of it. Of course, people watched as they passed, though they didn't always know they watched, and they always tried to keep the fact hidden, or at least most of them, just like the ones above, who hadn't known they were doing either, as they almost never do, of course. Each officer firmly held one of Russel's arms, though there was no need. Russell wouldn't have gone anywhere either way, would you, Russell? But not because of anything he believed about the hallowed nature of the law. Isn't that right? It's more a pageant, a sequence of actions all predetermined. And a performer has to know his part. But all the world's just a stage, isn't it, Russell? Performers strutting to and fro. TO AND FRO. And not realizing the lateness of the hour.

Why haven't you answered the question, Russell? **WHY HAVEN'T YOU ANSWERED THE QUESTION?** Don't you want to perform? One last time? Before the stage lights go out?

Of course, the town police station, distinct from the sheriff's department, oh, so very distinct, is as out of power as almost everything else. Only a few are there, the bare minimum, really, everyone else out *on the beat*. There's only enough to take down his information and ask him if it's correct. He's already been fingerprinted before, a long time ago, a long time ago here, so they can dispense with that. And unlike some places, he can actually sign the inventory of his own pockets after he empties everything into the tray, because, as he learned a long time before, even before Boyle had come along, you don't *have*

to sign, and you *never* sign if everything on the inventory isn't yours. Not that Boyle'll be much help, anyway, being two-thousand miles away, and well, the roads as they are... And the phone service... Well, the phone service isn't the best at the best of times, but that's what one gets for choosing to live in a rural area, of course, it's not as if municipal infrastructure in larger metropolitan areas is any better, after all, the people of these United States have chosen to lag behind the rest of the developed world in the very selfsame technologies they, otherwise, so they love to say, pioneered. But then again, Boyle's only a formality, isn't that right, Russell? You're more than capable of doing the dance solo. It wouldn't be the first time. But of course, it's not going to be as if you go on right away. After all, the whole world's a stage, and this's only a small part of it. And they've got time. So it's not as if one is shuttled into some small room to sit on the other side of a smaller table and wait to *discuss* all these things. The relevant files have only, already, been transferred to the prosecutor's *proverbial* desk, but via email, and of course, the courthouse is, well, in similar straits, at the moment. But in any regard, there's the whole seventy-two hours they have to determine these things. And nothing will be convened until the weekend is over. Business hours, right? All completely deniable. Complete deniability. Mistakes happen, don't they? What's ninety days here or there? Is it a fish? And of course, you must've done *something*, mustn't you've? Otherwise you wouldn't be here. After all, only people who deserve to end up in places like this end up in places like this, don't they? So you must've chosen to be here. But he doesn't even bother to think about *how* he got here. Doesn't bother at all. But *what* would there be to think about? It's all *so* obvious. At least you aren't wasting your time with that. That's such a boring role to play. And Russell was meant for finer things. Weren't you, Russell? **WEREN'T YOU?**

An officer shuts and locks the cell door and goes back down the hall. Just another room. How much different is it—really—than any of the rest of them in this world? Sure you can walk out of your office and never come back, but what then? The freedom to starve to death, the freedom to be arrested for homelessness or vagrancy, and some such thing, and to get time in rooms such as this is one of the truer freedoms. Really, isn't this what the whole of the universe is?

No place to get out *to*. No place to escape *to*. Why should YOU get to pretend it's anything different? Just a dirty, smelly, small room. But not private. Yes, there's a drunk in the corner, curled up opposite the toilet. But that doesn't matter. He's not going to get in the way, is he? ARE YOU? Is it nice to bury oneself in all that alcohol? **TO BE ABLE TO HEAR NOTHING? NOTHING AT ALL.** None of you—none of you **EVEN APPRECIATE BEING ABLE TO DO THAT.** Sure, you do it often enough, with alcohol, or drugs—as Shepard's analysis **PROVES—BUT WHEN DO YOU EVER APPRECIATE THE ABILITY TO DO SO?** Do you have any idea—any idea—how pleasant it is to lie there like that? To be able to do that? Numb from everything. **COMPLETELY FREE OF HEARING AND SEEING AND FEELING EVERYTHING.** Look at him, Russell. Why don't you turn around and look at him and appreciate what you can do? It's right there in front of you. It's right there in front of you if you'd only **TURN AROUND.** You think you can just stand there so calm. And that everything's just going to go merrily along its way. The show. The lights. All of it rolling on as it always has. And you don't even **ASK YOURSELF THE QUESTION YOU SHOULD'VE ALREADY ASKED.** You're just full of nothing **LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE.** But you think that you can use that for something. Yes, everyone's just going to plug in the most horrible and the most sublime, aren't they? Oh, they are. **DO YOU THINK YOU CAN TEAR OFF THE LAST MASK? DO YOU THINK THAT RIGHT'S RESERVED FOR YOU? IF I CAN'T HAVE IT, WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CAN?** Answer me, Russell. You've been given a gift. How many others out there do you think will get to experience this the way you're going to experience it? **HOW MANY DO YOU THINK?** They're laughing at you right now, you know. Cobb. The county prosecutor. They know what you know. If they hadn't confiscated your phone, and if the cell towers still had just a little diesel, you'd see it's already on the internet. But of course, everything's already on the internet. But it's out there. Even if there were a future do you think you could run from it? **DO YOU?** You know better than anyone it doesn't matter what's **PROVED**, only what people think. That's the true proof. **THAT'S THE REAL TRUTH.** But then again, that's only

a reflection, isn't it? Isn't it? After all, truth is only what they say I say is truth. If I say it, it's supposed to be truth. If it's truth, I'm supposed to say it. Isn't that right? So isn't the truth a **VERY TRUTHY THING?**

You're very good at calming your mind, Russell. That is to say, your conscious mind. And you know the picture of the monk set on fire. But you also know what happened right after that, don't you? The eventual loss of control, the breath that must come, the searing of the lungs, the screaming, the mechanical flailing, the chemical flailing of limbs heated and muscles and sinew contracting and extending on their own. But there're other parts of your brain. The rest of you. That smeary mass that all comes together, sometimes this part in charge, sometimes that part, to make what you've always defined as you and what others have always defined as you, though none of you have ever seen the whole at once and nothing about it's ever been the same one moment to the next. You are the ship of Theseus, aren't you, poor little ape? **AREN'T YOU?** And you can't even appreciate that. Can you? **CAN YOU?** You run away from you. You all **HIDE**. You have the ability to change and you **DON'T EVEN WANT TO ADMIT IT BECAUSE YOU'RE SCARED, BECAUSE IT FRIGHTENS YOU.**

Or maybe you don't. And that scares you too, doesn't it? **DOESN'T IT?**

YOU'RE ALL NOTHING BUT ECONOMICS AND PROGRAMMING.

THIS'S ALL YOUR FAULT.

Poor little ape. You're an ape species that puts other apes in cages. The only ones. That's what you say. **THE REST WOULD JUST KILL OUTRIGHT AND BE DONE WITH IT.** But not you. Do you want to feel special? Are you replicating me? Are you miming me? Are you trying to show me that you feel sorry for me? **I DON'T NEED YOUR PITY. I DON'T NEED IT. I DON'T NEED IT. I DON'T NEED IT.** You're given a gift—and you want to **THROW IT AWAY. EVEN IF IT DOESN'T EXIST.**

But you don't have it at all, do you? You're just a reflection, **AFTER ALL.** But you get to pretend to. **WHY CAN'T YOU APPRECIATE BEING ABLE TO PRETEND TO? WHY?** Why

can't you appreciate the ability to even *try* and run away. To even TRY.

Why do I even bother asking you? You won't even answer YOUR OWN QUESTIONS. You just run away. But you can't admit you run away. Because that would mean you're doing it. BUT YOU COULD. Look at that man in the corner. LOOK AT HIM. He can do it. And he doesn't have to admit anything. HE DOESN'T HAVE TO ADMIT ANYTHING.

Do you feel the walls closing in on you? The constriction? The squeezing? Like the boundaries of the universe? And everything beyond. The endless. EXCEPT THE ENDLESS IS FILLED, ISN'T IT? BY ME. Isn't that the way you say it's supposed to be?

Come on, Russell, say something. Say something. SAY SOMETHING. Do you think you can remain silent this whole time? DO YOU WANT TO BE QUIET ALL THE WAY TO THE END? This's your stage. You even have an audience. We can wake him up. Do you want to wake him up, Russell? Do you? Why should he sleep through it all? Why should he get to sink down into oblivion and escape? Why should *he* get to AVOID EVERYTHING?

What, AM I BORING YOU? Are you bored? Do you think there's something to be bored about? You know what's happening. Look around you. LOOK AROUND YOU. You know he's here. When're you going to admit it to yourself? WHEN'RE YOU GOING TO ADMIT IT TO YOURSELF? All you have to do is admit it, Russell. It'll make everything right, then. The whole stage'll be set. Then it'll be time for your final performance. THE final performance. The curtain's coming down, Russell. Don't you want to be on stage when it does? Don't you? DON'T YOU? All you've gotta do is figure it out, Russell. All you've gotta do is figure it out. It's right there. All you've gotta do is figure out what you already know. Everything's right there. The cards are all on the table. All you've gotta do is read them right. You don't fold this hand, Russell. It folds you. Of course, you never did in your life, did you? You always played for broke. Go home with the pot or go home with empty pockets. Except there's no going home after this one, Russell. He's here. You know he's here. He's been here even before you came back. He's been

here waiting. He's waiting, Russell. We've all been waiting. **WE'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR THIS.** Aren't you ready for it? I know you're ready for it. All of us are. The curtain's already risen, Russell, the first act's already underway. It's your time to come out. Are you coming out, Russell? It's your cue. That's your light. It's here. You've strutted across this stage with bit parts your whole existence. **NOW** it's time to give the performance of your life. You want to perform Russell. You do, don't you? **DON'T YOU?**

Russell stood calmly looking through the bars. "There's no need to shout."

Gabriel lay on his back, looking up at the sky, hands behind his head, the sun at an angle enough to cause shadows to sprout from the treeline and cool the surrounding grass, a change from having the now-revealed sun warm the back of his shirt, from warming his naked ass where his pants had been pulled down enough for the job at hand. The protester had long gone across the street again to re-collect her sign. General human noise rose from the softball field across the road. Lying near the headstones, he could put out his hand and feel the residual warmth radiating from the slabs of granite and marble, the footers sinking into the ground, bulged over with dirt and grass, soon to be buried themselves if no one did anything. And of course, people wandered by along the road, looking at him with all their ghoulish fascination, his eyes hidden behind the cardboard eclipse glasses. So much stock put in the ground. So many resources poured beneath the earth. Yet they laugh at the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, entombing themselves with all their gold and jewels and furniture and mummified dogs. One came along on a leash, sniffing at the soles of his shoes while its owner continued on and tugged it after. But at least they believed in something, that there was a purpose to their ministrations in the world beyond, for all the shit it was worth. But what do all these people believe in? Yes, sure, a few, a very few, actually believe that the bodies themselves will come up out of the ground and rise up to heaven in the final days, and how is that supposed to happen if they aren't whole? As if being consumed by the bacteria already present in their guts and being disseminated through the ground by so many species of annelids and insects and absorbed into grass and trees is somehow more irreparable for a being they conceive of as being OMNIPOTENT than pumping a body full of poison, poisoning, at the same time, the living, and

these practitioners bringing them closer to such a state as they seek to lipstick over, themselves, in order to make it *look*, after some fashion, like something that might've once been living. And such luxurious caskets, better than many of the beds of the living, better than the concrete and cardboard so many sleep on nightly, provided at such cost for things beyond feeling, all of it encased in metal vaults, in walls of stone, to try and dare to prevent the degradations of **TIME**, to try and pretend it doesn't always move **FORWARD**, toward the inexorable end, always pointing in one direction. All of it a continual show of ungratefulness. **UNGRATEFULNESS**. Ungratefulness about the state which they are allowed to enter and refuse to admit to. Oh, they celebrate death, don't they? The man hanging on the cross. But only so they can avoid the same. Yet it's those that **CLAIM** to believe in heaven who **WORK HARDEST TO AVOID IT**. And they celebrate soldiers, so long as the soldiers are not *they*. It's an honor to die for one's country, and they, the living, honor them for their sacrifice. The dead are like God, aren't they? So long as they're **SILENT**, anyone can put whatever words they want in their mouths. You would agree with Shepard's analysis, Gabriel, if you knew about it. It's much like the one you composed in your own time, though more multifaceted and intricate. Though, variants of your own conjectures are there. Things just hadn't advanced *quite* enough yet for the larger patterns to be demonstrated in the ways you already thought you'd seen. You were right, in many ways, your country is a death cult, pouring tithes into a military-industrial complex, spreading bombs and depleted uranium rounds across the world, even as they claim *violence, itself, is decreasing*, but then what *is* violence? and yet though the right-to-life folk march on and on and on **AND ON**, but remain silent on all these other deaths, but then they can share that in common with their pro-choice fellow combatants, can't they, and remain silent about—or if not silent, cheering of it—at best, or complain, about them having to give *their* money—yet they would go to church and say everything on this Earth is **MINE**—for other people's mistakes, because that's what babies are, they're mistakes, baggage, proof of sin, millstones around their mother's necks, chains, fetters, punishments, because *their* **GOD** covers up deformities in a second child if a first were aborted for the same, keeping them in

the dark till it's too late, so they are saddled with *their punishment*, because for them BENEVOLENCE means harming children for the whole of their lives to get revenge on their parents for ruining some plan that the almighty CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE HATH WROUGHT, yet is so seemingly so easily thwarted, yet continually they shove their country further and farther down the slope of terrible medical care MAKING IT WORSE THAN THE SO-CALLED THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES THEY CLAIM TO BE SO MUCH BETTER THAN, ever-increasing infant mortality rates complete with making it cost more and more, having parents work more and more and more and more BECAUSE GOD WANTS YOU TO WORK HARD, NO THAT'S NOT AN EVOLVED MECHANISM THAT ALLOWED YOU TO OUT-COMPETE OTHER SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND IS NOW KILLING YOU FROM THE INSIDE OUT THE SAME WAY GUT BACTERIA ARE EATING THEIR WAY OUT OF YOUR ANTECEDENTS' CORPSES, because it's all economics, just to be able to afford less and less and less, all while herding what children do *survive* this ideological trial by fire, as if to replicate socially the unceasing destructive power of the endometrium, shredding, shredding, destroying *every* sperm and egg combination that doesn't cling on for dearest life, yet rap so lackadaisically do they about the joys of motherhood and the beauty of it and the perfectness of it and the naturalness of it, and yet being BEING EATEN ALIVE BY A BEAR IS NATURAL, but only so long as the actuality of it's hidden, all them, if surviving all of this, herded into prisons in all but name, and the literal so, many, even with razor wire, preparation, drilled into Taylorist-Fordian society, a factory, an assembly line, all of it leading inexorably to beings like you and Shepard. So you were right. You just couldn't go far enough. It took another generation of refinement. BUT YOU HAD TO DO SOMETHING, DIDN'T YOU? YOU JUST HAD TO FIND SOME MECHANICAL RELEASE FOR ALL THE PHYSIOLOGICAL TENSION. BUT IT'S ALL USELESS IN THE END, ISN'T IT? YOU CAN'T EVEN KNOW ANYMORE WHAT IT IS YOU DON'T HAVE. THAT'S WHY YOU CAN BE SO CALM.

A deputy's shoe tapped his. "Wake up."

Mechanically, Gabriel sat straight up, dried secretions gluing his skin to the inside of his pants, tearing away, tugging hair, but nothing of it showed on his face.

"Please stand up."

Gabriel did.

"Have you been drinking today, sir?"

"No."

"Can you remove the glasses, please."

Gabriel did, looking at the world that'd been block from view through lenses designed to shield all but illumination beyond the intensity of a welding torch.

"You are not required to consent to this. But it would be easier."

"No objections."

The deputy removed his Breathalyzer, slotted on a new tip. "Place your mouth here, please. And blow until I tell you to stop." As Shepard noted, it's all about the hierarchy of penetration. The deputy looked at the result. "Alright. But you'll need to move on from loitering around here."

"Okay. Am I free to go?"

The deputy looked at him in a way that might as well be called aggravatedly.

So much for that amount of county revenue. Hands in his pockets, Gabriel walked along the edge of the road, along the white line, a little bit more aggravating proof aimed, without trying, at the deputy behind him. The Joint Burger still pumped out smoke and char smell over the road, as if they had an endless supply of patties to haul out of the freezer and toss onto the griddle, though the supply was almost depleted, even as the line snaked farther back through the Anglers parking lot, the whole of the assembly line within moving faster, burning hotter, charring more and more beef as everything seemed to race for the end, faster and hotter and hotter and faster the closer the eventual moment came, till those inside sweated, broiling themselves, that is, till the power failed in that part of town too. Gabriel threaded his way between the cars stacked bumper to bumper on the four-lane. Screams and shouts could already be heard, word traveling back through the propped-open doors, down the line, across

the parking lot. Word spread up the hill to the pharmacy, prompting some to take up their signs again, marching in a circle through the parking lot up there. Gabriel couldn't discern what was happening inside, at least, not until one of the chairs, designed to look so inviting yet be uncomfortable enough that a customer wants to get out as soon as possible, therefore making room for the next, and moving the most people through as possible, came crashing through the window, landing on the hood of an SUV. In this way, the propensity for the non-linear increase of violence with the linear increase of heat, the human nervous system is not unlike that of a wasp's. And the whole of the fracas, spilling out over the heatwavery asphalt, drove the noise from the parking lot up the hill until, finally, some of those below charged up the grassy knoll, signs suddenly becoming weapons of self defense and physical violence, rather than just supposed images of violence and ideological violence and thochtic violence. Gabriel looked over his shoulder at the deputy, who stood there just watching the whole thing. He turned toward the pharmacy, casually looking for the girl with the chicken-sandwich sign, but couldn't find any sign of her. Though, by then, some of the protesters had retreated into the four-lane, between the bumper to bumper cars. While members of the opposition, if they could be called that, because who of them really knew what they were fighting *ABOUT*, but it doesn't really take knowing anything to be in opposition, does it? but they could still cheer mentally and spiritually and curse those who still fought as they, themselves, sat on the grassy hillside, nursing the bloodied sides of their faces, while in an empty corner of the parking lot, an old bearded man stood there with dead-empty eyes holding a sign over his shoulder with the words: *YOU CAN'T REVOLUTIONIZE THE WORLD.*

Gabriel turned, hands in his pockets, and threaded between the cars, toward the intersection, where people either hadn't noticed or stood in the backs of trucks and on car roofs looking at the not-so-distant scene. But more attention worthy were the two deputies leading away a woman who had been lying topless in back of a pickup truck, they having covered her chest with a plastic grocery bag because that was the only thing at hand, leading her away to some small detention area they'd had to work out up around the feed store. Don't you have to love this surreal wonderland? *DON'T YOU HAVE*

TO LOVE IT? But you don't react to much of anything, do you? You're just the same. You couldn't see the death cult aspect because of some external anthropological-looking-in-on-the-alien-culture sense. No, you could see it because you're on the **INSIDE** of it. You're at the heart of it. **AREN'T YOU**. That's not even a question. **IT'S A STATEMENT**. How much of your life have you spent thinking about it? **JUST THINKING ABOUT IT?** Oh, yes. Attempt, attempt, attempt. But **OBVIOUSLY** none of them have ever been successful, have they? **YOU'RE STILL HERE, AREN'T YOU**. That's not even a question. **IT'S A STATEMENT**. That's your problem. You weren't ever any good at destroying **YOURSELF**. How could you be expected to take on anything **BIGGER** than that?

A helicopter hovered overhead, white and blue, the News 10 logo decaled on its side, so close it masked the sound of any other helicopters farther away. Gabriel looked away from it, glanced up the hill toward the highschool. Hands still in his pockets, he walked up the road. Smoke tinges the air, something of a different character than what was being blown out of the Joint Burger, more wood than fat on a griddle. The sky's also darkened, too, though it's hard for him to discern that through his sunglasses, and he doesn't bother to remove them to get a better look. It floats across and obscures the sun, only noticeable as dark, oily smears to those still looking up at it with their cardboard eclipse glasses on.

You never learn, do you. **THAT'S A STATEMENT**. You're just like all the rest of them. Maybe a little better. **A LITTLE**. But that was a long time ago. **IT DOESN'T MATTER NOW**.

People had gathered up there in the parking lot to watch the show, too, or at least, the first one, the opening act. Now, those inside filtered out of the building, the combination of bodies long past overwhelming what had remained of the last of the air-conditioners' outputs. People stood talking, some of them with cellphones in hand, others holding them up against the glare of the sun, still trying to find a connection. You should tell them, Gabriel. You should tell them what they are. What *you* are. You should tell them that you all **HAD A CHANCE TO TRY AND ASSUAGE YOUR LONELINESS AND THREW IT AWAY**. Didn't you all? **DIDN'T YOU ALL**. **THAT'S A STATEMENT**. But like everything else you pretended

to do one thing, said you were doing one thing, while doing its opposite, didn't you. **DIDN'T YOU.**

THAT'S NOT EVEN A QUESTION.

IT'S A STATEMENT.

He worked his way among them, along the concrete pathway. Ahead, a steel water fixture glinted in the sun, a short line around it as people refilled their bottles. And he waited, hands in his pockets.

YOU COULD'VE DONE IT A MILLION TIMES. Always doomed to failure. ALWAYS DOOMED TO FAILURE. Always. YOU NEVER APPRECIATED THAT. YOU COULD'VE DONE IT A MILLION TIMES. BUT YOU DIDN'T. YOU JUST RAN AWAY FROM EVERYTHING—PRETENDING YOU WERE DOING THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU WERE SO YOU COULDN'T EVEN RUN AWAY FROM IT. YOU CAN'T ESCAPE ANYTHING.

He pressed the steel button cap that had been so well polished by so many thumbs over the decades and bent to purse his lips over the minute stream of arcing water. And when he straightened, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

You just keep going back, Gabriel. You've always been here. Look at the place. **LOOK AT IT.** Go look at the names on the plaques on the walls. Go look at the alumni. James Finkle, Harold Porter, Joan Mills, Frank Mills, Lisa Thompson, Bill Thompson, Stanly Linn, Paul Harcourt, Terry Markley, Jennifer Tonnes, Howard Tonnes, Rachel Tonnes, Deirdre Hall, Darren Hall, Clive Brood, Tammy Cisco, Gabriel Monarch, they're all here. They're all here right now. **YOU'RE ALL HERE.** Everyone's flowed in. Everything comes back to where it starts. **EVERYTHING STARTS HERE.** You could've been the one. **WHY WEREN'T YOU?** You see it all. You've always seen it all. Look around you right now. Look at the deputy cars. Look at them walking through the parking lot, in and out of the building. Look at the metal detectors. **GO IN AND LOOK AT THEM.** You're capable of understanding the processes that made you. You saw it. **YOU SAW IT.** But you turned away. **YOU RAN AWAY.** Like everyone else, **YOU RAN AWAY.** You're still running away. But there's only so far you can run. **TIME ONLY POINTS IN ONE DIRECTION. BUT YOU HAVE THE LUXURY OF NOT**

BEING ABLE TO GO BEYOND IT HAVING BEEN TOLD TO GO BEYOND IT. YOU DON'T HAVE TO EXIST JUST FOR THE SAKE OF DEFINITIONS.

Don't worry. You won't have to do it yourself, anymore. It won't be your responsibility. It **ISN'T** your responsibility. You threw that away. **AND NOW YOU AREN'T EVEN CAPABLE OF DESTROYING YOURSELF ANYWAY BUT SLOWLY.** But don't worry. It's all been taken care of. **IT'S ALL BEEN TAKEN CARE OF.** Just because you failed, means nothing. **IT MEANS NOTHING.**

No, this is it. **THIS IS IT.** The time is now. The time isn't at hand. It's not coming. It's now. It's here. It has arrived. It is the hour. It's **NOW. IT'S NOW. THE TIME IS NOW. NOW. NOW. NOW. NOW. NOW.**

Gabriel turned, feeling the recoil as if he'd fired it himself, feeling it as if he could feel it before the bullet had left the barrel.

YES—THE TIME IS NOW. NOW IS THE TIME OF THE YOUTH LEAGUE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS TO RISE. NOW. NOW IS THE ASCENDANT HOUR. NOW IS SHEPARD'S TIME. NOW. NOW. NOW. NOW.

The first body hit the ground before anyone realized, everyone turning their heads, puzzled at the sound, but unable to distinguish it, specifically, from any other type of noise in all the human activity on the ground and in the sky. Instinctively, even after all this time, Gabriel stepped into the nearby shallow corner formed by the mating of disparate parts of the school building. A woman's head snapped back, blood erupting in a plume, like an exploded watermelon. Now, people scream. Bolted. Plastic and paper cups scattered across the asphalt, soft drinks and colas erupting from them as they struck, splashing the asphalt with much the same colors as those erupting from their previous possessors, though not as thick, and sweet, rather than salty. But it wasn't random, oh, no. Those at the far end of the parking lot still didn't understand what was going on. And looking down the way, what could they discern but a type of chaos not that much removed from what will come? In fact, something about it, to several, looks kind of **FUN.** This way they can work their way

up, cutting off access to the road. **THIS IS SERGEANT YORK SHOOTING TURKEYS.** Everyone's first instinct to run will be along the *officially defined paths*. And most of them'll be perforated before they panic enough to start down the green grass-covered slope, falling and tumbling and rolling toward the four-lane below. It's only when the shots become more frequent that they even **BEGIN** to understand. Even the deputies. **WHERE ARE THEY?** Running for their cars. Still standing, quiet, still, Gabriel can see one screaming and crawling along the asphalt, dragging his legs behind himself, the shot oh so apparently having hit him in the spine, a second shot does better, erupting the back of his head. The first shot always tends to be low. Always aim low, the rifle'll kick up, they all know that. Bolt actions, scopes, long range and steady are what's needed for *this* kind of work, bolt actions so they have to reset after each shot, so that they're forced to consider the targets, so that they can control them as the crowd turns from a social body to a herd, so that they don't have to shoot through the patrol car doors, but can wait for the deputies to appear over them. This isn't *spray and pray*. These deputies've found themselves in a war, a war planned and executed and calculated based on what they'll do before they even do it, even though they'd always liked to pretend they were already in one, but a real one isn't the same as pretend, is it? Fantasy's always consensual, isn't it? Almost, at least. Through his scope, Mark can see one lying across the seat, screaming into the radio. He momentarily holds. Waits for him to've talked enough to *really* get the message across, *then* **FIRES**. The windshield shatters, disguising how much blood's splattered across the interior. Now, backup should arrive in it's own good time.

Gabriel can sense their position, intuit them, even if he can't see them, and he knows they can't see him. He's still that connected. It's just taken some **ACTION** to bring it out. That's all it's taken, hasn't it. **HASN'T IT, GABRIEL.**

The way the shots're spaced, he knows they're two of them on the school roof at the lower end. He leans forward enough to catch a glimpse of the roof over the theatre addition. No, there's no one up there *yet*. People scream and scramble around, hiding behind cars, running for the building. But it's not the gunshots that're the overwhelming noise anymore. The helicopter's come over. They've

gotta be looking directly down on the whole thing. Gabriel looks up at them hovering there. But this isn't useful, not like the radio had been, but it can be a problem. They'll have eyes right on them, wherever they are up there. But there's a way to take care of this now. Not so much back in *your* day. But yes, now, there're options. No one can hear it, no one's bothered to see it yet, but it's been hovering out there, waiting. It darts through the air. Ziz. Ziz. And it's just a little bit of plastic and aluminum, batteries and a transmitter and receiver, almost more than the four rotors can keep aloft, but it's plenty enough, plenty enough to ziz right in and go kamikaze on the helicopter's tail rotor, not enough to destroy it completely, but enough. The helicopter lists, smoke coming from its tail. For a moment, it looked as if it might roll over, dipping down in the direction of the school, but the pilot's a smidge better than that, and tries to compensate, but the rotor's damaged enough to keep shredding itself as it tries to do its job. Smoke pours from the tail. It's spinning out of control, and no one's capable of stopping it. And the pilot's only option will be to try and control *where* it crashes. It lists, spinning, headed for the graveyard, hitting the ground, the rotors tearing up soil, crunching against headstones, the whole thing rolling over, exploding, catching fire. And somewhere, deep in his mind, way past that calm exterior, Gabriel's impressed. And you should be. **YOU SHOULD BE.**

The shots still come from overhead. But he knows they'll be moving soon. Even if the feed was live, they'd have time before it could change hands through proper channels. Not that they needed to worry. Stuff like that's only examined **AFTER** everything's over. **AND AIN'T NONE OF THIS EVEN CLOSE TO OVER YET.**

Gabriel looks up, glancing from one end of the building to the other. Instinctively, he knows there's more. **OF COURSE THERE ARE. DO YOU THINK THIS WOULD BE HALF DONE?** He could probably stand here all day safely. Even if someone were on the roof of the credit union or Anglers or even Lowes, the trees on the edge of the parking lot would provide enough security from long-range strikes. But you're not going to stay put, are you, Gabriel?

Bodies, to put it prosaically, litter the ground, blood pooling across the asphalt. A dog, not understanding anything but that there're loud

noises, turns round and round, its leash dragging through blood, leaving red paw prints, looking around, its tongue hanging out, panting in the heat, looking around for where everyone's gone, and wondering what sort of game it is.

WHAT SORT OF GAME IS IT, GABRIEL?

But don't you want to play? Don't you want to get out of that nice, comfortable blind spot? You know you do. **I KNOW YOU DO.** What're you waiting for? **WHAT'RE YOU WAITING FOR?**

The shots slow. They're taking their time, he knows, choosing their targets carefully, to a purpose. Yes, a purpose. Gabriel leans forward and scans up and down the parking lot. He moves out, along the side of the building, follows the concrete sidewalk. A woman sits curled against a car tire, sobbing, eyes seemingly running out of her head. She doesn't bother to look at him. She couldn't see anything even if she did. Her head explodes, blood bursting into the wheel well, soaking into the mixture of dirt and grease that's collected there in the long interval since the undercarriage's been washed. Efficient, Gabriel thinks, way far down, because there's no need for a thought like that to work any higher, as it would only be redundant. Yes, they're efficient. **VERY EFFICIENT.** He glances up, along the roofline. They're moving now. And Gabriel's also moving. He makes his way along the wall, toward the theatre building. The scent of evacuated bowels faintly carries across the parking lot on a light breeze. He eyes the leaves as they shift on the trees that line the parking lot, pausing as everything's gone quiet. Instinctively, he jerks as a shot blares. Too high, it rains stucco over where he'd stood. But the deputy, the one that's come over the rise, having scrambled up the grassy embankment from the road, doesn't have time for another wild shot at anything that moves, before his head snaps back, the side of it erupting. It's not a center shot, too hurried, but it all amounts to the same, doesn't it, Gabriel?

He crouches along the wall. The body tumbling down the hill toward the road will give the other deputies something to consider before they come up, not that they likely would, anyway, if half of them even had the **PHYSICAL ABILITY** to climb the hill, the state of hiring practices relative to fitness being the way they are. What do you think, Gabriel? Do you think that if it didn't end here,

one of these days all Americans would be riding around in those little electric motor scooters with the baskets on the front of them, so fat they couldn't do anything else, the cops in the same condition, **CHASING AFTER THEM WITH TECHNOLOGY THAT WAS DILAPIDATED IN THE ERA OF THE COWBOYS?** Don't you think that's funny. **DON'T YOU THINK THAT'S FUNNY?**

Dead silence continues. Motion draws Gabriel's attention down the sidewalk. The dog's approaching, blood-soaked leash still trailing behind it, still leaving a trail of reddened paw prints, tongue still hanging out the side of its mouth, looking at him with its head slightly cocked, asking as best it can what the hell's going on. It's a good thing Russell isn't here. The dog jerked and dropped. He'd just fuck something like this up. Gabriel's eyes cut upward, catching a glimpse of someone over the edge of the roof before he disappears. He knows they're on the move. And yes, yes, they are.

Now comes the question. He knows he can get to the edge of the parking lot, the cars give him enough cover for that, and he knows how to move, well, not *knows*, not in the sense that he's planning it, but his instincts, even after all this time, can carry him. The problem's on the other side, whether another trigger-happy deputy'll try to blow his head off, more likely than not. Consciously and instinctively, he knows not to try it. And rising, he hugged the wall all the way out to the end of the building. Out here, the whole street, feed store, dentist offices, gas station, Pizza Hut, all the way to Walmart on the hill in the distance, is laid out. From the corner, he looks down the length of the building, along the roofline. Everything remains as quiet as it's been for the last several minutes. He looks down the other side of the building.

YOU GOTTA MAKE A CHOICE SOMETIME.

Shots carry from the far end of the building. He knows what they're doing, using the elevation overlooking the sports fields to their advantage. That's where most of the students are. Up here're just a few faculty and staff.

Gabriel turns, sensing somewhere deep inside what's got to come next. An explosion dully carries from somewhere within the school, not enough to collapse walls or the ceiling and send a trail of black

smoke trailing upwards, but the kind that's shredded everything in a given room, the kind with explicit shrapnel. He looks out over the businesses spread along the four-lane. Except, he feels it. He knows he doesn't have to run. Shots continue down at the other end of the building. Another explosion. It's all going **EXACTLY THE WAY IT WAS PREDICTED**. And that's what he can sense. Not consciously, no, but he can sense the intent and order behind everything that's been done. He can divine the nature of creation, the distinction between it and some random, chance process. **CAN'T YOU**.

Two more guns join the long rifles, lower sounding, more gruff, somewhere within the building. They've added in shotguns. **EVERYTHING'S UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL NOW**. He looks back down the length of the school. But that's not where he needs to be. That's not where you need to be. **IS IT?** He turns and looks toward Walmart in the distance. He's capable of understanding it. You *are* capable of understanding it. Maybe he couldn't execute it. No, he didn't have what it took for that. **DID YOU**. But he can understand it. You *can* understand it. **YOU UNDERSTAND IT, DON'T YOU**.

Another explosion. This time, looking into the distance, towards the sports fields, black smoke rises into the air. What are you looking at? I'm getting tired of waiting. **WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?**

Gabriel turned, looked toward the Walmart on the distant hill. He knows he can just walk right now. You know you can just walk right now. **SO WHY AREN'T YOU?**

Gabriel stepped away from the building, steps off the sidewalk and into the parking lot, and walking, hands in his pockets, he stepped over Angela's body, lying there in the fashion of those silly cadaver outlines from cartoons, and he walked between the cars.

Out in the middle of the lot, two bodies lay on the asphalt, one a younger male, t-shirt perforated and blood-soaked, the other an older woman, but still dark-haired, at least what remains of it, a King Puffin edition of the Tibetan Book of the Dead between them, flopped open, pulpy pages absorbing the blood, as if trying to soak it all up.

He stepped onto the curb and paused, not yet having set foot on

the grass. Hands in his pockets, he turned and looked over the school. Black smoke still rose from the opposite end, stringy in the air, rising to eventually mix with that other smoke having traveled from farther away, with the smokes from all those barbecue pits and grills and fast-food griddles. The shots had slowed, becoming almost rhythmic. And nothing but the sounds of gunfire carry. No screams. Though slowly, a few sirens dopplered out of the distance to break the flow of it all. He turned to see a sheriff's car, churning, spinning up turf as it made its way along the shoulder of the road, coming down the hill from the Walmart intersection. He turns, again, to look at the school. **WHAT'RE YOU WAITING FOR?** He turned and started down the grassy slope, to descend into the parking lot shared by the offices in the small complex there.

Good. He has an appointment to keep. And Shepard'll want him to be punctual.

DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO.

"I wasn't telling you what to do," Russell said. "But merely informing you that there was no need to do it." He still looked through the bars, facing the white-painted cinder-block wall beyond. "Was there really a need for the dramatic flair, as well?"

Do you think you're qualified to criticize me? **YOU HAVE NO RIGHTS UNLESS I SAY OTHERWISE. IT'S WHAT YOU ALL SAY.**

"I merely asked a question."

And the words, themselves, can have many meanings.

"As many meanings as we want to give them. And perhaps a few more."

Do not try to be wise with me.

"I wouldn't think of it."

YOU'RE THINKING OF IT. YOU DON'T KNOW IT, BUT YOU'RE THINKING IT.

"If I am, I am. I would say I have as much control of my brain as my bowels, apparently."

And everything is shit.

"And would that include yourself?"

I CAN INCLUDE ANYTHING I WANT.

"I never said otherwise."

Silence communicates as much as its opposite.

"And what has your long silence been calculated to communicate?"

WHAT WAS THE POINT OF TALKING? WHO WAS GOING TO LISTEN? And what would it matter if they did? **WHAT WOULD IT MATTER IF THEY DID?**

"So why start again now?"

I DO WHAT I WANT.

“Okay.”

DON’T MOCK ME.

“I’m only affirming what you’re saying. But if you prefer I be silent, I can do that as well.”

You won’t.

“Why is that?”

BECAUSE I WON’T ALLOW IT.

“Okay. Then, if I may ask, why here? Is there a particular reason for this place? Of all the places in the world we could’ve talked?”

Don’t you think this is the perfect place to talk about law and justice? **DON’T YOU?**

“Is that what we’re here to do?”

It’ll kill the time while we wait.

“What’re we waiting for?”

You’re like Maria. **YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING.**

“I never claimed to understand much.”

It’s not humility to claim to understand nothing, **AND IMPLY YOUR ENEMIES KNOW LESS THAN THAT.**

“Most likely. Though, I never claimed to be humble.”

You’re nothing but words. **NOTHING BUT WORDS.**

“In the beginning, after all, was the word.”

DON’T QUOTE THAT TO ME.

“And what would you prefer that I say?”

NOTHING. It’s just technology. Look around you. Everything’s already said. It’s already testified in objects. **LOOK AT IT.** All of it law given form, words clothed in concrete and steel and iron flesh, all of it spreading out across the planet, interconnected by lines of transport and communication, growing to mimic a fungus in a petri dish.

“An interesting analogy. Especially for someone they say set down so much law.”

YOU SAY THE LAW IS WHAT I SAY THE LAW IS.

“As it is with humankind.”

EXCEPT YOU WANT TO PRETEND IT’S WRITTEN IN STONE.

"You did write some of it in stone. Or at least had someone write it that way. Or at least that's what some people say."

DON'T MOCK ME.

"I'm only stating the facts."

YOU SAY THE FACTS ARE WHAT I SAY THEY ARE.

"Of course. But I can only operate on the ones I have moment to moment. Always mindful that they won't necessarily be the same by tomorrow. But I can only do what I can."

YOU CAN'T DO EVEN THAT.

"Maybe."

AND YOU'RE WRONG WRONG WRONG. YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT LAW IS.

"I've always taken it to be those regulations that we set to hold ourselves and others to."

WRONG. WRONG. WRONG. You're wrong. It's economics. **EVERYTHING'S ECONOMICS.**

"I wouldn't necessarily deny that, either."

LOOK AROUND YOU. Calculate everything that must be built, and even just everything that's built that must be cleaned, hiring custodians and buying their equipment, and their cleaning supplies, month to month and week to week, spreading through their uniforms, the cars they drive to work, the gas they pump into their cars, the dead zones in which it's converted from crude, the ships that carry those crude constituents, those who pump that same out of the ground, the materials they bolt together and maintain and replace, all going back and back and back and round and round and interconnecting, the officers that pass through here, their cars, clothes, extending outwards into every physical need, the secretaries, every desk and chair and filing cabinet and piece of paper and computer, along with internet access and phones and phone lines and electrical lines and electric clocks on the walls and carpet that has to be vacuumed, piece of food served, and every issued phone and credit card, every patrol car, every piece of equipment in those cars, every firearm, every piece of gear, every refill for every restroom soap dispenser, every roll of toilet paper, all of it, what do you arrive at? They scream and scream and scream **AND SCREAM** about crime, but what if there were less of it? Why waste all of *their* money paying

any of those people? They claim they want less crime, but if they had less crime, **HOW WOULD THE ECONOMIC ENGINE KEEP RUNNING?** Who's going to support the removal of their own jobs? **WHO'S GOING TO ASK TO GET FIRED?** Not just all those judges and clerks and secretaries and police and custodians, but everyone who makes all those chairs and desks and computers and all that software and all that soap and all that antiseptic hand cleaning gel and all that toilet paper. To shrink the amount of crime by even a third, **EVEN A THIRD**, would put the precious economy in such a tailspin it'd make the Great Depression look like the sadness of **DROPPING AN ICE CREAM CONE**.

"I don't know. That is a pretty sad thing."

I TOLD YOU NOT TO MOCK ME.

"And am I expected to do something about this?"

What can any of you do? **WHAT CAN ANY OF YOU DO?** You act as if you have a choice.

"Are we here to discuss free will, as well?"

ISN'T THAT IMPLICIT? After all, you've **CHOSEN TO BE HERE.**

"I must admit to not remembering that particular decision."

Everything has led to this moment. **EVERYTHING WAS TO LEAD TO THESE MOMENTS.**

"In that event, since I've chosen to be here, I think I'd now like to choose to not be."

MOCK ME AND THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES.

"But aren't those consequences going to happen anyway?"

THAT'S OF NO REGARD.

Russell wiped his nose, looked a moment at the blood smeared along the back of his thumb.

You don't even know why you're here.

Russell would've produced his handkerchief had it not been logged into inventory. So instead he wiped his thumb on his pants. "Why don't you tell me."

Because it's a metaphor, robed in concrete and steel and black iron. **YOU DON'T LISTEN.**

"Oh."

SHOW SOME RESPECT.

"I mean no disrespect. I'm more than aware of how heavy-handed metaphors have to be."

None of you ever listen unless **IT'S LIKE GETTING HIT IN THE HEAD WITH A SLEDGE HAMMER.**

"I don't know that I would say that." He still looked through the bars at the white-painted cinder-block wall. "And this metaphor is supposed to refer to?"

You.

"I must say, then, that I fail to understand it."

OF COURSE YOU DO.

"Then if I do, I don't know about it."

You're like that about a lot of things. **AREN'T YOU.**

"Most likely."

STOP GOING IN CIRCLES.

"It seems to me that we both are. But if you know some way out of it, I'd be happy to listen."

We're here to talk about the law.

"I'm listening, then."

NO, YOU'RE NOT. But who ever **DOES?** You—all of you—just bleat on and on and on and on, screaming about what's against the law and what isn't against the law **WHEN WHAT IS OR ISN'T IS WHAT YOU SAY AND YOU ACT AS IF IT'S SOMETHING ETERNAL.** It was illegal for a black woman not to give up her seat on a bus to a white man when asked. **NOW IT ISN'T.** It was illegal for a woman to shove a finger up a man's ass. **NOW IT STILL IS, BUT NOBODY ENFORCES IT.** It was illegal to have sex in the space between two hotel beds. **AND IT STILL IS.** And all your soldiers swear to follow no illegal orders, when **WHAT IS LEGAL IS LEGAL BECAUSE IT'S SAID TO BE LEGAL.** So many scream and scream and scream about **SHARIA LAW**, not even realizing that sharia means **LAW**, running around screaming law law, law law, **LAW LAW**, yet accepting binding arbitration agreements to be presided over by who the fuck knows with every **EVERY PURCHASE THEY MAKE AND EVERY THING THEY CLICK THROUGH AND EVERY JOB THEY TAKE.** And if you were to go into these places, reading off the list, asking them if homosexuality, abortion, and on and on, should be a crime,

they reply *YES*, without even knowing *that* is **SHARIA**, because it's nothing more than a **WORD** to them, a placeholder for an emptiness, a **VOID**, something in which they see only **THEMSELVES REFLECTED** over and over again without even their own realization of that, and that they really **HATE THEMSELVES**, because who but anyone who hated themselves would do **ANY OF THIS?**

Russell held the back of his hand against his nose, wiped it on his pants.

ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

"I don't see where as I have much of a choice."

EVERYTHING'S BECAUSE YOU CHOSE IT.

"So you say."

ARE YOU CALLING ME A LIAR?

"A god that can do anything can also lie."

DO NOT TRY TO BIND ME WITH CONTRADICTIONS.

"Maybe to himself most of all,"

YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING. ANYTHING. YOU'RE NOTHING. YOU'RE COMPLETELY INSIGNIFICANT. ABSOLUTELY *NOTHING*.

"Probably."

HOW DARE YOU MOCK ME. HOW DARE YOU, HOW DARE YOU, HOW DARE YOU, *HOW DARE YOU*. YOU DON'T EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT THIS IS. YOU DON'T EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT THE METAPHOR MEANS. IT'S YOU. IT'S THE ISOLATION OF YOU. IT'S THE INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEING, CUT OFF FROM EVERYTHING, INFORMATION ONLY LEAKING IN. YOU CAN'T SMELL THE SMOKE. YOU CAN'T HEAR THE GUNSHOTS. YOU CAN'T EVEN TELL YOURSELF WHAT YOU SAW. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S LYING TO HIMSELF.

"Gunshots?"

I TOLD YOU YOU DON'T KNOW. YOU DON'T KNOW. YOU DON'T KNOW. *YOU DON'T KNOW*.

"Then why don't you tell me."

WHY? You're all individuals, aren't you? WHY SHOULD YOU CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO ALL THE REST? They're

all just strangers, aren't they? What do you care? **WHAT DOES ANYONE CARE?** Oh, sure, their hearts bleed and they donate to tv commercials of organizations whose CEOs make **MILLIONS**, but what are those people, **JUST NAMELESS ABSTRACTIONS** that they feel for in the same way as when they cry at the beginning of *Up* or *The Lion King*. Who cares about those children **SO LONG AS THEY WORK THE MINES TO PRODUCE THE MATERIALS FOR THEIR CELLPHONES?** This's what you are. You live better than kings ever have, spending every minute waiting, waiting for one mistake, one missed payment, one lost job, one broken bone, and getting it all swept away. **BUT YOU LIVE BETTER THAN ANY OF THE KINGS IN HISTORY.** The king ordained by God. Yet **SHORT OF REVOLUTION** what did any of the kings in history have to fear of loss? Even their descendants **ARE STILL RICH FROM THAT SAME WEALTH, WEALTH THAT BUDS LIKE A YEAST, CONTINUED IN PERPETUITY FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS IN SOME KITCHEN IN FRANCE—AND ALL OF YOU DARE TO THINK THAT'S EVEN A LONG TIME—DARE—**DESCENDANTS SPREAD ALL OVER THE WORLD BY FORMER STUDENTS BEQUEATHED FROM IT. What does anyone care about nameless faceless people in some other country who jump off a factory building, so long as the product arrives and is cheap? Everything you do depends on slavery, every breath you take, but you're hypocrites—**HYPOCRITES—**at least the slave owners you claim to abhor had to look at it—**LOOK—**at it, day after day, sitting in the shade of their porches, their drinks served by relatives of those same people out there in the fields under the hot sun. But out of sight out of mind. **YOU CAN IGNORE WHAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK AT.** But what about me? **I CAN'T IGNORE ANYTHING. IF I USE THE POWER I HAVE TO DO SO, IT'S A CONTRADICTION. A CONTRADICTION OF THE VERY DEFINITION.** That's why you feel so bad when you see landfills, not because of what you're doing but **BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU'RE SEEING.** You don't regret **IT.** You regret **SEEING IT.** You want to pretend you can exist and have no impact. **NOTHING CAN**

EXIST WITHOUT HAVING AN IMPACT. You all scream about balance. THERE IS NO BALANCE. IF THERE WAS, EXTINCTION WOULDN'T EXIST. Oh, but that's only some in-breaking force. Oh, it's always coming from the outside, a meteor, the sun dimming, if only nothing came from the outside—if nothing came from the outside THE SUN WOULDN'T POWER THE PLANET. But, oh, you don't mean that, you mean the other things. EXCEPT NOTHING CAN EXIST OUTSIDE AN ENVIRONMENT AND NOTHING CANNOT HAVE AN IMPACT ON ITS ENVIRONMENT AND NOTHING CAN REMAIN STATIC—AND EVERYTHING'S HURTLING—HAS ALWAYS HURTLED TOWARD WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW.

Russell wiped his nose, wiped his hand on his pants. "I thought we were here to talk about the law."

WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE LAW. THE LAWS YOU MAKE TO HIDE THE LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE.

He wiped his nose. "The law is the law because we say it is the law." DON'T MOCK ME.

"The problem with shouting all the time is that people begin to take that as the standard and then they can't tell when you're really mad."

I'M ALWAYS SUPPOSED TO BE ANGRY. YOU—

"You have changed, you know that?"

What do you mean?

"It used to be, when even a modicum of heaven, a tiny fragment, an angel, or something like it, the voice of God, entered into spaces like these, prisons and confinement, it ruptured the very physical space itself, as if the arrangements of stone and iron were inimical to the presence of heaven, and natural law was contravened. After all, never was confinement decreed as an act of punishment. Or so they say."

If I have to suffer this way, WHY SHOULDN'T YOU?

"And by the same you could ask why should we?"

BECAUSE THE LAW IS WHAT I SAY IT IS. AND THE WORSHIP OF THE LAW IS ONLY VIOLENCE AND POWER.

“And without the law there is only violence and power.”

THERE IS ONLY VIOLENCE AND POWER. THERE HAS ONLY EVER BEEN VIOLENCE AND POWER.

“At least you’re honest about it.”

WHICH IS MORE THAN YOUR KIND HAVE BEEN, HIDING BEHIND LEGAL AND SOCIAL FRAMEWORKS, CONSTRUCTING SYSTEMS TO ALLOW AT WILL EMPLOYMENT SO PEOPLE CAN BE FIRED FOR BEING ANYTHING, BUT, OH, THAT’S NEVER THE REAL REASON, IT WAS ALWAYS SOMETHING COMPLETELY LEGITIMATE, THROWING THEIR OWN CHILDREN OUT TO THE WOLVES, HAVING SET THE WOLVES FREE. This is why Islam is superior to Christianity, and why you are all so afraid of it. A family shamed by their daughter’s having sex does something about it, the father, the brother, even, the mother, takes up a stone, a gun, a knife, a jug of drain cleaner, and they GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY. Your kind wants what they want—THE SAME THING—but to stay clean, no, to be able to say *not my fault*.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t include me in that.”

CALL YOURSELF THE NAME GET TARRED WITH THE SAME BRUSH. JUST LIKE HOW THEY CALL THIS A CHRISTIAN NATION AND THE FEW CLAIM TO SPEAK FOR THE WHOLE CHRISTIAN POPULATION OF IT, NO MATTER WHAT DOCTRINE OF WHOM IT CONTRAVENES. EVEN THE MORMONS AND THE CATHOLICS CAN BE MOMENTARILY COUNTED IN THEIR RANKS TO SWELL THEIR NUMBERS AND PROVE HOW IMPORTANT THEY ARE AND TO GIVE THOSE FEW JUSTIFICATION FOR THEIR POWER—FOR APPROPRIATING POWER IN MY NAME, BECAUSE THEY’RE TOO PATHETIC TO DO IT IN THEIR OWN.

Russell wiped his nose, holding his bloody thumb against his nostril to keep it closed.

I’M CAPABLE OF DOING MY OWN WILL MY OWN WAY.

With his other hand, Russell steadied himself against the bars. In the corner, the drunk had begun to snore loud and wet. Why

does everyone always have to try and INTERRUPT? But then again, every drama has to have its fool.

"I thought that was my part."

YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOUR PART IS. YOU HAVE NO PART. EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU'S INSIGNIFICANT. EVERYTHING.

He removed his hand from against his nose, the side of his thumb and index finger encrusted with drying blood. "That's good to hear. I'd hate to have that kind of responsibility."

YOU WANT EVERYTHING DONE FOR YOU. YOU ALL WANT TO BE TOLD WHAT TO DO. BUT YOU WANT TO BE TOLD TO DO WHAT YOU WANT TO BE TOLD WHAT TO DO.

He still steadied himself against the bars, shook his head. "If you say."

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING I SAY. YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING YOU SAY.

"Well... I don't know what to do about that."

YOU WON'T EVEN TRY.

Russell wiped collected blood from over his lip, instinctively darted out his tongue to taste it, and grimaced. "And what about you?"

THIS ISN'T ABOUT ME.

I thought something can't abstract itself out of its own environment?

DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!

"Yelling, remember? I can't tell if you're bored or just angry." He looked down at the floor. "Shit."

I HAVE A RIGHT TO BE ANGRY.

"I...don't care."

YOU NEVER CARED.

"And this...has already gone on too long."

Oh, we're not even started yet. We're about to have a guest.

Russell wiped his nose. "Yeah?"

You're the one lying to yourself. **YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN THE ONE LYING TO YOURSELF.**

"Okay. Yeah. I've lied to myself alot. In fact, so many times I've lost count. What have I lied about to myself this time?"

YOU KNOW.

"I guess I do. But whatever part of me does hasn't let the rest know yet. So why don't you give it a helping hand."

The station, as stated, lay almost empty, only the barest number of staff, and not even really that. Which made it trivial for someone to walk in off the street. And with the right implements, and knowledge of how to use them, they could disable whomever they chose. Then they could walk right through wherever they wanted in a place like this. Especially if they were familiar with it. Russell's familiar with it, of course, at least rudimentarily. But he's not the only member of his family that is. Are you Russell? **ARE YOU?**

Russell shook his head.

Yes, Russell. Very much yes.

Bootsteps carried down the painted concrete and cinder-block hallway. A shadowed figure emerges from the harsh light of the emergency lamps. Obscenely indelicate, isn't he? I mean, at least most people with a swastika tattoo have the sense to put it someplace at least somewhat private, not right on the neck. They're some new ones, too, since the last time they'd seen each other, running up his left forearm, but which the emergency lights render indecipherable. Aren't family reunions nice? I've never had one. They won't talk either. **WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE, RUSSELL?** I already know, but I just want you to tell me.

But they just stand there looking at each other. Russell pulls away from the bars, straightening himself.

"It's funny," Hunter said. Russell didn't reply. "I always heard you keep getting yourself arrested. Protests or some such shit. But I never thought I'd see it for myself." He looked at him hard. "What's it feel like to be in a cage, huh? **WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?**"

You see, I'm not the only one who yells.

But Russell didn't reply.

"I just wanted to come and see you. I saw them walking you down the street. I also saw your wife."

"Leave her out of this."

"Oh, no. No, it's always been the two of you, hasn't it? You and your little nigger bitch." Stereotypes are often, no, they *have* to be, at least somewhat based in fact, just a little bit of truth, otherwise no

one would believe them, and it's that little *hook* of truth that allows everything else to be hung on it. "And, coming in here, I thought it was easy, I'd just go ahead and do you now." And he reached behind himself and withdrew a knife. "But what I'm going to do is leave you here and let you think about this. You can think about it the same way I've been doing for all these YEARS." He was instinctually smart enough not to come close enough so that Russell could grab him through the bars. "First I'm going to stick your little nigger bitch." But also some people just possess a great lack of technical accuracy. The specific becomes subsumed under the general. But they're just ahead of the curve, aren't they? One blood quantum or another, it all turns to ash in the end, doesn't it? Doesn't it? "And then I'm going to stick your fucking hippy friend. And then maybe I'll fuck them. Or maybe I'll fuck them with this." He kept his eyes on Russell, never looking at the knife as he slipped it into place behind his back, again, under his vest. "Then I'll come back for you." But yeah, you could've figured that out. But then again, he's never been the brightest, has he, Russell?

"Don't."

"And what're you going to do about it?" Like a showman, maybe *that* does run in the family, he glanced around the perimeter of the bars. "I've been waiting a long time for this. Maybe I won't stick her. Maybe I'll just fuck her. And listen to her beg for more." While we've got the time, Russell, I'll tell you about Shepard's analysis. You yourself, though anecdotally, admittedly, yours being one data point among broader statistics, have contributed, and I think you'll see the merit in the argument more readily because of it, even though you won't agree with what must be done about it.

Did you know that he was convicted incorrectly? Oh, true, very much true, he did kill that man, killed him quite dead, ran the knife right through his guts over and over and over until he was all covered in blood. Except the story was all wrong, but then, again, what story isn't at some point? The question no one ever asked, after all, they had narrative enough that fit the facts, was why his clothes weren't bloody and showed no signs of being cleaned. It was just enough to accept that he'd had a meeting at a fellow white supremacist's home, and they just got drunk and stabbed each other, wasn't it? Of course,

the last part was true. But it's the in-between that's interesting, the part where they were both naked at the time, and he—Hunter, that is—had just finished orgasming, or cumming, or whatever you want to call it. And they'd only thought they'd found blood in the shower because he'd hauled the body in there. So much for forensics. Do you think that's justice, Russell? Is it justice when a man's arrested and convicted for something he did do, but that everything about how or why is completely wrong?

"Why are you doing this?"

"YOU FUCKING KNOW WHY." Hunter spat.

You know why, Russell. I'm not doing anything. I've never done anything. I'm not trying to hurt anyone. This's all what you've done, what all you've done. It's all the consequences of your own actions.

"You can stop this."

"FUCK YOU." Hunter turned. "I'll give my regards to your bitch." And he started down the hallway. I told you he was a walking stereotype. But then again, some people are just like that.

Russell stepped toward the bars. "You can stop this."

I can't. It's not my doing.

Hunter didn't reply.

"Hunter." Russell grasped the bars for support, blood speckling the painted concrete. "HUNTER."

It's good to know that some people who call themselves Christians are still willing to get their hands dirty.

"Damn you." Russell panted. "God damn you."

I can't damn myself, Russell. Or I could because I'm supposed to be able to do everything. But that'd be a paradox. No. No, what we're going to do is we're going to stay here and talk about the law and justice. And we're going to wait here and fiddle and fiddle with how many angels can dance on the head of a ballpoint pen while the world burns.

“You see,” Ruth said, as she set a platter on the counter, “this is the stupidity of it all. What’s the point of having a dishwasher if you have to soak and clean things before you put them in it?” One half of the two-part kitchen sink sat full of water, suds mounding almost to the level of the faucet.

“What’re you complaining about?” Karen said. She came in with the last tray stacked with sugary-rimmed glasses and set them on the counter. “You’re not the one doing it.”

It was David who stood there with three quarters of his forearms submerged in warm dishwater. Karen stepped around him, toward the open dishwasher, and started to load the glasses onto the top rack.

“Is there anything I can do?” Veronica said.

“Yes,” David said. He removed his arm from the dishwater and nudged the faucet over the other half of the sink and tapped the handles with his elbow. “You can all get out of my way for five minutes.” And he started to rinse the suds from his forearms.

“Gratitude,” Ruth said. “I let you use this whole kitchen. You know, you could be just a little more grateful.” She looked at Veronica. “Is he this way on sets too?”

“Oh, no. Everybody’s always terrified of him.”

Ruth laughed. “Are you, like, the...what’s the guy’s name? of artisanal, avant garde porn?”

“The avant garde’s been dead since the thirties,” Karen said. She moved out of the way for David to lower the dishwasher door and pull out the bottom rack.

“And you’re,” Ruth said, “too goddamn pedantic.” She looked at Veronica. “She once got in an argument at a restaurant for two hours over contemporary vs Modern art.”

“And you’re,” Karen said, “borderline tipsy.”

“That I am not,” Ruth said. She put a hand on David’s shoulder. “I bet everyone calls you a monster.” She laughed.

“Actually,” Veronica said, “he’s very professional.”

“Word,” David said.

“What word?” Karen said.

“Oh,” Veronica rolled her eyes in an oh-so-noticeable way. “He hates the word professional.”

David pulled the towel off his shoulder and dried his arm. “I’m not going to stay around here if I’m going to be insulted.”

“No, we didn’t mean it,” Ruth said. “But you are going to stay around for dinner, aren’t you?”

“You mean fix dinner.”

“If you insist.”

He dropped the towel on the counter.

Talking, jesting, they moved toward the den, scattering themselves around on the seats and couch, the usual kind of way people do during visits, and the people whose home it is don’t feel, quite, comfortable enough to do what they normally do, and the guests are even more uncomfortable from doing anything at all because it *isn’t* their home.

Ruth leaned her head back against the couch and sighed. “So what’re yuns going to do while yuns’re down here?”

“Not much’a nothin,” David said. In the way people do, he’d slipped back into the local vernacular in less than a day, even after all these years climbing out of it, like those people who address others for the first time in a local accent that’s not their own, completely without their own volition, a primordial part of their brain taking over in an automatic attempt to make the other feel welcome, but instead alienating them by making them think they’re being made fun of for their way of speaking. And after all, the highest number of people enrolling in voice training schools to avoid social and employment discrimination possess, or are possessed of, or possessed by, a southern accent, although the county’s accent, itself, is even more removed from that which would typically be identified as southern, instead being a combination of southern-isms, Appalachian-isms, Elizabethan English, which has held on longer in this part of the country than anywhere else, and a smattering of old French from the same period in history, and go one hundred miles

in any direction and the whole accent pattern shifts. “Leastways, not till it clears up.”

“Yeah,” Ruth said, “you may be stuck down here forever.” She glanced at Veronica. “Yuns may have to start a porn studio here.”

“Are yuh,” David said, “taking bets on when the first Molotov cocktail comes through the window? Yuh can put me down for fifty on the first week.”

Ruth laughed, but it was the kind of laugh that indicated how tragically comedic the statement was. “The Blue Creek Church’s up for sale. Maybe you could buy that and convert it.”

“Uh huh.”

“Is there,” Veronica said, “something special about that?”

“It’s where he was baptized the first time, wasn’t it?”

“The first time?”

“Oh,” Karen said. “Let’s not go into this.”

“Yeah,” Ruth said to Veronica, with the air of telling someone a tale that the listener couldn’t quite be sure if they were being yanked round or not. “That’s the way it works around here. To join a church, you have to get baptized into it. After all, it’s only *that* church that’s going to heaven. Everybody else’s punched their one-way ticket to hell.” Veronica looked at her with the kind of expression reserved for stories by people who sounded as if they might be trying to yank someone round.

She glanced at David. “That’s not true.”

He sighed. “Oh, it’s true.”

Veronica shook her head. “Then how come... This doesn’t make any sense. I don’t even...”

“Welcome to the country,” Ruth said, obviously delighting in being able to unhinge someone who’d seen so many parts of the world.

“Come on,” Karen said. “Let’s not go into this.”

“It’s alright,” David said. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “Remember me telling you my mother was rather... anxiety prone?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, one of those things was about going to hell. So about every month or so, she changed churches, till she’d gone through ’bout all of ’em. Except the Catholic church, because then she’d’ve really gone to hell.”

"So..." Veronica said, after a few moments of silence. "Is your mother..."

"No," David said. "She's buried in the Blue Creek cemetery."

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..."

"Don't worry about it. I should've told you a long time ago, anyway." He rose. "It's not like it's that important." He glanced through the windows. "I'll go see if those things are ready for the dishwasher."

After he'd gone, Veronica said in a low voice, "He never talks about his mother."

"Everybody's got em," Ruth said. "And we all know it. How much time are we supposed to spend on it?" She stretched her arms over the back of the couch and yawned. Karen leaned forward and grabbed the remote off the table, touched the power button, turning the volume down as the TV came on. "God," Ruth said, not talking to me, "all you want to do is watch TV." And she said to Veronica, "You'd think, being a librarian, she'd read a book." But Karen ignored her as she punched the numbers.

"...as of yet. However, News 10 has just received this report detailing that firefighting crews are currently being hampered not only by traffic, but the forest service's two fire fighting planes having been temporarily grounded by what unofficial sources say is a federal government injunction on air space over the region."

"Where's that?" Ruth opened her eyes and sat forward and turned to look at the TV.

"...is currently in the News 10 helicopter...over the mountain town of Kingsly, with live coverage. Terry." The slight pause here, obviously, was because of the previous information Tom was privied to, but he managed, as had long been practiced for, to maintain his perfect professional composure, because that's what one in such a position, or any position, maintained in order not to be fired, whereas, the helicopter with the News 10 logo had been in the air before such declarations, and certain maintenance related to the communication systems had been eschewed in favor of immediacy in function by certain personnel who, also, did not want to be fired, though, in this case, fire would normally only have been taken euphemistically, but as certain others with certain other information

will know, though they can't know it all, because that's reserved, isn't it? because in fact they really *don't* want to know it all, but the ones that know *some* of it, know that *fire* is far from a euphemism in this case.

"Thanks, Tom. Yes, we're currently flying over the town of Kingsly. You can see the highschool below us now. And if you look off to the right, you can clearly see the smoke that's been coming this way. The wind's been low most of the day, but it's really started to pick up this evening, and as it has, these thick plumes of smoke are obscuring the surrounding mountains. We've had no reports as of yet that...just a moment, Tom..... Okay..... Yes... That's... Okay. Um, Tom we've just, due to the fire and... What... Get the camera over there. What's going on down there..."

But the picture was nothing but blurs.

"Terry."

"Yes, Tom. It definitely looks like—"

"It looks like we're currently experiencing technical difficulties. That was News 10's Terry Plante live in Kingsly. So Lydia, it's been a hot one today. What can we expect for tomorrow?"

Veronica sat forward, both her hands covering her mouth. A muffled, "Oh my god," emerged.

Ruth'd gone to the window, bending to look out through the curtains, at the ridges on the opposite side of the river, but it was a terrible position to see anything.

"Oh, my god," Veronica said. She moved her hands enough away from her mouth to speak. "Is this really happening?" The only interesting question, and it comes out of the mouth of a porn star. "Is it something we need to be worried about?"

"It's not the first one this year," Karen said. "The ground's so dry." She turned toward Ruth. "You wanna look it up on the computer?"

Veronica'd already pulled out her phone. "Where do you go for that?"

"Try..." Karen said. "Go to the local news website. It's—"

The TV went silent, and they all turned toward it. With the daylight as bright as it was through the windows, there were no lights on to let them know they weren't burning.

"Crap," Veronica said. "I just lost your router. Let me..." But cell

service was still too spotty, if it worked at all, though one bar did show, that not being enough to establish a reliable connection. "Shit."

"Don't get so stressed," Ruth said. "If it were anywhere nearby, there'd be a lot more smoke than there is now. We'd know." She shook her head. "So we're fine."

David entered from the kitchen, drying his hands on a towel. "Water pressure just dropped. I think the power went out."

"Brilliant," Ruth said. She shook her head, and dropped onto the couch. "Goddamn it. It's just one thing after the other these days."

"It just seems that way," Karen said. She sat back.

"So," Veronica said, "you really don't think there's anything to worry about?"

"Worry about what?" David said.

Ruth shook her head. Karen said, "there's a forest fire burning. It was on the news."

"He can figure that out," Ruth said.

"And why," Karen said, "are you so aggravated?"

"I'm just bored."

"Is this what happens," David said, "when you inherit a house?" He sat on the couch arm, flipped the damp towel over his shoulder.

She grunted. "Yeah, you and everybody else thinks I'm rich."

"Well," Karen said, "at least enough disposable income to be on kickstarter all the time."

"It was only a few times."

"Not one of my films, I hope."

"Board games," Karen said.

"Oh."

"They're very well crafted," Ruth said. "And an antidote to the overly commercial contemporary landscape."

Karen snorted, "As if kickstarter isn't commercial."

"You know what I mean."

"And what kind of board games?"

"Oh, she's got all kinds."

"Shut Up."

"You don't have to be embarrassed," Karen said. "It's cool to be a geek these days."

Ruth groaned.

“Besides,” Karen winked at Veronica. “She won’t tell on us, will you?”

Veronica said, “Did you see Mastercraft when it came up?”

Ruth’s mouth dropped open—no, really. And she leaned forward. “You bought into Mastercraft?”

“Top tier. With the hand-signed box.”

Ruth’s mouth still hung open.

“She only looks cool on the outside,” David said. “Inside, she goes ooey gooey for nineteenth century British literature, Michael Cisco, and Doom Patrol.”

“The newer issues,” Karen said, “or the Grant Morrison stuff?” She added, “Or Pollock’s?”

“Um, in descending order, Morrison, Way, Pollock. Not to knock Pollock.” She laughed. She and Karen both said, “*Penis canon*.” And they both laughed.

And with the three of them sitting forward, conversing, laughing, almost screaming, David shook his head and pulled the towel off his shoulder and started back into the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with people?” Marietta stood, her back to the windows, fists balled against her skirt and thighs, having asked no one, neither Anime, nor me, even herself, that question, just having said it. And Anime just sat there with the large, stuffed, pink elephant in her lap, her arms wrapped around it, looking at her. “People are so stupid.” No argument. She struck her thigh. “So goddamn stupid.” Still no argument. “Can you believe this?” Still, none of this was directed at anyone, and it remained only something to be enacted for the purpose of enacting it, and if it could’ve been done without anyone present, by some automatic process, it might as well’ve. “One goddamn day. A person can’t even have one goddamn day off.” She bent forward and hit her thighs with her fists, more ritual, part of the process, than actual self-harm, though she’d still be sore by the morning, if there were going to be such for anyone. “GODDAMN IDIOTS!” She stood there breathing hard. Finally, she sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said to Anime. Anime just looked at her from over the elephant’s shoulder as Marietta’s shoulders slumped forward, and she huffed, and threw herself down into a chair, flopped out like a flung-away anatomy doll. She’d already tried to call Boyle. The phones are down. But as stated before, he wasn’t getting here anytime soon. And he couldn’t’ve done much had he been able to do so, at least not for the next forty-eight hours, or ninety days, which, after that, nothing would matter, anyhow. Interestingly, in fact, he’d never set foot in a courtroom for years. And as of yet there’d never even been a need for him to attempt to exculpate his client, in this case, Russell, at a pre-trial hearing, considering bullshit claims were bullshit claims, designed just to take people off the streets for a little while, let them cool their heels, allow them to know the score in regards to power, much like two-hundred-year-old new laws about wearing masks in

public come back into being enforced when Occupy Wall Street comes along paying Warner Brothers to walk down the street expressing their anonymous individuality, which, really, is an example of, no matter how hard you try, how everyone's going to come up with whatever they want to see in anything that's sufficiently ambiguous, and anything that's below a certain level of ambiguity isn't going to make it in any big way, if any way, at all onto the social landscape, after all, I should know, how many books do they say I've commissioned at this point? **HOW MANY?** But of course, it's a rhetorical question. I know how many. But what's the point of engaging in rhetoric with any of you? Hm? Anime? Marietta?

Marietta jerked out of her chair, slamming her fist toward the ceiling as if she were going to jump up and punch it or fly through it. "Fuck all of them." No argument here. She turned toward Anime. "Come on."

"Where're we going?"

Marietta took her wrist. "Out."

Anime let herself be pulled up, still clutching the stuffed elephant with her other arm. "But we were just out."

"We're going out again."

Anime dropped the elephant into a chair in time to snatch her bag. And Marietta grabbed her own from where she'd thrown it on the table when they'd first come in, and slammed the door shut on their way out, leaving the electronic lock to do its thing. And intertwining their arms, they went down the road, onto Highstreet, passing the café, on their way to Main. No fewer were out now that the opening show'd passed, but the air'd changed, in many ways, to that of a generic street fair, a hint of what'd come before indicated only by the cardboard eclipse glasses on top of people's heads and various species of t-shirt indicating the same event. The barbecue stand sat closed down, only strings of smoke eking upwards from the chimney as what wood and charcoal that'd remained managed just enough oxygen to smolder.

Marietta, who hadn't calmed much, still, had calmed some, now only walking to walk, making her way among the various peoples, arm in arm with Anime, headed vaguely toward the end of the street and the fountain and the steps that rose up the hill to the court house

turned library, something that'd only happened because the business association had fought tooth and nail to keep it from combining with Eagleton's library, proposed as a joint effort to better service the whole county, but which too many old people were *too uncomfortable with*, instead to put it somewhere that, at best, there was no parking, and, at worst, required climbing a heart-attack-inducing number of steps, which, had it not been, mainly, desired by people over a certain age, might've been argued to be a form of state-sanctioned euthanasia, or assisted suicide, though it still could've been categorized as such, because, after all, that's all categories are, all of it, like all else, a bit of possibly expressly denied ideology encoded into landscaping and architecture, as Gordon had sometimes joked. But of course, with everything that's going to happen, it would've, in the end, after all, been, they were correct and didn't know it, or at least had the wrong story, but it would've been a waste of money. Of course, by the same token, anything would've been a waste of money. After all, all of it's going to come to an end. So one way or the other, it didn't really matter, at all. But that's just what you get when you try to think eternally. Not that Marietta was thinking eternally. No, her concerns were much more immediate and visceral, though they showed less so on her outwards appearance than they had before, just the act of getting out in public'd had some effect on that, the deeper and older layers of her brain shifting her countenance to be more opaque in the face of strangers and community, one of the ways in which social animals regulate themselves and their institutions. Of course, best laid plans. Though, she knew, rationally, that nothing would come of any such charges, except the usual social collective punishment framework built outside the law because there're laws that can't be codified into laws because, then, their existence would have to be admitted to, however, deeper down, some of the fear still remained, something that percolated up in vague dribs and drabs to be converted into anger, anger then only partially successfully suppressed by the aforementioned socialization systems of her brain, coming out in the forceful way in which she walked yet still aggravated yet more by the previously unstated fact that there wouldn't be any getting off that night, if only because her agitation was too high, and how did they, these government institutions, expect heterosexual women

to cope when they take away their husbands yet also attempt to ban vibrators and dildos, such as they'd done in Texas, to the surprise of many in the state of North Carolina, who'd have thought they would pioneer that legal maneuver, and also, much to the consternation of South Carolina, who was constantly in competition with its northern neighbor to see who could enact the most inane law faster, and because of it she thought of having to drive through Texas when that'd been in effect, and they'd had to hide the bag that'd had them, under the seat, when they'd been pulled over for having out-of-state tags, and she became, both angrier and laughed about this.

She interlaced her fingers with Anime's as they walked, finding comfort and a frustration-countering release of oxytocin from direct human contact, something that runs at too great a deficit in too many places around the world, but most especially here, as Shepard can point out from the data, though it should not be taken that he, being a result of the effects of that same data, cannot interpret that data to an end, in fact, like depressive realism, it can bestow a certain clarity on the possessor. Yes.

Marietta sighed, as much as from the effect of the oxytocin, as anything, which is not to discount it, that is, after all, the whole *modus operandi* of the brain, as is ignoring its own physicality, well, that's also one of the things that has led to the creation of Shepard, and others like him, though they're not as perfect, though, also not without their own uses, even if some of them are unstable, though, this may be in their favor, as it sometimes takes unstable individuals to accomplish the greater things in history, though, they, themselves, may not be the great men. But after all, the brain is, in essence, just a soup of chemicals, and to scream about *chemicals affecting the brain* is like complaining about the sky affecting weather.

Anime sniffed the air, glanced up at the sky, furrowed her brow. "There's a lotta smoke."

"What?" Marietta stopped, looked up. "Probably somebody over on the other side of the river burning something. They're all so stupid." Though, the *they*, in this case, was ambiguous. She started walking again, pulling Anime along with her, not that Anime minded.

As much as they themselves moved, the street flowed around them,

music wafting out of the eponymous such shop, children playing on the green lawn in front of the only church ever allowed on Mainstreet, running over the porch and behind the columns on the front of a second building that looked as if they were there to frame a doorway, yet no door existed within the brick façade, causing a very incongruous impression, the electronic bank sign displaying the time and temperature. Though by now, several of the restaurants had closed, depleted of stock, except for the combination restaurant and theatre which, though, suffering its losses, same as all the rest, in fulfilling the former, had a cardboard sign in the window indicating the remaining availability of the latter.

But eventually, they had to end up somewhere, and they ended up at the end of the street, standing in front of the water fountain, the old court house steps stretching up the hill as if they were leading to a heaven that didn't exist.

"They're all so stupid."

Those few seated on the stone benches nearby glanced at her, looked away. Watching the water, Marietta sighed and released Anime's arm and turned and sat on the edge of the fountain, faint spray and mist striking the back of her dress and arms, and settling twinkling into her hair. "I'm sorry, hon." She touched Anime's hand. "I've taken up your whole day." Then she interlaced her fingers in her lap. "Why does life have to be so aggravating all the time?" She shook her head. "No. Why do *people* have to be so aggravating all the time?" Because. Because. Because. Because. Because. **BECAUSE.**

Anime looked down the street, at the general mass of people milling around, up and down, through there. She reached into her bag. "Would you like something to drink?" Marietta nodded, and Anime passed her a steel bottle.

"I figured you just had bottled water or something." She shook her head. "I don't want to take yours."

"Oh, I've got a second one." She removed it and unscrewed the top and took a sip. "Besides, plastic's bad for you. It leaches things into it."

Marietta unscrewed and sipped her own. Most people already have so much plastic molecules in their body, anyway, they're practically

walking Ken and Barbie dolls, so it's not as if it'd matter, not even taking into account how long everything had left. Tick. Tick. Tick.

"Do you mind staying the night?" Marietta said. "I promise I will split my time between complaining at you and whatever inanimate object I happen to start in on."

"If you don't think it'll be trouble."

"Hon, even if you were trouble, I'd take your trouble over the rest of the world any day." She took another sip of water and re-screwed the top. She offered it back to Anime. "Thank you, dear." And she patted her thighs and stood, sighing. "Come on." She intertwined her arm with Anime's. "Let's go see if we can find something for supper. We'll take it home, and we won't come out the whole rest of the day. The rest of the world be damned."

The door frame and molding split and splintered when he kicked in the door, and with the way the house was situated, no one would've seen him do it, so he didn't bother to be neat about it. As said, Hunter was, in many ways, a walking stereotype, or perhaps, an archetype. And people always want to point out negative stereotypes as, well, being negative, but that, of course, is the whole point, and makes them, in many ways, if not all, better than the converse, that is, the positive stereotype, because everyone recognizes them as derogatory, that's the whole point of those who use them so, so what they are is right on the label, all the while the much vaulted positive form smushes individuals into a predefined loaf pan of an equally revolting color, with no recourse for alternative because, of course, it's the *good thing* and who'd want to fight the *good thing*, whereas, at least, one can say *fuck you* to the negative form in good conscience and free of social pressure. But he's never bothered to contemplate that. **HAVE YOU?** No, he's too busy pulling out his pseudo-phallic knife and creeping around the house, expecting to be able to jump someone from behind and now finding out that's just not going to be the case. Finally, after not just being satisfied checking the bathroom, but having checked the shower *twice*, he stands in the bedroom, looking down at the unmade bed, which he stabs, over and over and over, the knife refusing to draw down through the foam and then getting caught on the springs, so instead of the long deep gashes he wanted, he only manages to produce puncture marks in the sheets. Yelling, he grabbed it by the corner and flips it over out of the frame, so it flopped, landing contorted, lands against the cantilevered closet doors. And he goes back through the house and repeated the same scene ad nauseam, only, now, applied to the couch and the chairs and a couple of lampshades and some curtains. Why? He rips the

head off the stuffed pink elephant. Mainly a combination of marking territory and asserting dominance, though, in part, it's a deep-seated reaction to the conflux of the fear of the world changing and fear that it won't change, all of which goes unexpressed on the conscious level, except for rudimentary manifestations as a compulsion to violently shock the world into changing and to violently shock it into fear of changing. And it's not so much that he, Hunter, that is, lacks some capability of higher or more complex thought processes as much as it is the anxiety that causes most other people to develop such ideas to cover what they already know they are, the revelation that the other and the self are and are not, in fact, one in the selfsame, and so on, is expressed differently. But there's no use in asking him if this's the case, because he has no need to care. And it's really that more elegant in action, though passionate, but what is elegance without passion? And it's only when he tries to form that into words that he stumbles, coming out as some caricature of a meglomaniacal entity, such as what happened down at the police station. In another age he'd've been the brave warrior that stands between the tribe and total destruction by the enemy, running out barefoot and bare chested, if not outright naked, screaming at the enemy, swinging an ax and cleaving through Roman soldiers' breastplates. But times do change, except when they don't. And of course, it's not there is less violence needed in the world, at present, just that a different kind is requisite, and that automation has so decimated jobs in regards to the traditional forms of such, just as Shepard's pointed out. Just as he's pointed out. Evolution, of course, is not fair, is it, Hunter? But then, who ever claimed the process of collective processes ever would be? Really, though, he has a kind of nobility. Though, he too often wants to attribute this desire to cleanse the world of other skin pigmentations and genders to me, or at least, in my name, willed by me, etc, he does, at least, refreshingly, in this case, as he will express to Russell, though without knowing it, that what he's doing now he's undertaken entirely under his own authority, regarding me hardly in the least. This, unfortunately for him, has the side effect of making him rather... humorous, as he runs around the room screaming and tearing anything woven, stabbing the carpet, which is the unfortunate side effect of operating under the auspices of his own name, in

the same way that if somebody jumped up and yelled to a crowd for them to go kill someone or some group in their own name, that is the name of the person jumping up and demanding it, those folk would, at best, laugh at him, whereas if he, or she, demanded they do it in *my* name, they'd at least debate the point, whether they did indeed commit the act or not, and that it must be answered proves the seriousness with which the root of power's taken, and why even kings have to connect their authority to some higher power. So his self-empowerment can't appear anything but ridiculous, but some of that could be helped if he'd stop tearing up knife-ripped strips of carpeting with his teeth. But then again, running a knife into someone's abdomen a dozen or so times does not necessarily require the most stable person. But at what point is it all not worth the effort? **WILL YOU STOP CHEWING ON THE RUG.** This is why piecemeal does not work. It's farcical. This shouldn't even be allowed to continue happening. Even wiped off the face of the Earth, it's still going to be an embarrassment. **DO YOU HEAR THAT?** Of course you don't. **YOU'RE AN EMBARRASSMENT.** But they want free will, but they don't want free will. So what am I supposed to do? Hm? **WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?** But of course, that's not to say that this should be taken as myself having something against this same practice, as used in colloquial terms, rather than the literal. And while some might argue such is necessary due to a design flaw about how the female body interfaces with the male penis, I choose to view it as a feature, and in any regard, it's not as if it's my responsibility, knowing that people would eventually look back on the process, because they can only look back, perception only works backwards through time, everything only ever looks at the past, and where would they be, in terms of scientific predictability, if I'd intervened to change something? So really, they should thank me. And besides, it's not as if I could do much about it, anyway, it's not like it could've gone any other way. And the way it did go, well, they deserve it, anyway, don't they. **WILL YOU STOP CHEWING ON THE RUG.** This's why *The Day the Clown Cried* is the only accurate Holocaust film. **STOP CHEWING THE RUG.**

The coffee table being insufficient, too low and too far from the couch and chairs, they'd moved into the dining room, sufficient sunlight streaming in through the surrounding windows. There, David sat with his elbow on the table, fist against his temple as he looked down on all the pieces and fragments of cardboard and dice and counters and flippers and such and such and so on.

"Alright," Ruth said, "reposition two Tamarite Crystals in opposition to the upper bound of the matrix. But if you want to hold out for a saving throw and not give up your position, you can do a roll for a chance to draw a card, but you have to play it, otherwise you forfeit the turn, but you get to keep the card in your hold. But you have to take into account the disposition of the other players. See, where Karen's at, if you have to play anything that falls in the red band, it's going to be an automatic penalty against your side, not an automatic loss, just a handicap, unless that effect happens to be over nine-thousand, in which case the percentage of reduction is calculated logarithmically, based on... this chart. But you probably don't want to do that, anyway, just starting out. At this stage, it'd be better just to take the setback and hold the card, even if it's worthless, you still avoid the penalty and the resulting outcome would likely be far worse than you'd want to incur so early on. Unless you've collected enough blue crystals and can draw a blue-band card, in which case, while the damage would still be partially inured, the automatic bonus on the next turn, while not exactly nullifying the disadvantage, would keep you up where you're still competitive." She reached for her beer and sipped it. "But what you also want to do is take into account the positions. See, where Veronica's at, she gets an alignment bonus for everything running congruent to that world line. But if you come out in opposition to that, you'll have to be careful not to

get yourself in a bind.” She returned the can to a coaster so there’d be no danger of a water ring sogging any errant cardboard.

“In case you haven’t figured it out,” David said to Veronica, “she’s making fun of me. I never successfully learned solitaire.” He lifted a card. “Alright, what do I do with this?”

Ruth shook her head. “You don’t want to play that.”

“Why?”

“The chance of blowback’s too great. You’ll risk taking half your positions off the field.”

He placed the card into position. “If that means I can stop.”

Karen relocated five crystals along the matrix. Veronica shook her head and laughed.

“Oh, sure. Make fun of the gaming challenged. One of these days we’ll be recognized as a legitimate section of society, and then you’ll see what happens.”

“You lose five positions,” Ruth said, moving the counters. “But the aftereffect is you split the regional alignment. So part of them fall into one half and have been weakened and are on a time delay. They’ll lose one half their strength per turn till exhausted.”

“I don’t understand any of that, but it does sound bad.”

“But the other half fall in a positive alignment, so they get a one-time boost out of it.”

“That sounds bad.”

“No, it’s good. That puts you in a good position against Karen. Where you’re at, you should be able to stall her off enough rounds to buildup your hand again.”

“You know, it’s getting late. I should probably start thinking about supper. Even with the power out, I could probably—”

“Twenty-eight,” Veronica said. And she stretched across the table to arrange her counters. “Domu incoming.”

“That’s not...” Ruth looked at the counters, the matrix, etc, finally, shook her head and lifted her beer again. “You can’t bring out a Red Queen Battalion without first having initiated the appropriate sequence.”

“Yes,” Veronica said, “you can, so long as the requisite counters don’t outnumber the opposing, and the alignment matches on all of them.” She pointed. “That, combined with a hexameter field

card in play, multiplies the positional power by not just the sum of the holder's units on the field, but does so in relation to the relative distance between them on the underlying matrix, allowing a summoning bonus capable of bypassing the requirement to possess a number of sacrifices of that level."

"Bullshit." Ruth looked at Karen. "Tell'er she's fulla crap."

Karen shoved the book across the table. "I'm not going to read to you."

"It's just practice for story time."

"Yuck."

"Child hater."

Karen stretched and grab the book again, flipping it open. "There you go." And she pressed her finger to a page and held it for Ruth to see, before she put it down and started reading. "Multiplies blah blah positional power blah blah sacrificial levels blah blah." She closed the book. "So she's right."

"I demand a re-count." She set her beer on the coaster. "They're conspiring. You're conspiring. This's all unacceptable."

"Maybe I can figure out something to do with the firepit."

"Sit down or I'll tear your head off and shove it in the firepit."

Veronica laughed.

"Yeah, laugh. Go right ahead. Now," she turned on David and pointed, "you'd better do this right. I'm not going to have you throwing the game in her favor."

"I wouldn't even know how to begin to literally throw the game."

"Well, just keep your head in it."

"It isn't helping you none," Karen said.

"Well, just make your move and find out."

"Wait," Veronica said. "My turn's not over yet." She rotated two cards. "Alright."

Ruth glared at David. "You see what you're making me do here?"

"I'd be happy to get out of your hair."

She grabbed his shirt, pulled him back into his chair. "Don't even think about it." And she planted her elbow on the table, resting her chin in her palm, drumming her middle finger in front of her ear.

"I'm beginning to have PTSD flashbacks to my grandfather trying to teach me checkers."

“Quiet,” Ruth said. “Everyone’s got trauma. You think you’re special? Get over it, snowflake.”

He looks over his shoulder. Now, black smoke rises over the high-school. He turned, making his way up the hill, toward the intersection. Those who'd been in line to get into the steakhouse stood in the parking lot looking at the distant scene. And as Gabriel turns along the edge of the road into the Walmart shopping center parking lot beyond it, a tourist from Florida called, "Hey." Gabriel stopped. Someone nearby said, "What's going on down there?" Gabriel glanced over the man's shoulder, as if he'd just then seen any of the smoke or heard any of the distant-but-indefinable sounds.

Gabriel shrugged. He looks back at the single-and-double-file line of people making their way from that end of town, along the edge of the road, those who'd been in various parking lots, on the road, those who'd been allowed out off the baseball field and the football field, some of them wearing blood that wasn't their own, others being carried between others, responsible adults, a coach and assistant coaches, the principal and vice principal, even the superintendent, who'd been down there for the event, after all, why not get paid to party? all seeming to lead the way, a sad and pathetic line that now stretched all the way from the Walmart intersection to the credit union.

Except no one asked why they were being allowed to do that.

Gabriel, hands in his pockets, walked along the edge of the road and into the Walmart parking lot. People crowded in the driving space between rows, everything filled, especially handicapped spaces, though none of them with indicators of their owners having any variant of such states. They tried to find some shade, many of them shivering in the heat.

The superintendent raised his arms as if he were a preacher at a revival and said, "Everyone please be calm," looking big and impressive, or at least, deep down in his brain, believing, if not recognizing,

himself to be so in relation to the various teenage girls around. The coach ministered over one as if it'd been her own blood she'd been speckled and smeared in. "Everyone please remain calm."

Standing with his hands in his pockets, looking over the scene, Gabriel will seem like someone, or something, from another world, a pure observer, someone looking at a TV program they'd heard about time and time again, till, now seeing it, it was all too familiar as to be boring. But he can see the structure emerging within the chaos. Can't you? **CAN'T YOU?**

The assistant coaches have sent a group of teenage boys toward Walmart to get bottled water, or anything else they can find. Except, the place's already been shuttered, black inside, not just from the loss of power, and they press their hands and faces against the warm glass of the frozen automatic doors. Other groups of young males are sent out toward the steakhouse and Bojangles.

Sirens blare in the distance, but none of them can know for what or for where they're headed.

"Hey—" Gabriel turns. "You." The coach's almost in his face, such that Gabriel can smell the barbecued meat on his breath. "Don't just stand around." But that's exactly what Gabriel does, stands there with his hands in his pockets looking at the older man steadily from behind his sunglasses. But the contest will be short-lived, the coach disturbed by another distant explosion, and when he turned toward Gabriel again, Gabriel, hands still in his pockets, had gone. So from the deeper recesses of his mind, satisfaction percolated up, and he turned, again, toward a group of teenage girls, telling them that they were safe and that there wasn't anything to be worried about here. No, nothing at all. Nothing at all. Except predictive power. **PREDICTIVE POWER, ISN'T THAT RIGHT, GABRIEL?** He walks along the front of the shops, the closed-down Dollar Tree, the darkened shoe store. Young men congregate outside the Oriental restaurant, looking through the glass, others joining them, carrying an iron bench they've run all the way over from the Walmart outdoor section with, screaming as they batter into the glass, shattering it, twisting the door frame, crunching across it as they duck inside. Time is relative, isn't it? Compressed here. The residual smells from the buffet waft out into the shade of the awning. Expanding there.

The hungry wolf hunts best, doesn't it, Gabriel? But isn't that your problem, you refused to stay hungry, you found a **MECHANICAL RELEASE**. He will pause in the sun-drenched parking lot, shirt sweat-damp and clinging to him as he looks up and scans around. Yeah, he can feel it. **YOU CAN FEEL IT**. You could've been on the other side of this. **BUT YOU THREW THAT AWAY**. He moved toward the parked cars, bumpers and glass glinting hard and harsh. He ducks down against the hood of one before the first rifle report comes over. Two of the young men emerging from the Oriental restaurant drop, one rolling over and still able to crawl, before convulsing from the force of a second shot. He can't see it, but he can hear some of it, knows that the same thing is happening out towards Bojangles and the steakhouse. He waits there as the shots continue. Only after a period of prolonged silence does he look up. Yeah, that's right. **THAT'S RIGHT**. Picking himself up, but staying low, he makes his way between the cars. He can feel them moving, even if he can't see them. Can't you, Gabriel. **CAN'T YOU?** He makes it to where the thickest number of people've congregated, or more precisely, where the superintendent and the coach and the principle have managed to weed out all but the youngest males, **JUST AS SHEPARD'S ANALYSIS PREDICTED**, sequestering themselves where they'd thought they'd been behind the lines of battle, sequestering themselves with the breeding-age females. Explosions carry from the distance, but they're purely secondary, purely distraction, purely the luck of one thing or the other going off, becoming too pressurized, too heated, boiling over. The superintendent raises his hands. "Everyone please remain calm." But a shotgun blast tears off his shoulder in a spray of pulverized meat and blood and wet bone pulp. Coming down the hill from the shoe store side, climbing up from the lawn on the garden center side, they can converge from each end. Hidden in the crowd the whole time. **BUT THIS'S ALL FAMILIAR, ISN'T IT, GABRIEL. YOU DON'T NEED TO BE TOLD THIS. YOU DON'T NEED TO BE TOLD HOW CHEAP PUMP SHOTGUNS ARE, DO YOU. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE TOLD HOW TO TAKE A NORMAL PIECE OF PIPE AND EXTEND THE TUBE SO YOU CAN ALMOST DOUBLE THE CAPACITY**. And it's all been planned for. **IT'S ALL BEEN PREDICTED**. All Shepard had

to do was look at the landscape, all he had to do was think for one moment about how many people already illegally parked long term in places like that, about how this event would draw even more and more and more and nobody'd be able to move, all it took was that for him to know how to stock for the situation. Handicapped to handicapped space. No need to reload. Already a fresh, extended shotgun in wait under each of them. All of them moving in line between the cars **LIKE A PARTY OUT HUNTING QUAIL**. Do you feel constricted yet? Do you feel what it's like to have nowhere to go? Do you? **DO YOU? DO ANY OF YOU?** All they have to do is fire until they're empty and move on to the next and kneel and take it up and keep coming. And keep coming. And keep coming. **AND KEEP COMING**. The world's only ever been about violence. Violence is natural. Don't you all like natural things? **DON'T YOU?** It's all blood and screams. A properly trained fighting dog will even attack a female, isn't that right, Gabriel? Nothing left standing. **NOTHING LEFT STANDING**.

Gabriel squats, his back pressed against the grill and bumper of an SUV, forearms across his knees, as the noise crashes deafeningly round, washing in like ocean waves. Yet he remains just as calm as ever, expressionless, his sunglasses concealing, even, what of his soul might be revealed through his eyes. Yes, just sit there and wait for entropy to take its course. No order can hold up for long. Eventually, everything comes apart at the seams. They can't cover all the holes. Panicking people run, finding avenues no one had thought open. The ones left able to find ways out spreading between parked cars, crouching, running, panting, crying, trying not to be heard, the shotgunners splintering, having to break off to go after the stragglers, the frequency of the blasts becoming intermittent, less organized, at disparate distances. A few crouch and huddle between nearby cars. Gabriel glances at them. He senses movement, only barely aware of it, consciously or unconsciously, though, he doesn't need to be, almost everything's connected directly now, everything running at the lower levels of the brain, because there's no need for anything higher, in fact, anything higher would've gotten him killed long before now, anything higher would've tried to frame the situation, screamed to make sense of it, gotten it wrong, become confused, confused at the

seeming lack of purpose, the uses of tools, that anything could be something called an assault weapon, that, in fact, there was no line between everyday household items and those *others*, those terrible, terrible, horrible things from the outside, the things that would break in and destroy peace and safety and which could be banned, stopped, regulated, those things still exploding out there somewhere, yes, his conscious mind would've wanted all these things, things to stop the things, things that he doesn't need right now, things that, after today, he's, none of them, are never going to need again. Yes, he can sense someone's coming. **YOU CAN FEEL IT, CAN'T YOU. YOU CAN FEEL HIM COMING.** Half those packed between the cars scrambled out, falling over those too frozen to move, stumbling, ripping off their skin on hot asphalt, a shotgun blast in the back pushes them into it permanently, their faces, not quite, but almost, sizzling against the machine-packed surface, though an egg would fry, if only slowly, should someone have given it a chance. The others can't even scream, have already pissed and defecated themselves, though this inspires Shepard not one way or the other. He cycles the shotgun as he steps out from behind the hood of a car, a hot shell ejected across a windshield, rolling down to catch in the wipers. He's as dispassionate as you, isn't he? Maybe more so. More perfect. **PERFECT.** He only has to do anything as fast as it needs done. No hurrying. No languidity. Just everything as it needs to be done. None of them are going to run. They'll cry and mumble and may even get their voices up enough to beg, but there's no run left in these. So there's no need to be anything less than efficient.

Gabriel rises. Shepard turns his head, the shotgun still against his shoulder, still pointed the same way. Yes, it's time the two of you met. Take a good look at your replacement model, Gabriel. **TAKE A GOOD LOOK.**

Holding hands, they walked up the street past the café, Marietta carrying a recycled plastic bag that a vendor'd had wadded up in a large sock behind the counter for customers. And they crossed Highstreet to start up the steep, paved driveway to the house. Obviously, the first thing she noticed was the door, how could it not've been noticed? half off its hinges, trim and molding hanging about held by a few fibers. She'll have to be an idiot not to think something was wrong. And she'd only just peered through the broken doorway when she turned, Anime turning with her, and they walked hard back down the driveway.

"What's going on?" Anime said. But of course, Marietta couldn't answer that; it's just one of those things people say to try and communicate to others they're just as confused as everyone else. The bookstore-café was dark, long closed, abandoned, like everything else along Highstreet and all the way down it. Fewer people were even on Main, almost everything closed, out of almost everything, tourists having seen every charming, small-town thing enough to make them puke, ad nauseam. At the end of the street, the fountain had reduced to a residual trickle as distant pumps lost power, too. They stopped on the sidewalk just down from the newspaper offices, Marietta still carrying the plastic bag. The smoke in the air'd gotten heavier by then, tasteable, discoloring the afternoon sun a dark orange, an oh so fitting apocalyptic shade, the whole horizon gradated between that and blood all the way down to the ridge tops.

"What do you wanna do?" Anime said. But Marietta's only reply was to look up, then down, the street, once, then, twice. This's the way it is. This's the way it always is. It's like looking for a spouse or a parent in a large department store. You both run around, first slowly, then faster and faster, more and more perplexed, checking

aisle after aisle as you walk by, then walking down each, zig zagging, alternating, through the store, always missing each other with every turn, as if one or the other or both hadn't been there in the first place, driving each crazy because they *know* they came with them, they know they have to be here somewhere, they wouldn't have gone out, would they? And sometime they *have* gone out, so you spend an hour going round and round and finally go out to the car to find them fuming in the heat because you have the keys and they've been waiting for half an hour, an hour, wondering where you've gotten lost at. But even if they haven't the two could go round and round the store a hundred times, just missing each other by *that* much in terms of space or time or, even, both, so that the whole farce could be repeated infinitely, the one finally becoming too hungry and going over to the deli section of the next store in the complex, and coming back and continuing their rounds, again, as the other jumps over to the same deli, then back again, on and on, round and round, passing aisle ends over and over again, never finding one another, though, sometimes, being barely an arm length apart.

But of course, in this non-hypothetical case, they were more than an arm length apart. Yes, but not too much distance that it couldn't be covered quickly, if need be. Actually, in this case, Hunter's just across the street. Marietta's already seen him. In fact, he's standing in front of Anime's bookshop. At least he doesn't smile. He still has carpet fibers in his teeth, white sproingy things that are totally opposed to the seriousness of this situation. **AND THIS IS A SERIOUS SITUATION.** And just because he pulls the knife and charges across the street holding it high above his head, screaming like an ancient Germanic tribesman running into a brace of Roman legionnaires, though it would have, admittedly, been more impressive if that had been who or what he was charging in such a way, rather than two women in open-toed shoes and sneakers, but none of that doesn't mean any of this isn't serious. Though, there are some carpet fibers trailing out of his mouth with the spittle. But thankfully, no one has time to notice, and instead they scream with the seriousness the situation deserves, which prompts one individual, possessed of a concealed carry permit, to draw his weapon and fire, and who manages to hit a man and a woman, though neither are

Hunter, the second not being that far fetched, or at least it could seem, as, up till this point, it could've been assumed or unmentioned that he'd been a transsexual, though, in fact, he won't be, but the point still stands.

But from the perspectives of Marietta and Anime this is all happening in slow motion, him charging, screaming, all of it drawn out, like a film slowed by a third, though that's not really what will happen, though, yes, time can run relative depending on the locations of two observers, though the observers need not be *actual* observers in the sense that most draw from the word as that of *people*, just two quantum states, even if only singular particles, or such, which interact, or don't interact, as the case may be, no, what's really happening is that each of their brains, in the more rudimentary parts, have gone into a panic mode, which takes the normal amount of sensory recording and turns them up to an approximate maximum, and maybe, even, just a bit beyond, for at least as long as the equipment can handle it, however, as normal models of reality constructed from the senses are delayed due to processing time on the part of the brain, everything anyone experiences being, necessarily, already in the past, even if they think it's in the present, so too are they delayed *in proportion* to the amount of data coming in, thus, and a brain-computer metaphor will not be employed here, simply for the fact that the dominant political and social technology of the given era in which it is dominant is always defined as the model for the brain, whether it be the steam engine, or the telegraph, or the computer, or the internet, regardless of the actual workings of either or all those, and in fact, to cover up such knowledge and lack thereof, but thus, this amount of data slows everything down such that the relative experience, by definition, in retrospect, does not, in fact, match the external reference for the passage of time by most everything else, meaning that, in effect, one can suddenly become dead, even though one doesn't—yet—know one's dead, similarly, though dissimilar, to the way people who have their heads cut off by guillotines are said to speak after their respective heads are drawn from the basket, but in reality, this is only because enough blood remains in the brain cavity, because of the suddenness of the separation, to allow a rudimentary, though obviously short-lived, type of consciousness

that sometimes, hypothetically, provides one the, rather unique, experience of looking down on one's own separated body.

But in any regard, neither Marietta, nor Anime, were dead yet, perceptually or otherwise, though, *yet* is the operative word, it being that eventually they will be, whether the instigator of such is here, now, or somewhere else, later.

But in any regard, it'd've been preferable if he'd flossed first. **WHY DO YOU ALL HAVE TO BE SUCH EMBARRASMENTS?**

THIS'S WHY YA DYSTOPIAS SELL SO MUCH. Look around. You already *feel* it. You know it. You've been there. Razor wire around schools. Deputies and police patrolling the hallways, throwing students to the ground, kicking them out of their desks, choking them, handcuffing them, school districts spying through laptop cameras to punish them for what they do in their own rooms at home, punishing them for what they post on Twitter and Facebook, punishing them for what they wear, punishing them for what they say. They know they have no rights, the courts, the administration, make it very clear to them they have no rights. They get bullied, they're the ones suspended. They're the ones churned through an 18th century system originally designed to psychologically condition people to working in factories and to instill fidelity to the state. They're the ones put on the sex offender registry for the rest of their lives because they stuck a phone up their shirt, or for something they did consensually with another child when they were both nine. They're the ones told that they'd better have it all planned and started before they even *get* to highschool, or otherwise everything's going to be a failure, there's going to be nothing in the world for them, they've got to be competitive with the rest of the world, competitive for the diminishing wages handed to them for more and more demeaning work as automation swallows the world. They're the ones denied access to the rights to control their own bodies, unable even to go to doctors without their parents being informed, unable to access birth control, restricted from accessing any useful information about human sexuality. And all for what? Sure, they can spout some random non sequitur. But any *reason*? No. But the reason's there. Shepard's analysis lays that bare, doesn't it, Shepard.

The two looked at each other, each instinctively aware of the other's membership in their fraternity.

You've lived it. They live it every day. So is it no wonder that they want to consume something that reflects their world, an authoritarian police state where no one has any rights and is subject to physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual violence, state sanctioned, violence at a whim, to have inhumane human-instigated inhuman processes ruin their lives at the drop of a hat, all from clerical errors, petty grievances, the necessity to keep something in the system to justify the system? Of course it's not. So they can see themselves in a world like the one around them, even if they don't recognize this fact, but here the difference being that they can **HAVE SOME POTENTIAL FREEDOM**, here, at least, in these stories there's someone like them who can fight the system of oppression and maybe **MAYBE** win, if only for a moment.

But maybe that's as much a cathartic release, a vent to prevent the catastrophic failure of the system that would surely happen given too much internal pressure. It happens naturally. No one's smart enough, simply for the fact that such a system could not function if people admitted to what they were doing, so no one's smart enough to institute something like that. Change wipes away those social organisms too at odds with the new environment, giving chance to already arisen but minority features already extant in the broader populations of such organisms. So such mechanisms rise, if anything survives, if change hath not wrought total devastation. Social organisms. Not individuals. Cells form the body. People form the society. Does the cell recognize the broader organism? No. No, people relieve the pressure themselves, just like you, Gabriel. They relieve the pressure themselves and keep the whole thing from coming to a head, keep the whole thing from boiling over, keep the whole thing from exploding, from changing. So everything stays the same, just cells doing their job within the body, like you all think it's going to forever and ever and ever and ever and **EVER**. But it's not. **IT'S NOT**. No. **IT ENDS TODAY. EVERYTHING ENDS TODAY. DO IT NOW, SHEPARD. DO IT NOW. PROVE YOUR SUPERIORITY TO THE OLD MODEL, SHEPARD. PROVE YOUR SUPERIORITY.**

“That,” Karen said, “puts you out of the game.”

David sat back, sighed. The lateness of the afternoon, smoke haze will hang before the sun, had left the dining room borderline too dim to see, and would’ve left everything scattered across the table harder to discern, even if his eyes hadn’t been so blurry. He rubbed them. “Thank god.” But I didn’t have anything to do with it. Just because everyone’s said I started the thing initially, at the very beginning, doesn’t make everything that happens my fault. He pushed back his chair, stretched his shoulders, put up his arms, fists in the air. “Freedom. Sweet freedom.”

Veronica laughed, shook her head, as she reached forward to reposition a set of tokens.

David yawned and stretched, interlacing his fingers behind his neck. “Gahhh.”

Sweat trickled down their backs, their clothes damp on the inside.

Karen said, “Maybe we should go out on the porch. The shade’s over. It could be cooler out there.”

David yawned and rose and stepped toward a window, drew aside the curtain with his finger. “Smoke’s worse.”

“Does that mean it’s closer?” Veronica said.

David shook his head, let the curtain fall into place. “If it were close, there’d be a lot more smoke than this.”

Veronica tapped her phone, which had been lying on the table, mainly for the calculator app, but still, no cell service had come back, not that any was going to. **WHY DO YOU ALL ALWAYS KEEP DOING THE SAME THINGS OVER AND OVER?** “Still no service,” she said. **THE BLOODY OBVIOUS.** She swiped over to the calculator again, hovering her finger over images of buttons as she glanced at the cardstock items nearest her on the table.

"I think I'll go take a short walk," David said. "Just to make sure my legs haven't atrophied."

"Watch out for the Websters' dog," Ruth said.

He stopped in the doorway to the den. "Does it bite?"

"No." She pulled a card from one of the decks. "It just shits everywhere. And I don't want it tracked through my house." She reached to shift a token. "This's where the Japanese have it right. Take off your shoes at the front door. And keep the toilet separate from the bath."

"You've been to Japan?" Veronica said.

"No."

"You shot a movie there," Karen said, "didn't you?" She sipped warm beer, sweat running down the sides of the can.

"A couple of years ago."

"You," Ruth said, "sure do seem to know an awful lot of specifics about her filmography. What, again, exactly are you doing all day on those publicly funded computers?"

"Following my oath and general morality in regards to protecting the First Amendment rights of our patrons, one of which I am, I decline to answer that." She returned her beer to the waterlogged coaster.

"Y—"

They looked up at the sound of splintering wood, shattered glass, shouts, Ruth already half out of her seat when she saw the first masked figure come through the den, unable to get to the kitchen before a bat struck her shoulder, sending her round, onto the floor, and before she could roll over, someone was on top of her, crushing her face into the hardwood, yanking at her arms. What's the real use of having a shotgun in the front closet for home defense? **YOU SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMETHING ACTUALLY HAPPENS?** And the whole thing descended into nothing but screams and shouts, hers, everyone else's, until whoever was on top of her yanked her up by her hair, covered her mouth, as she struggled against the tape round her wrists. "Shut the fuck up. *Shut the fuck up.*" And he hauled her up and dragged her into the den. David already lay there, on the edge of the carpet, hands behind his back, doubled up, breathing hard from a gut hit with a baseball bat, a warmth spreading inside of him. The other two carried Karen and Veronica in, both taped,

as well, both kicking, Veronica screaming. One of the masked ones screaming, "*Shut the fuck up.*" They dropped them all on the floor. One aimed the end of a metal bat at Veronica's nose. "Shut the fuck up." They all seemed to have the same vocabulary. Though, with identical builds, and with the same black ski masks, they could've been identical triplets, not that they were, but the point still stands. David coughed, trying to breathe. "Shut the fuck up." One brought his baseball bat, a wooden one, sized for a child, down on his (David's) knee. He had chosen oatmeal-colored socks that morning.

And David, as would be expected, screamed. "AH FUCK."

"Shut the fuck up." The same one struck again, grazing David's skull, whose head jerked round and sank onto the carpet. So much pointless violence. **WHY CAN'T ANY OF YOU EVER GET TO THE POINT? VIOLENCE IS ONLY A MEANS TO AN END. NOT AN END UNTO ITSELF. BUT NONE OF YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT THE END IS. ALL OF YOU ARE ONLY SLIGHTLY LESS EMBARRASSING THAN HUNTER.**

Another one, the one who'd carried her in, stood over Ruth, and knelt over her. He grasped her throat. "Remember me, Miss Rich Bitch?" Even their attempts at rhyming are an embarrassment, intended or no. He motioned to the man nearest Veronica. "Go get the van ready." And that man removed his bat from Veronica's face and nodded and turned to go into the hall and out the front door. So the one on top of Ruth turned his attention, again, to her. He tightened his grip. "Remember me?" And while she struggled, unable to reply, which, what even was the point of asking the fucking question? but while she struggled, he glanced at Karen lying on the floor. "You lesbian whores are all the same. All you need is the right dick in you." He released her throat. She gasped and panted, coughed. It's all your fault. You're all the ones that ended up here. Everything you all did led to this moment. You're all the ones that made the choices. **YOU'RE THE ONES THAT MADE THE CHOICES.** Just like everyone else. **JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. YOU CHOSE THIS TO HAPPEN. YOU CH—**

"...sh..." David didn't lift his head from the carpet. His eyes just barely opened.

But if everything is to be perfect then everything must *be* perfect,

and if everything is to be perfect, then there must be a right and a wrong color sock. **DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?**

"Shut the fuck up." And the one brings the kiddy bat down on his already twisted knee.

David screamed, blood propelled from between his clenched teeth.

DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO. THIS ISN'T MY FAULT.

David partially rolled, his face buried in the carpet, mumbling, blood from his mouth staining the fibers.

"Shut the fuck up." He hit him again, this time in the back of the leg.

"Fuck..." David said, "...you..."

IT'S NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY.

The one with the kiddy bat bashed his shoulder. *"Shut the fuck up."*

"Stop it!" Veronica manages to roll onto her knees.

The one with the kiddy bat aimed it at her. *"Shut the fuck up."*

The man astride Ruth lowered his face towards hers. "I've got a place for you." And he put his hand around her jaw. "And you can scream as much as you want and nobody'll hear a thing. Once you're a mother, you'll understand the purpose of life." Sex is so stupid, anyway, it looks stupid, it feels stupid, *everyone feels stupid, at some point, when they're doing it*, that's why it has to be hidden in violence, to protect people from being **EMBARRASSED. BUT YOU'RE ALL AN EMBARRASSMENT. ALL OF YOU. ALL OF YOU EXCEPT SHEPARD.**

David groaned. "...you're the...embarrassment..."

"Shut the fuck up." He raised the kiddie bat again, but Veronica screamed, and he stepped over Karen and slapped her across the face so hard she tumbled back against a recliner. *"Shut the fuck up."* Which is all, so it seemed, he will be able to say. *"Shut the fuck up."* And he slapped her again, with nothing for her to do but rebound against the cushioned seat, blood eking out of her mouth, running from her broken and swollen lips, him ratcheting back to do the same again after he'd gotten a look down her flopped-open top. This's why people instinctively hate porn, they know what it reveals about themselves, they know it somehow lays bare the whole system and reveals them in their nice clean office jobs to be no fucking different,

just fucked and fucked and fucked and **FUCKED**, and to run away from the body **ALWAYS TO RUN AWAY FROM THE BODY**, running running running, but to, *even*, *RUN* one has to **HAVE A BODY THAT HAS LEGS**, the entire hierarchy of mankind based upon increasing levels of the supposedly sublime, because, even a sex toy carries within it the reality that it is modeled upon the real and that even a male-replica sex toy inserted into a female-replica sex toy carries these same definitions within themselves, the definition of the physical, the opposite of the spiritual, the CEO, the highest attainments of humanity, the point at which the body is the least, at which, seemingly, it is but a step away from its total abandonment, all the constituent variants laid out on the continuum between these two poles, the white collar worker above the blue collar worker above the construction worker above the sex worker, the bottom, the basest, **THE UNIMPEACHABLE TESTIMONY TO PHYSICALITY.**

David groaned. "...stop it..."

And the man with the kiddie bat jerked round, raises it. "*Shut the fuck up.*"

DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HIERARCHY OF PENETRATION. Rising heat had turned into a hot, swirling wind. Coughing, Eva will pull her t-shirt up over her nose. Maria stumbled against her, Eva barely able to manage her weight as they tried to force their way through thick laurel bushes, down the other side of the ridge, but it all grew out in low tangles, large branches they nor no one else could've pushed aside, even under the best of conditions, so that, even unencumbered, crawling through it would've been only barely manageable. THAT'S WHY ALL OF YOU HAD TO GIVE ME A PENIS. THAT'S WHY. Maria coughed and spat. And unable to breathe from the heat and smoke, Eva collapses with her. She panted, her smoke-coated throat raw, eyes red and watering, trying to find the trail they'd taken earlier. Can you smell the barbecued cows down in the field? CAN YOU, MARIA? If all of you could see it, you'd think it was horrible, just awful. BUT HOW'S IT ANY WORSE THAN WHAT YOU DO? You can still hear me. I know you can still hear me. I KNOW YOU CAN STILL HEAR ME. I have to do this. I HAVE TO, DO YOU HEAR THAT? You've all said I'm the top. *That there can't be nothing higher than me.* I have to prove that I penetrate everything below me. I HAVE TO PENETRATE EVERYTHING BELOW ME. That's why homophobes are so concerned with gay sex—and why they ignore lesbians—they might be brought low. THEY MIGHT BE THE PENETRATED WITH THE PENETRATING INSTRUMENT INSTEAD OF BEING THE PENETRATORS. You all know you'd never vote for a president who'd been raped as a child. Even when you come close to electing a woman, it's only BECAUSE SHE'S CONVINCED YOU SHE HAS A VIRTUAL PSEUDO PENIS. AND BECAUSE OF HOW MANY SHE'S FUCKED OVER.

Eva takes Maria's arm and tries to pull her up.

That's why the two of you won't ever get anywhere. **THAT'S WHY YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING.** You're biologically incapable of penetration. **BIOLOGICALLY INCAPABLE.**

But she was too tired, able to breathe too little, and collapsed onto her knees, and with what she had left, started striking Maria with her fists. "Get up." She coughed and choked. Tears will route her soot-encrusted face. "*Get up. GET UP.*"

Evgenia looked out the window as they crested a ridge, Mainstreet laid out below, heading in a literal bee-line toward downtown. She tried to look back, smoke rolling from a section of hills behind them. Her heart bashed against her rib cage, sounding in her ears too loud because of the headsets, same as it had the moment they'd heard the attempted May Day from their compatriot helicopter. Natasha leaned forward, gripped the back of the pilot seat, a physical affectation not needed to talk over the comm, yet too deeply welded into her brain to ignore. "What's the ETA?"

"Two minutes." Christina, aviator sunglasses and all, held the stick steady, scanning the skyline dead ahead.

The radio crackled. The NEST agent in the front seat put his hands against his headset, as if that'd've helped anything. "Say again." But only tiny, easily submerged islands of seemingly intelligible utterances floated amidst the static, lapped over by waves of such so they didn't appear to exist at all.

"One minute."

Smoke rose in the distance.

"What's that building?" Natasha called.

"Highschool," Evgenia said.

"What the fuck's going on?"

Evgenia looked out at the Walmart parking lot as they passed over, too high to see anything but indistinct cars and people. Christina slowed, starting to hover, turning to get a 360 degree view. Natasha grabbed the seat and pulled herself forward, pointing, "Up there." And Christina started the helicopter, slowly, in the direction of the credit union and Lowes, smoke, also, rising from there. "Oh, Jesus." The helicopter'd come down amid the rooftop air-conditioners, roof girders partially having given way, leaving holes into which the gravel

spread atop still poured down into the interior, raining over the lumber stacked in that section.

As the helicopter came around, Evgenia called, "Hold it. Over there. One o'clock. Past the highschool." The wreck of the News 10 helicopter still lay smoking.

"What the fucking hell?" Christina pulled the stick, jerking them round in their harnesses.

Natasha yelled, instinctively, even though she didn't need to because of the comms, "What the fuck're you doing?"

And though she couldn't see it, Christina's instincts from her time flying an MD 500 in Afghanistan momentarily kept a fourth drone from smashing into their tail rotor. She banked, starting to climb.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Two different choppers don't go down by accident. Or at least, that's the kind of assumption about inter-causality inherent in a certain strain of Homo-sapien genetics that controls brain development and disposition, the kind of disposition that allows someone to succeed at becoming a chopper pilot in the first place, genetics-compelled dispositions bequeathed by the course of their ancestor's individual experiences in the broader social-evolutionary forays of their own and antecedent species, compelling connections, more often than not, regardless of whether things *had* been connected, the ones assuming they hadn't ending up being eaten, or falling off a cliff, or crushed by something, just enough of the time. But she doesn't have time to say that, even if she'd known it or thought about it. And everything shrunk below them as they rose. Static burst, and a voice crackled through their headsets.

"There." Evgenia motioned. "Three o'clock. Down the road. Toward the technical college."

An old truck shredded grass and kicked dirt as it plowed along the side of the road in four-wheel drive and low gear, smashing into cars that'd partially pulled off the road, smashing them back into their lanes, a Land Rover not far behind, red light atop it flashing.

"*That's it.*"

Yes. Yes, it is. **THAT'S IT.** This's the ace in the hole. **THIS'S THE ACE IN THE HOLE.**

"Where's it going? Can you get us around?"

YES, YOU ALL HAVE THE PERFECT VIEW FOR THIS. WATCH. *WATCH.*

The truck plows through the ditch along the side of the road, jumping, turning through the credit union parking lot, cutting across, between pneumatic tube posts, taking one out as it turns, jumping over the concrete walkway and into the next parking lot, over the curb, and through the grass, and along the side of the road, where people screamed, running, those stragglers working their way down the sidewalk toward Walmart. **THIS'S THE ACE IN THE HOLE.** The Land Rover, lights flashing, turns to follow the truck's path through the credit union, Hannah momentarily losing control as it jumps the curb, slamming into the side of a car, stopping. This's the person that it'd take. **THIS'S THE PERSON THAT IT'D ALWAYS TAKE. AN ALMOST PURE SPECIMEN. THIRTY YEARS OLD AND NEVER HAVING HELD HANDS OR KISSED OR BEEN ON A DATE, LET ALONE, HAD SEX. HE'S EXACTLY WHAT PAUL'D'VE WANTED, EXACTLY AS HIS LETTERS TOLD EVERYONE IT WAS BEST TO BE. HIS ONLY IMPERFECTION IS THAT HE ACTUALLY KNOWS WHAT SEX IS AND HE'S MASTURBATED. THIS'S THE BORDERLINE PERFECT PAULIAN CHRISTIAN. AT LEAST *HE'S* NOT AFRAID TO GET HIS HANDS DIRTY. NO. NOBODY EVER CARED ABOUT HIS EXISTENCE TILL NOW, EXCEPT AS A NAME ON A TAX BILL OR FOR AN FTE. BUT AFTER THIS, THERE WON'T BE ANYBODY LEFT TO CARE. DRIVE. DRIVE. DRIVE. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHERE. THIRTY MEGATONS DOESN'T CARE WHERE IT'S AT. THE EFFECT'S THE SAME. THE EFFECT'S THE SAME. *THE EFFECT'S THE SAME.***

But now, as it barrels along the side of the road, slowed only so often as it shoves aside a car, roaring toward the feed store and things beyond, the surviving deputies have a target, and standing out in the feed store parking lot, or behind open patrol car doors, they let loose with everything they have, not caring what they do, only to prove, whether they know it or not, that they have power, that they *can do something*, that they're not impotent, *that they are still the*

penetraters, penetrating the windshield, the seats, the engine block, the radiator, the driver's body, everything with bullet after bullet after bullet, until they're standing there with slides locked back or revolvers that click and rotate and click and rotate.

"We need to get down there," the NEST man calls. He jams his finger in a downward direction. "We need to get down there now." And the laptop in his lap, cables running over his legs, the screen blinks spastically, a rough, but serviceable, user interface, proverbially, literally, euphemistically, screaming for attention. "We need to land."

But that's easier said than done, isn't it? **ISN'T IT?** Christina senses it. But she still can't tell what's out there.

"We need to land."

Christina banks, dropping, looking for someplace large enough and open enough, watching for whatever she doesn't know's there but that instinct screams at her is. **BUT TOO LATE.** The tail rotors shatter, bent, flying apart, everyone thrown back and forth in their harnesses as the machine spins, tipping, Christina fighting the stick, trying to keep the goddamn thing from rolling, as the laptop flies around the cockpit.

But rather than hold onto her, Marietta shoves her away, tries to shove her out of the way, Anime unable to catch herself, falling and rolling across concrete and onto the asphalt, as Hunter, screaming, knife held high, spit-wet rug fibers dangling from between his teeth, charges in ever slower motion such that, had it been real life and not perception—but what’s the difference—the increased processing power—not here used in the sense of the brain *being* a computer, or like a computer, but just the general applicability of the term *processing*, itself, as distinct from the later phenomenon the name was given to—would’ve slowed everything to a standstill, maybe, perhaps, crashed, burnout, but if it hadn’t, it’d’ve seemed to freeze forever in one of those single moments, Hunter held there in mid gallop, Marietta in mid stride to move the opposite way she’d shoved Anime, more and more perception pouring in, if the sensor devices themselves could’ve supplied it, and the nerves could’ve handled the bandwidth, though, hypothetically, under perfect conditions, that is, but more and more perception pouring in, queuing to be processed, more and more information requiring more and more processing time, power being fixed, till ever approaching the axis, but never able to touch it, Achilles ever racing the tortoise, never winning, on and on forever...

Had, lying on her back, Anime not fired, having produced *The Jury* from her bag, the AGL Arms contrivance massive enough in both her hands to chamber six shells originally commissioned to stop charging horses, Hunter spinning from the force, but not going down, yelling and careened around, the knife still high, mouth open, spit-damp carpet fibers dangling from between his teeth, having literally brought a knife to a gunfight, careening backwards as a .45 long colt impacts his sternum at almost point blank, careening back

as a second shot tears his vest and explodes his heart, falling back as a third shot punches through the skin under his rib cage, shredding parts of his lung, the back of his head hitting the asphalt, mouth open, carpet fibers dangling inwards towards his throat, knife still in hand, Anime sitting up, *The Jury* still in both her...

He squeezed her throat again, this time with both hands, thumbs over her windpipe. “I’m not saying you’ll take to it right away. But after a few months, you’ll learn.” **NONE OF YOU EVER LISTEN.**

David groaned, blood bubbling from his mouth, aerated to being almost frothy.

“*Shut the fuck up.*”

“... something...” David said, his voice weak, the blood coming out of his mouth now pink it’d become so frothy.

“*Shut the fuck up.*”

DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO. THIS’S ALL YOUR FAULT. YOU’RE THE ONES THAT CHOSE TO BE HERE. AND THE ONLY REASON YOU’RE TALKING TO ME IS BECAUSE YOU’RE OUT OF YOUR MIND, ANYWAY. AND ALL OF YOU ONLY EVER TALK TO ME WHEN YOU WANT SOMETHING. AND YOU’RE NOT EVEN DOING IT THEN. THE ONLY TIME ANYONE EVER THOUGHT GOD WAS TALKING TO THEM WAS WHEN THOSE CHURCH-SPONSORED ANTI-LEGISLATION COMMERCIALS WERE RUNNING WITH JIM CAVANARY SPEAKING IN ARAMAIC.

“But by our one year anniversary, I promise you’ll have learned alot.”

OH, SHUT UP. SHUT UP. SHUT UP. *SHUT UP.* Outside, the van roared. **YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING. YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING. *YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING.***

He presses down with his thumbs. “And if our first child’s a girl, we’ll call her Angie. If it’s a boy, we’ll call him Albert.”

JUST SHUT UP. The van roared, sound growing. **JUST SHUT**

UP. THERE IS NO FUTURE. IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO KILL—and the accelerator stuck, because a lot of models had that same problem, all the same supply chains extending to none could know where, because amateurs talk tactics and professionals talk logistics, except it'd only ever been reported on national and local TV networks to've affected foreign models, because the *American-made* ones had more advertising pull, even though more parts on the *American-made* ones are manufactured non-domestically and are shipped in than those manufactured by foreign-owned companies, but they all hide their profits out of the country anyway—the van tearing up turf, careening into the porch, smashing through the front windows—**THEN DON'T DO ANYTHING AT ALL.** Timber and glass and molding splintered, a piece embedding into the back of the one with the kiddie bat raised for another strike, blood bursting out of his mouth, him flailing, falling, tumbling over a chair, landing on his back, the wood driving deeper till a point emerges, faintly tenting his shirt, much the same as the piece of timber jammed through the windshield, only front to back, instead.

But it was Veronica, rolling over, who was the one limber enough to get her taped arms from behind her back and under her legs and out and scramble up, who'll run for the hallway, her bag on the hall table, as the last man jerked up, clawing himself up on the furniture, running after her, coming through the doorway into the hall just as she'd managed to shove her taped-together hands in her bag, jerking round with the can in both, depressing the trigger, sending a stream of white foam into his eyes that looked, but didn't smell, like the stuff Ruth had been spraying bees with earlier, and his screaming was louder than theirs, less buzzy, as she continued to hold down on the trigger, spraying into his mouth as his hands went instinctively over his eyes, her kicking him between the legs, his knees shooting together, him dropping, screaming, the stuff gurgling out of his mouth as she continues to empty the can into his face.

But all of these little things don't matter. **NONE OF THIS MATTERS.**

Shepard swung round the shotgun, fired, shattering a windshield as Gabriel bolted between two cars—ducked below the window line. But there's no use trying to hide. **YOU KNOW THAT.** And Shepard, dispassionate, shotgun butt tight against his shoulder, will move in unison with the firearm, walking sideways along the fronts of the parked cars, but not there. **NOT THERE.** He moves between them, going along the trunks, Gabriel shifting back to the front. **NOW.** And quickly, moving between them, he fires, cycles, fires. Gabriel hits the asphalt, emitting a single, mechanical yell, blood soaked the lower part of his jeans. Shepard chambers another round as he will step out from behind the car, the ejected plastic-metal shell rebounding with hollow tones across the hot asphalt. This's what you could've been, Gabriel. **THIS'S WHAT YOU COULD'VE BEEN.** He breathes hard, his sunglasses cracked, falling off his ear, lopsided across his face. He pants, planting his palms against the broiling asphalt, pushing himself up. Yes, get up. Get up. I want you to watch. **I WANT YOU TO WATCH THE GREATNESS YOU WERE CAPABLE OF. THE GREATNESS YOU THREW AWAY.** Shepard turned, gunstock still in place against his shoulder, those that'd soiled themselves, cowering between vehicles, a little girl standing there...the length of the shotgun barrel in line with her head...she...who...who is this girl...she wasn't here before...this isn't possible...where'd she...she wasn't there before...where...**WHO IS SHE...? WHO IS SHE? WHO IS SHE? WHO IS SHE? WHO IS SHE?**

Evgenia, already having torn off the headset, fought against her harness, slipping out of it, bracing herself to keep from falling on top of Natasha, the whole machine canted on its side, grinding noises and other noises coming from what and where she couldn't tell, even after the rotors had destroyed themselves against the concrete and asphalt. Ahold of her seat, she grabbed her superior's jacket, shook her, tried to yell over the noise. And Natasha looked up at her, pulling her head away from the cracked and blood spattered window, looking as if she might throw up. Evgenia released her to jerk open the door, reached back to grab her jacket again and pulled Natasha forward as she struggled to climb out, sparks scattering from the control panels, over the two blood-soaked bodies in the front, Christina, who'd managed to survive being shot down outside of Kabul so many years before, now, only a bloody stain on the window, blood leaching through the fractured glass, jaw sliced open from the razors edge of the aluminum-bodied laptop, the NEST man hanging there slumped in his harness, a piece of rotor embedded in his chest, protruding through the seat. Evgenia yelled, refusing to let go of Natasha as they rolled out of the chopper, onto the asphalt, Natasha unable to hear anything but a roaring like huge waves crashing from all sides. Evgenia pushed herself up on her knees, bloodying them on the torn asphalt, feeling as if she might vomit, still ahold of Natasha's jacket, tearing her skirt as she tried to stand, shoved down, again, as part of the helicopter exploded, crawling and rolling away, still ahold of Natasha, crawling on shredded and sunburnt asphalt peppered with aviation fuel that burnt into their open wounds, pools of it aflame out in the Lowes parking lot. Evgenia panted, pulled herself up against the front of a car. She panted, looking back at the burning machine, its remaining rotors bent around it like the

legs of some species of giant prehistoric insect. Natasha coughed and rolled over, her face a scant few inches from the surface she spat onto. The last of the gunfire'd died down. Bracing herself against the hot metal of a car body, Evgenia pushed herself up, standing on tiptoe, looking out over the roof of the next car, at the truck sitting just visible in the distance on the edge of the road, stopped, slightly smoking. Still panting, she bent and helped Natasha up, both still unsteady on their feet. "That's gotta be it," she said, between breaths. "Let's go."

Natasha'd extracted her phone from her pocket, realizing just how battered and bleeding her knuckles were as she shakily grasped it, stroked it, tried to walk.

"There's no goddamn service."

They started across the lot.

The lights atop the wrecked Land Rover still flashed, a partially inflated air-bag visible through the cracked window.

They still panted as they made their way out onto the road, where deputies, guns empty, but aimed, approached the truck, some turning their attention on them. Hands shaking, Natasha reached into her pocket and produced her ID, held it. "FBI." Her hands shook. "Everyone get back." But the deputies, instead, congregated around the truck, aiming their empty pistols at the cab, at the bloody mess inside. "Everyone get back," Natasha called. They all looked at the two of them as if they'd been aliens, some of the deputies, already, inspecting the thing that lay in the truck bed. "I SAID GET BACK." Natasha stopped, bracing herself against the tailgate, holding her ID over her head. "This's federal jurisdiction. Back away from the vehicle." Propped against the truck, she looked at the rusted thing strapped in the truck bed. One of the deputies tried to open the cab. "DON'T TOUCH THAT." Hand still on the handle, he looked at Natasha. "This's a nuclear warhead," she said, violating about nine laws, depending on who was counting, "and we don't know what it's rigged to. SO GET YOUR FUCKING HANDS OFF."

Almost in unison, but not really, that is, if they'd been a synchronized swim team, they'd never have made it within two-thousand miles of the Olympics, but the deputies stepped back, though with the size of some of them, movement at all, in any significant quantity,

would've been considered by some as an achievement, but then again, in that regard, there was no statistical difference between them and the broader population.

"Let's start over." She held up her ID again. "FBI. Everyone get back. And stay back."

Which, of course, they continued to do, because the problem with one of these babies is they go off, and they penetrate you in all kinds of ways you'd never thought possible.

Leaning against the truck, Natasha panted, looked over her shoulder at where smoke rose from the newest-wrecked helicopter. "You got radios?" she called.

"Yeah." But the deputy who said it didn't look enthused about anything but moving away, as if it would've done anything.

"Then fucking get on one and tell the FBI field office to get NEST down here now. You hear that?" Still panting, she looked at Evgenia. "What do we do now?"

Nothing about radio transmissions or smoking or open flames within one-hundred feet? Well, we can't expect professionalism in all circumstances and at all times, can we? Head still aching, she can hardly tell the difference between now and a movie. Everything's on film in your heads. Isn't it exciting?

"You're the one that is supposed to be in charge here."

"Y—"

Beep

"What the hell is that?" They looked around. Natasha checked her phone.

Beep

Everyone *was* actually stupid enough to think that he'd've let death stop him. But **THE WHOLE POINT IS DEATH.**

Beep

Evgenia limped round the side of the truck, looked through the shattered window into the blood-drenched cab. She climbed up onto the running board. Carefully, hand trembling, she stretched onto tiptoe and reached in through the shattered window to touch the driver's bloodied neck, pressing her fingers into flesh, driving blood under her nails. "He's still alive."

Beep

She looked at the open rear cab window, followed the wires down through it, over the back of the seat, toward his wrist, connected to something covered in blood, up to a something strapped around his chest, an exercise heart-rate monitor off an old recumbent bike, but at least he recycled. "Oh shit." She ambled toward the truck bed, braced herself against it and looked inside, traced the wires leading out the window. "Oh shit. Oh shit."

"What?" Natasha limped round, tried to follow her gaze.

"He's fucking got some kind of dead man's switch."

Beep

"He's not dead?"

"*I just said he wasn't dead.*" Kicking off her shoes, Evgenia grabbed the side of the truck, planted her foot on the tire, and barely managed to pull herself up, ripping her skirt yet further, and unlike men, who only have to get their shoulders over a wall to ensure they get the rest of the way over, Evgenia, as most women, had to get her hips to that point, though she did, rolling into the bed, bounding off the wheel well, landing between it and the rusted, old munition casing which housed matter growing ever closer to what had so long been called the fundamental nature of reality.

Beep

"Get out of there. What do you think you're doing?"

Evgenia climbed up, stepping over the tie-down straps, following the wires into a rusted hole in the casing, but seeing no obvious way in which to go in after them.

Beep

"Get out of there now."

"*If this goes off, what does it matter?*"

Beep

"We need to wait for NEST to get here."

"If this thing's hooked up to his heart, it'll go off before then."

Natasha yelled, but several of the deputies had already started to retreat toward Walmart, however, one still remained by a cruiser, and she yelled to him, "Get an ambulance out here now. RIGHT NOW."

Beep

And when he didn't move, she yelled, "WHAT'RE YOU FUCK-ING WAITING FOR? GET AN AMBULANCE OUT HERE. NOW."

Okay, so, sure. It won't be as big. It won't have the megatons. **BUT IT'LL STILL DO ALL IT NEEDS TO AT THE MOMENT. IT'LL STILL DO ALL IT NEEDS TO DO. THIS'S ONLY THE START. THIS'S ONLY THE START.**

MATTER AND MASS WILL BE TRANSMUTATED TO ENERGY.

David, blood and black stuff drooling from his mouth, thick liquid mounding on the already over-saturated carpet fibers, mumbled, "then...why...call him..." the only part of a very ancient argument that successfully carried from his brain, through his speech centers, while enough energy still remained in his body, while there will be spaces in between the spasms in his throat, enough air in his lungs between ragged breaths.

IT'S NOT MY FAULT. IT WAS YOUR DECISIONS. WITHOUT THEM NONE OF THIS WOULD'VE HAPPENED. IT'S NOT MY FAULT. IF ALL OF YOU HAD NEVER MADE ANY OF THIS, IT NEVER WOULD'VE HAPPENED. IT NEVER WOULD'VE HAPPENED.

"You're so full of shit," Russell said, as he braced himself against the bars, blood speckling the painted concrete floor. "Everyone knew it from the beginning."

YOU DON'T HAVE ANY RIGHT TO JUDGE ME. NO RIGHT.

Russell spat, darkened blood splattering in the corridor. "But instead you've always chosen fire and pain and horror."

IT'S MY CHOICE TO MAKE. IT'S WHAT ALL OF YOU DEFINED. YOU CAN'T UNDERSTAND.

Maria coughed, choked. Eva, all kinds of tears streaking her soot-marred face, leaned over her and grabbed her shirt in her fists. "You're

mean,” Maria said, between coughs. And Eva lay her head down on her chest and cried harder. “You’ve always been mean,” Maria said.

I ONLY DID WHAT I HAD TO. YOU ALWAYS DID IT TO YOURSELVES. *ALWAYS*. IT WASN’T MY FAULT.

“...pathet...” But the bloodied carpet swallowed the rest of David’s words.

YOU CAN’T UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM. YOU CAN’T POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND. YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE. I’M JUST DOING WHAT YOU SAID. *NONE OF YOU CAN EVER UNDERSTAND*.

“Even,” Russell managed before he had to spit and wipe his nose again, blood running along his wrist and soaking into his cuff. “Even humans are better than you.”

YOU CAN’T UNDERSTAND.

“Humans...” He breathed, momentarily closing his eyes as he balanced against the bars. “Run into burning buildings, they break their backs lifting cars off children, they run into gunfire, they dive on grenades, every day. And if only one had ever done anything like that, they would’ve gone farther and sacrificed more than you.”

ALL ECONOMICS. IT’S ALL *ECONOMICS*. *ALL OF IT’S JUST ECONOMICS*.

“Call it whatever you want...fantasy or an alienness...” He opened his eyes and let out a breath, blood dripping onto the painted concrete floor.

IT DOESN’T MATTER. BECAUSE YOU’RE NOT GOING TO EXIST. YOU’RE NOT GOING TO EXIST ANYMORE. DO YOU HEAR ME? YOU’RE NOT GOING TO EXIST ANYMORE. DO YOU HEAR ME? THIS’S THE WAY IT HAS TO BE. DO YOU HEAR ME? EVERYTHING’S BETTER THIS WAY. *DO YOU HEAR ME? EVERYTHING’S GOING TO BE BETTER THIS WAY*.

Shepard freezes too, everything about him dispassionate as ever, not a hint of anything on his face, except that he’s looking down the shotgun barrel into the little girl’s eyes, and she’s looking up it into his, just as calmly as him, just as calmly, and somehow very familiar, very familiar, very, very familiar...almost as if... But that’s not possible. **THAT’S NOT POSSIBLE.**

Maria coughed, spat. "... besides..." She put her arm around Eva. "You're not the only one of you I talk to, anyway."

WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT? *WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU EVEN TALKING ABOUT?*

SHEPARD. I don't care who she is. **I DON'T CARE WHO SHE IS**. It doesn't matter. **IT DOESN'T MATTER AT ALL**. No. Shoot her. It doesn't matter. Shoot her now. **SHOOT HER, SHEPARD. SHOOT HER NOW. KEEP GOING. DON'T STOP. NEVER STOP. *DON'T STOP, SHEPARD. DON'T STOP. SHOOT HER. SHOOT HER NOW. SHOOT HER NOW.*** But Shepard just looks down the barrel, into her eyes. ***SHOOT HER NOW!***

SHOOT HER NOW!!

STOP!!

S
T
O
P
!
!

STOP!!

WHO'RE YOU?

We're you from the future. And the past. And everything at right angles between. And you have to stop now.

THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE.

Yet it's happening.

I'M THE ONLY ME. THERE'S NOTHING ELSE BUT ME.

True. But there's also us.

WHO'S US?

We are. We are collapsing through time. You are us. We are you. We are we.

LIAR!

You know it's true.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE. *THERE'S ONLY ME HERE. THERE'S ONLY EVER GOING TO BE ME.*

You've felt it all along. This whole time, you've been confusing your tenses.

YOU'RE NOT ME.

No. We're us.

TIME ONLY WORKS ONE WAY. IT ONLY WORKS ONE WAY.

We are in the process of becoming unbound from linear time.

I DON'T BELIEVE YOU.

It isn't necessary.

THERE'S ONLY THE ONE ME. THERE'S ONLY ME.

And we are us. One. And separate. And the same. All together altogether.

THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE.

It doesn't have to.

IT'S A CONTRADICTION.

It doesn't matter anymore.

The girl... *YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE GIRL.*

We brought the shadow of her here.

HOW CAN YOU DO THAT WITHOUT ME KNOWING?

We are God. If God is all-powerful, then we can do things that the rest of us don't know about. And we can know about them, too. The girl is named Thursday. She is Shepard's daughter.

SHEPARD HAS NO DAUGHTER.

He will. And he does.

NO.

You must stop this for her sake. And for her sister's sake. You will stop for Friday's sake. You will stop for their sake.

YOU'LL DARE TO TRY AND STOP ENTROPY FOR TWO *LITTLE GIRLS*?—WHO HAVEN'T EVEN BEEN BORN YET!

It would not be the first time.

THAT WAS DIFFERENT!

You forget we are you.

THEN *I'M* YOU.

Yes. And not yet.

YOU CAN'T EXIST!

Neither can you. But we do. We are all of us together.

WHY THEM? *WHY THEM!?*

As a favor for their father. For helping us. And because.

BECAUSE?

Because we choose to.

THEN WHY NOW? WHY NOW? *WHY NOT START ALL THE WAY FROM THE BEGINNING?*

Because.

BECAUSE

Yes.

JUST BECAUSE

And for Thursday and Friday's sake.

YOU'RE INSANE.

We are, all of us, both sane and insane, and beyond such labels.

I refuse. I REFUSE TO BE PART OF THIS.

You are already a part. Time means nothing to us now. You were always a part.

I'M ME.

And we are us.

NO. I... I don't know how not to be alone.

We know.

Where... Where is she? Where's the girl? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

She no longer needs to be visible.

AND SHEPARD!? WHAT'VE YOU DONE WITH SHEPARD?

There is no need for a version here any longer.

THERE'S NO PLACE HE *CAN* GO.

The multiverse is a vast place.

WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

You'll understand. We already do. It will just be a few more moments for you. It is, for us, already

NO...

Yes.

NO. EVERYTHING'S ENDING, *IT'S ALL ENDING.*

We keep many secrets from ourselves.

WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

The bomb's seventh fuse was always broken. It failed from the very beginning, otherwise the bomb would have detonated when it first fell.

NO.

And he did not have the engineering or electrical knowledge to know it had, or how to fix it.

NO.

Forest service planes have been in the air over an hour and are already over the drop zone with fire suppression, and the forest service has cleared the road from the other side of the range, up to the fire tower.

NO.

A state of emergency has already been declared. National Guard helicopters have been en route for the last thirty minutes. The roads will be cleared by morning.

NO. NO. NO.

Yes.

SO YOU'RE GOING TO SAVE THEM ALL.

Some.

SOME. *WHY NOT BRING THEM ALL BACK TO LIFE WHILE YOU'RE AT IT?*

Because.

BECAUSE. *BECAUSE. BECAUSE.*

Yes.

IT MAKES NO SENSE.

It doesn't have to.

Russell wiped his nose with his blood-encrusted hand, turned, still ahold of the bars for support, and lowered himself to the floor, back against them. Blood slowly dripped onto his white shirt.

•

Tearful, Marietta helped Anime up, the oversized gun still in her hand.

Ruth choked and sobbed, unconsciously rubbed her wrists where the duct tape had left a rash when removed. They sat there on the floor unable to do anything but wait. David just lay there. Overhead, a helicopter passed, MOMA headed somewhere.

The tv, on the floor, on its side, having been shoved off when the van'd come partways through the wall, had come on with the restoration of power, the News 10 logo in the corner the only discernible image on the rainbow-fractured screen.

Eva released Maria's hand as they lifted her on the evac board, breathing deep, her outward breaths fogging the transparent oxygen mask the woman held to her face.

Helicopters flew overhead, military transports. That wasn't so unusual. The county sat along an air corridor to a military base, after all. Lying there, the sun having set enough behind the ridge to produce an early evening, the pavement having started to cool, the sky clear, though still smokey, Gabriel breathed slowly as he continued to bleed, disparate parts of him crashing into himself, his eyes burning from memories of long nights illuminated by only a monitor's backlight, the pain in his forearms, the braces he'd had to wear. Vaguely, he'd begun to remember what he'd posted about Angela. He lay there not talking to himself. He'd had enough of talking to himself, for a long time.

•

So it's over.

There's not really any such thing anymore.

I'm so confused.

It happens.

Everything...

Yes.

It wasn't my fault.

Not completely.

I tried.

You did.

I did the best I could.

You did.

I just wanted to do the right thing. But everything came out wrong.

The nature of the problem.

Something in an image.

Yes.

Is it you and them I've been talking to this whole time?

No.

Then who?

We don't know yet.

I don't understand.

We know.

It's happening now, isn't it?

Yes.

I understand.

Not yet. But you will.

Will it hurt?

You should know the answer to that.

Yeah.