

I am here to fuck up your life and make a book of it.

The book is the first priority. You can't write it on your own, so you've arranged to have me come along and take over for a while. To take over your life. Not permanently. Just until I finish your book.

It's hard, this writing business. It's hard not to suspect you have fallen into the well, or that you have chased a dream down into the rabbit hole of insanity. You amass papers and notes and files and you surround yourself with the madness of revision, digging deeper into it all the time.

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You've left me notes at your desk. I told you ahead of time, I wouldn't need most of this stuff. I appreciate the gesture and the effort, I suppose, But I don't need to know how the toilet handle needs to be jiggled just so, and I don't need a detailed description of how your job needs to be done, of what your responsibilities are. If you know it reasonably well, then I know it too. I don't know everything you know. Not up here in my head, but the shit you know, down in your bones, I've got all that. Pretty sure I explained it to you as well, but this is how it goes. Everybody leaves detailed notes. Notes upon notes, trying to ensure they don't forget something important, something instrumental, something that would give away the game. Nobody wants me to embarrass them by forgetting their mother's name or some shit like that. But like I said, If you know it, down in your bones, if you've got the habit, I know it too. If you've got the habit, I've got the habit. To a lesser degree, of course. Your habits and addictions are not mine, but I do feel them. Shit. This is a waste of time, but there is one thing that I want to make clear. I might not know where you keep the asprin, but if I've got a headache, and I walk into the bathroom, I'll reach into the medicine cabinet and go right to the shelf where the asprin lives. The more I think about it and try to explain it,

the less sense it makes, and the more I stumble over the shit that you take for granted. If I don't think about it or worry about it or let it consume me in any way, the whole affair goes swimmingly. The machinery ticks forward like a well-maintained clock.

So I get back to your desk, which is my desk now, and I start looking over your notes and papers. You've got a manuscript in the works, according to your notes. Yes you certainly do. This briefcase has about five hundred pages of printed copy, there are labeled folders in the filing cabinet. Anything with the words "waking city" written on it, you say. Or sometimes just "wake" or "Pork Lab" or even "Stone Pig Mask" -- all of that is related to the manuscript you would like me to finish, those later labels coming from your earlier drafts, before you had a sense of what the book was all about. Enough of a sense to settle on this name, anyhow.

Your notes are a jumble. They are self-contradictory. But as you have pointed out in the notes you have left for me, they are dated, so I will be able to tell which are your more developed ideas and scenes. Most of them are dated. A fair number of them are dated, there are still sheafs of paper and folders with scene titles and outlines and plot points and lineage and biology notes concerning wild herds of pigs roaming the mediterranean isles of the afterlife. There are diagrams of hybrid insect typewriters. Great. Lots of shit to look at. Yes, they are dated, but

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some of the early notes and scenes are much better than the later iterations--the more developed ideas--that have replaced them.

Fuck. This all is putting me to sleep. It doesn't help that I worked a shift of your day job, and went directly from wheat-pasting posters around the city to your night job, working as a night-auditor at an overpriced 'rock and roll' themed hotel, and went from there back to your day job, driving around the city, putting up posters. There is glue all over my pants and my shoulders ache, but fuck it. This is the normal state of affairs in your world. I can feel that in my bones. Like I said. You know it, deep down in your bones, and I know it too, deep down in mine.

But I am looking at your stacks of papers and I am looking at your computer screen, with spreadsheets and outlines and word processors and text editors ... the shit is all rather ... confusing and contradictory. I am having a hard time figuring out what this book is supposed to be about. Something about the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and Apollo and Cupid and pneumatic tubes, and a lot of clicking and clacking. I get that. Your notes are saturated with descriptions of little machines making insect noises and little insects making machine noises, but I am starting to fall asleep. I'll get back into this later. I don't know if I can keep up the work schedule you have got going here. It seems detrimental to your health, let alone the quality of your writing. As I drift further away from consciousness,

the state of your manuscript begins to make sense to me. A pattern begins to emerge. You are dead tired and half asleep every time you sit down to write. No wonder the shit is confusing. You can't expect that to make sense. You aren't even there when you confront the page. You aren't here now, wither, but that is a different matter. I am here in your stead. That's the fucking point. But I am too tired to make much sense of any of this. I'll have another stab at it tomorrow. Have I recorded any words yet? No. Have I scratched out or highlighted any of your words yet? No. I don't think so. But I am holding a pen in my hand. What am I doing with that? Fuck. I am scratching the inside of my ear with it. I put the non-business end of the pen--would that be the party end?--into my ear and twist it around. The pen. On this end, business. On that end, party. Some party. What kind of a party is this? Exploration of the ear canal. Find anything worth reporting, boys? I pull out the party end of the pen and look it over. A few large yellow flakes of earwax loosely adhere to the blunt cylinder. Gross.

This party sucks. Yeah, but you are on the guest list. Hoo fucking Rah to that.

And then I hear someone fumbling with keys at the lock on the apartment door. What time is it? It's not as early as I think. I don't know how I spaced the passage of time ... but I sat down here at about noon. Did the night shift, did the cruise. The damage run across the city, replacing any defaced advertisements.

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That took from seven to noon, abouts. None of that matters. Just a waste of my headspace. I am sitting at the desk, trying to make sense of the notes, of the manuscript, but not only of the manuscript, also of the peripheral pieces, the sketches, the recorded dreams, the sporadic dreams. You've got a piece here called 'Things that are Wrong With Me.' It's just a list. Exactly that. A list of things that are wrong with you. I'd like to find a home for this baby. It's my favorite thing I've seen so far. I'd love to find a home for it. I think fiction needs more lists. This one is great. It starts with 'My penis points slightly to the left,' and moves through 'I suffer from recurring dandruff,' and 'hair growing out of my ears,' to the more interesting 'I am so out of touch with my own emotional experience that I seldom have an accurate understanding of my own feelings--in fact, I tend to transmute every stimulus into an expression of sexuality. Things that make another man fly into a rage do little more than give me a transient hardon.' I'll find a place for this one, I think. Time will tell where that place will be.

You don't really journal much. Not in the traditional sense. There is nothing literal and confessional in these papers or in these journals. Anything that seems to have a confessional flavor of memoir or autobiography or journal about it seems to be couched in other terms and symbols or forms, seems to be disguised as something else entirely. Your most confessional writings read like half-baked science fiction.

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I'm drifting off. My focus is gone. It is Three Thirty in the afternoon. I have to be back at your job at Eleven. It's enough time to catch some rest. I'll bring a stack of papers to the hotel tonight. I didn't do it last night, as it was my first shift there, I thought I'd play it straight. But tonight, I'll bring some papers. Maybe bring the laptop. No. Not yet. I'll start with these printouts. I'll read through them. Mark them up. Highlight anything that catches my eye. You didn't want me to destroy any of your old drafts, in case you didn't have backup copies made somewhere, on some disk or in some box. But I can't promise anything. There are certain things I will respect. I will try to preserve elements of your life so that when you return, you recognize it, so you will not be overwhelmed by a sense of pathetic loss. I will work to ensure you recognize the life you return to when my time here is done.

Where was I? The keys rattling in the door. It sounds like they drop to the floor. Someone picks them up and goes back to the lock. You have two cats. They are moving around with agitated anticipation now. Eagerly awaiting something.

Who the fuck is that?

Oh yeah. The wife. Well. Let's have a look at her. She comes in the door. Blond hair with streaks of color, up in braids. Red lipstick. Shimmering eyeshadow. A little sundress. Sneakers on her feet. She's a little off balance on her sneakered feet.

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her braids are coming a little loose. She is carrying a bag over her shoulder, but it drops to the floor as she tries to hang it on a doorknob. "Baby!" She says. "You're up."

"How was the family?" I ask. Ah yes. She was visiting her family. Your in-laws.

"Oh my god," your wife answers. "I am so fucking exhausted."

"Did you have fun?"

"Sure. What are you doing up?" She sidles over and slips into my lap. She puts her arms around my shoulders and lays a thick wet kiss on my lips.

"I was just about to go to bed," I tell her.

"Haven't been yet? Oh, poor thing." she half teases. "I don't know. It was fine. I ... I just wanted to spend some time by myself. And I didn't get to. My mom took all the time off from work and she made plans for every day. And I can't really complain. I mean ... we went to the spa. She took me shopping. We went to her favorite wineries. 'We went to Gloria,'" your wife says mock-tossing her hair in an impersonation of her mother. "I wasn't going to drink," she continues. "But I did."

"I see that," I say.

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"You gonna give me a hard time about it?"

"No. I just ... I'm tired. Trying to work on this ...thing ... this book." It's always interesting the first time I have a conversation with someone close to the client. Because I really don't know what I am going to say. If I do it right, I don't have any idea what I am going to say ... I don't know anything about them. And I don't try to ask myself these questions. I don't try to evaluate my feelings, or Your feelings for this person. It took me a while to get to that. There were awkward interactions early on, I assure you. If I think about it and try to prep myself or plan out what I should say ... anything like that will just paralyze me, leaving me awkward and silent. So I just let the words come naturally. And by paying attention to the way you instinctively react, I develop an understanding of your relationship. An understanding of you that I can't find in your notes. Because you edit it out. But if I stand aside and let your habitual behaviors and responses take over and have their own way, I get to see a much more raw and honest portrayal of you. I see the hidden you that you might prefer to keep under wraps sometimes. Or the hidden you that you don't even know exists, if I am to believe your poem, 'A list of things wrong with me.'

So I continue. I am on the verge of exhausted collapse, anyhow, so it is easy to just lean back and let you have your say. Of course, it is not you that has your say. I have it. I have your

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habits and your tendencies and your patterns of behavior . These are all things that reside within the body. At least in part. So I just try to get out of their way and let them happen.

"I just wanted a little time to myself," your wife says, "and it kind of sucks that I didn't get it."

"I know you've been frustrated," I say. "I've been frustrated too we want to get out of here. You've been pushing at the walls, trying to make changes. Trying to do things differently. We both hate our jobs. We need something different, I know. And you are ... I mean. Fuck. I am an old fucker, now. You are still a young hot thing. You want to get away, spend some time for yourself? You should do it. I'll drop you off somewhere. You want to go camping for a few days? Go visit somebody? It'll be good for you. I'll drive you. I'll drop you off somewhere and pick you up when you are done."

We talk for a while. A little back and forth. She's frustrated. Wants something different. Wants out of this city. Wants out of her anxiety. Her workplace. Our constant struggle. "Fucking work work work is all you ever do," she tells me. "You are so fucking unhappy. It hurts me to see you like this."

"I am unhappy?"

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She's no longer sitting on my lap. She's somehow moved across the room. She's leaning against the wall with her arms crossed under her small, bouyant breasts. "You would know. Maybe you are happy like this. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you don't look happy. But fuck it. You would know."

"I was just going over this stuff," I gesture to the stacks of paper around the desk. "And if I've learned anything, it's that I probably wouldn't know how I'm feeling. Am I unhappy? Shit. I can't tell. I just ... I spend all this time trying to make shit happen, to make a life for us, to accomplish something artistically, to make enough money to keep our roof over our heads--to keep booze in the kitchen ... It's like I've just got my head down and I'm slogging away, and I don't know if anything means anything ... I don't know if I am happy. I've got a hard-on. Does that mean I'm happy?"

She laughs. It is nice. "You work too much," She says. "You should quit one of your jobs."

"You hate your job," I say. "You should quit your job."

"I've got to do something," she says. "I feel like I am drowning."

"I don't want you to drown," I say. It is coming from you, but I think it is part me too. "If there is anything you need to do, fucking do it. You want to take a lover? take a lover. You want a--"

"Shut the fuck up," your wife says. "I thought about leaving town, though. I seriously ... on my way back here. I thought about just going to the airport and flying to Hawaii or some place. Fucking Facebook gives me anxiety. Everybody puts up their perfect life vacation shots. This girl I went to high school with ... She never went anywhere. I always ... I don't want to say 'looked down on her,' but ... she stayed at home. Got a job out of highschool, working at a gift shop on the plaza. I went off to New York. I got my degree. I started my own business. I married an awesome man. She never did anything. But last year, she started posting pictures from Brazil. Japan. All over the world. The fucking gift shop was sending her all over the place. All expense paid business trips all over the world. To buy trinkets or doodads or whatever. And fuck if that's not enough. The owners retired and gave her the shop. She owns the business now. She's opening a new store in Maui. And I have to work in a bar. And I can't even go in to work without having a panic attack. I can't face that place without taking a couple of shots of whiskey. That's not healthy. I seriously just wanted to go to the airport and jump on a plane. To Hawaii. To anywhere. I used to be so spontaneous. I didn't used to have this kind of anxiety. I didn't used to feel so ... trapped."

"You want to get on a plane? Get on a plane," I say.

"That's not it. I don't want to do it without you."

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"I don't mean permanently," I say. "I'll be with you. I ... I don't know how to leave this shit right now. I can't just jump on a plane. I'm also older than you. I look at this stack of paper, at all these fucked up notes, and I think 'I've got to make something of this,' I think. 'This is it. If I don't get my shit together ... I \*have to\* get my shit together. There isn't another career path, there is not the open unlimited highway of youth. I've hit this point where I just look around, and I ... If I am going to be something, it's what I already am. You've got ten years before you hit that. I look at this desk and I look at these papers and I go into my dead end bullshit job and I go to rehearsal and I play gigs that go nowhere. I ... yeah, I freak out when I lay it all out. When I put it out there like that. I look at all this shit surrounding me, and I think. There's got to be something in this. I've got to pull this shit together. Or I am just fucking falling down the rabbit hole of insanity and mid-life crisis and what ever the fuck. Shit. I don't want to leave you. We have a good thing. Yeah, we fuck each other up every once in a while, but we try to do it honestly, we have faced some shit together. This kind of honesty is hard to find. A relationship is a lot of work and blah fucking blah.

"I'm so happy to have you," she says. "We may be fucked up, but at least we don't lie to each other."

But did you tell her about me?

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That's it. By the time I get to bed, it's six in the evening. I go down for three hours. I wake up to the sound of coffee grinding. Your wife does this for you often.

I try to get in a good 25 minutes of focused time at your desk, but it is impossible. Your wife is telling me about the things she's seen on buzzfeed today. She follows buzzfeed on facebook.

"Can't you just go to buzzfeed?" I say.

"I guess," she says, looking at me like I am missing the point.

I bring your briefcase to the hotel. It's stuffed with notes and narrative. When I get to the hotel, I hear people screaming in the courtyard. The bar is in full swing. People surround the pool, cocktails in hand. Somebody, or some group of somebodies, shouts "Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!" from inside the bar.

Somebody gets thrown into the pool. by a complete stranger. His friends square off against his friends while security add I try to figure out exactly what is going on.

I don't get much work done at the hotel. Four or five rooms are filled with people getting shit tank wasted. I'm pretty sure there are narcotics going around the place. four naked girls jump into the pool at four thirty in the morning.

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"The pool is closed, ladies." I tell them, for the fifth time. They had made inquiries early on, and they mounted three offensives throughout the evening, each of which I was able to intercent and turn away. But not this one. They make it into the water, giggling and naked. "You need some towels?"

I bring them a few sets of towels, and they dry off by the side of the pool. "You're cute," one of them tells me. "I just \*love\* your hair. Don't you love his hair?"

I am delirious by the time I make it to your next job. This is ridiculous. "<sup>I quit,</sup>~~I've got to put in my notice,~~" I tell them. They take it well.

"If this is really it, you don't even have to work this week. We'll be fine."

But I'm all set. I'm in my work clothes. I've got the car. I showed up at the warehouse. I might as well pull the shift, I tell them. I don't mind. I came down here. I am happy to do this week.

I keep thinking of your wife. She has this great round ass. An iconic derriere. She's a petite little thing.

Your wife's ass is on my mind when I quit your job.

They seem to like you. They'd hire you back, I think. If you never make it out of the city, if this novel-writing business doesn't work out for you, you can spend the rest of your life hanging paper. If you die young, that is. You won't make enough money to put anything aside for retirement. As long as you die by the time you hit sixty-five or so, you've got the rest of your life laid out before you. Those last few years would be hard on your body, to be sure. But they like you. Maybe they like you enough to find some other work you could do. Something that wouldn't strain your joints so. Something that wouldn't keep you up at night (or whenever you find the time to try and squeeze in an hour or two of sleep). Maybe they'd give you a paintbrush and a collection of common exterior enamels and send you out in an ongoing graffiti abatement campaign.

You can thank me for keeping that door open for you.

I get back to your apartment. I have a couple of shifts left of this paper-hanging business, but I'm not out there today. I'm not up for it today. Today, I am taking care of business. You want me to finish this book? I am on it. This is what I do. I am a machine on a mission. Today, my mission is to carve out the space in your life required to achieve such an undertaking.



At your desk, I pull up the calendar. No social engagements, good. Anything coming up? Upcoming matters of concern? Taxes. It's tax time. Good. I just quit your job. A tax return will come in handy. A little extra cash flow.

I know where you keep your papers. The knowledge is habit. I don't have to think about it. I just reach for your W2s. You've got a stack of them. What's this? hardly anything withholding. Did you do this on purpose? I understand you might not want to give the government an interest-free loan, but you've got rent for next month in the bank and not much else. And what's this? a 1099? Great.

So your tax return ... you owe three thousand dollars; excellent time to quit your day job. Still a month early though. Not at deadline yet. But fuck.

Some of this anxiety creeping over me must belong to you. This is unusual. Your fears and anxieties are not supposed to effect me. I am a machine. A book writing machine. A machine on a mission. What do I care about the balance on your bank statement? This is what I am here for. My purpose is to disconnect from the traditional, conventional trappings of society, to free you from those bonds, at least temporarily, so that you may achieve your \*great work,\* or at least your opus of mediocrity.

I pace back and forth across your apartment, troubled by the advent of this financial insecurity. Troubled by the way it troubles me. I am looking for something. What am I looking for? A selection of keys hangs in the entrance hall. There is a little alcove cut into the wall. A hearth, an altar, a nook. This is where the phone would have been, back when such an appliance was something that required its own special area. there's a little shelf, enough for pen and pad of paper, and a many-time painted over bell. Phone jack. A couple of nails sticking out of the wall have keys--loose and on rings--hanging from them. A few old mounting brackets--also painted over many times--have keys hanging from them as well.

One of these keys is the key to the door of your neighbors apartment. Your dead neighbor's apartment. I know the key by touch. It is bigger than the others. It is freshly cut. It has a large rounded base. I go back to your desk, holding his key in my hand. I look at your blog. There is a piece you wrote about finding your neighbor dead on the floor. The last things he told you--he was angry with you. For not being able to say no. For not being able to carve out the space in your life to focus on the things that are important to you. For not taking the time to write. You took care of him, some. You feel like you could have taken better care of him. This much is apparent from your blog post. But what the fuck did you know? You should have known he was going to die soon. Probably you should have known. But there is a difference between

the impending inevitability of death and preparing for it's immediate onset. You become numbed by routine. Each day you look out to the horizon and you know your end is there. You are slowly but surely moving toward your own eventual collapse. One day you will reach the end of the journey, but the horizon never seems to draw any closer. You look out there in the morning and you know that one day you will be there, but that day is not today, so you go about your affairs as if your life will go on forever, even when you know that cannot be.

Your neighbors last day was like this. You were not prepared for it and he was not prepared for it.

You took him to the bank. He withdrew three thousand dollars in cash--spending money for the next few months. You brought him home and you went to work. You checked in on him later. He wasn't feeling so hot. You probably should have taken him to the hospital, but you didn't. He sat there, struggling to stay focused, unable to get up from his easy chair. It was a good thing you had the key made. Just in case something happened, something like this. You knocked on the door and called his name. He answered you, his voice weak. You asked him to hold on. You went back upstairs to grab the key to his apartment. He asked you for a glass of water and one of his oxycodones. You brought it to him.

He didn't want you to take him to the hospital. He wanted to lie down. He needed your help to get him into his bed.

You lifted him up and carried him there. You had to go back to work, you told him. That's what set him off. He got angry.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he said. "How many jobs do you need? You know what your problem is? You cant say no to people."

"I certainly can't say no to you," you said. Half-joking.

"You can't fucking do it." He wanted you to try. To just to say the word, just to feel what it felt like in your mouth.

"Say it!" he said.

He pushed you until you shouted back at him. "No!" you said.

"All right. Fucking No! No!" It felt pretty good.

That took the energy out of him. he collapsed back into his bed. "Bring me another pill," he said. "I've got a haircut appointment in the morning. If I'm still feeling like this, I don't know how I am going to make it. I'll have to call a cab. I'll get a taxi to pick me up. He's going to shave it all off. It's going to fall out anyway." He'd just started chemotherapy.

You told him not to worry about his haircut appointment. If

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he felt like this in the morning, his hair should be the last of his concerns.

"It's not about the hair," your neighbor said. "It's about the commitment. I have an obligation. I mean to keep it."

This was not the last thing he said to you, though it was close. You like to remember the bit about saying no. The way you remember it, or the way you tell it, is that his last words were directed at you, focused with laser precision and intensity. A dying request that you learn to say no. That you learn to take the time to write. That you learn to do the things that are important to you, and that you recognize a necessity to draw up and respect boundaries. You like to remember this confrontation, this loving shouting match as his last parting gift to you.

But you went out into the city to hang some paper. Your neighbor couldn't eat anything now, but he thought he'd be hungry in the morning, before he went to get his hair cut. He'd asked you to pick up a sandwich from a new burger place that opened up on your block. They had a chicken club sandwich that he thought was delicious, though the decor of the place and the attitude of its employees and the volume of the stereo (not to mention the music selection) all disgusted him thoroughly.

Before you went to the night shift at the hotel, you stopped back to bring him the sandwich and check on him. You knocked gently on the door as you let yourself in with your key. You called his name. He answered you by calling his own name, only adding a pronounced question mark at the end. You put the sandwich in the fridge, for the morning.

This is how your neighbor met his end. planning for a near-future that did not exist, that was nothing more than illusion.

His last words to you were a request for another oxycodone, which you brought to him, along with another glass of water. You put the phone next to him, within easy reach on his bedside table.

Now, I am sitting at your desk, with his key in my hand, looking at your three-thousand dollar tax bill, and thinking about the three thousand dollars in cash that your dead neighbor took out of the bank on the day before you found him lying dead on his bedroom floor.

I don't find the money. Maybe someone else found it first. Police have been in there. His accountant has been in there, searching for the latest copy of his will. I come out of his apartment with a roll of stamps and a handful of oxycodone.

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