**CLOWN R&R**

I’m in the middle of my tuna melt when Wendy tells me she’s got a woman on the line with a clown stuck in her window well. Great.

“Can I call her after my break?” I say with a mouth full of moist tuna.

To which Wendy says, “I’m really sorry but she sounds like hysterics.”

Wendy’s big for her age, her age being about 55—or 20 years my senior—and big being residual body mass from her college rugby days.

I put the rest of my lunch in foil.

“You still have a little on your” Wendy says while rubbing at my chin with a Kleenex. Wendy’s husband passed away suddenly last Christmas time, but she’s abbreviated the five stages of grief, more or less.

“Thanks,” I say with a feeling of loneliness.

We have a script we’re supposed to follow here beginning with: “Thank you for calling Clown Removal and Rehabilitation, this is Dennis speaking.”

The voice on the end says: “My head aches like heck, dear.”

“I would be more than happy to assist you with this issue,” I say while sticking to my prompt sheet.

This woman, Susan or Linda—it’s been a while since the first call—claims the sound of my voice has intense therapeutic and relaxation benefits for her. She’s been calling since the spring when Rob pulled a dead clown from one of those big glue traps—which, as is company policy, we do not endorse nor recommend.

This weekly exchange has become a cute little routine for us. Placating Susan/Linda also beats doing the Observational Data Reports or working on the email server—two things Mr. Larsen—director of operations for the southwest region—once said I have a high aptitude for.

“Can you read the FAQs again?” Susan/Linda says. These are her favorite.

“I’d be happy to.”

I start somewhere in the middle: “The majority of clown bites result in minor swelling and redness around the bite area and typically subside within 48 hours.”

“Perfect,” she says, “don’t stop.” So I read to her for the next approx. 30 minutes and she listens, silently but for a few moans and sighs and unintelligible rustles. Midway through the *Clown Myths, Rumors and Urban Legends* section Rob walks in still donning his SC-R&R Gas Pack.

Rob’s got these *“Rob’s 10 Rules of Life While Living Life at Work”* with Rule #1 being ‘Always speak your mind especially in a professional setting.’

He starts going on about how this jackwagon—his words—confused him for a clown and shot him with a hunting bow. This is classic Rob.

I shoo my hand at him while pointing to the phone in my ear, but he seems to misinterpret this as a directive to talk louder and faster, which is not helping Susan/Linda’s headache. Then he shows me his left quad, which definitely has an arrow lodged in it.

“Jesus,” I say.

“It’s pretty much numb by now, but listen, you got to yank it out for me,” Rob pleads and props his leg up on my keyboard, “I’m going to look away. Don’t tell me when you’re going to do it.”

On the phone Susan/Linda asks if I’m still there. I tell her to give me a minute.

“I’m losing blood fast here.”

“Okay, alright.” I set the phone down and grab the end of the arrow.

“Wait,” Rob says, “Are your hands clean?”

But I’ve seemed to have already pulled it out.

We both kind of stare at the arrow in my hand for a while.

Finally Rob says, “This. Cannot be talked about,” and hops off my desk. “They’d axe me for sure. First thing I need to do is destroy this.” He snaps the arrow in two. “Now I shall have a snack.” He starts digging through my candy/cookie drawer.

I’ve all but forgotten about Susan/Linda and find the phone on the floor, the line dead. I consider pressing redial but ultimately slam the phone in the cradle, with a bit more force than I intended.

Rob kind of stares at me. “Did Wide Back eat all the Chewy Chips Ahoy?”

Wide Back is Wendy.

At 4:58pm I clock out, buckle the buckle on my helmet and head out the door hoping to avoid Wendy, who unfortunately is already waiting by air conditioning unit where I lock my bike.

“Hi there,” she says. I’m just close enough to where I can’t turn around and pretend I don’t see her.

“Wendy,” I say and act like I’m in some sort of hurry.

She tells me it’s Thirsty Thursday, though I’ve told her upteenmillion times I don’t drink since my DUI.

“I got fifty dollars in singles.” This is the voice of quiet desperation.

I try to avoid eye contact.

“We could go to Great Alaskan Bush Company.”

“Sorry,” I say as I saddle my Huffy, “Mom gets antsy if I don’t come home right away.” And I peddle off as fast as I can.

‘Antsy’ for my mom is her pretending for the last two months that dad is dead. Doctor said it’s early onset Dementia. Doctor also said to hide all weapon-like objects, so ixnay the steak knives, scissors, etc.

Tonight I walk into the kitchen and mom is having one of her episodes, this time about the plastic sporks.

“Money’s tight,” I tell her as we sit down to eat, “and people will pay good money for cutlery.”

“I wish your father would have left us something worth selling. Instead of just a body.”

Dad is seated to the right of mom at the table. He looks over at me and says, “Whatever makes her happy,” then sporks a piece of porkchop into his mouth.

“Denny.” My mom looks at me. “I never got to tell you, but I think you taking this job to stop these clowns was a good thing of you.”

In this moment I almost think she’s snapped out of it—that this women is much more my mom and much less the thing eating her brain.

“God knows your damn father couldn’t stop them.”

I read somewhere that we are hurt most by the ones we love. I don’t want this to be the lasting memory of my mom: that she thought dad was killed by a gang of clowns.

In bed I block out my mom and Wendy and think about Susan/Linda. I only have a voice to go off of and my imagination isn’t great, so I end up with a hazy mental image of my ex-girlfriend from community college, a redhead who was a tattoo artist and renaissance fairs enthusiast. I imagine reading Susan/Linda/my ex-girlfriend something with slightly more literary merit than the Clown R&R webpages and blog. Maybe *Beowolf* and/or *Lolita*. I’ve never read either but figure they must be more romantic than “10 Fail Safe Tips for De-Clowning Your Car, Boat or RV.” In an ideal world they’d actual pay me extra for writing those click-bait lists instead of folding them under the umbrella of ‘corporate property produced during employee’s term of employment.’ I would use this money to take Susan/Linda out for surf n turf followed by a nightcap at her place.

I get close to climaxing there in my bed when Rob’s stupid arrow pops into my head. I can hear him yelling out in pain. And Susan/Linda inside the phone saying *hello? Are you there?* That puts the kibosh on that. I let a Sleepy Time tablet dissolve on my tongue and I’m out in a few minutes.

I spend majority Friday playing Angry Oxcart Driver hoping Susan/Linda will call. I make it all the way to the Cambodia map where you have to carry .5 metric tons of shafted and milled rice grain on several poorly maintained bridges and unpaved paths around Angkor Wat. You have to do this under the allotted time or else the barter, Phanith, will refuse to pay the previously negotiated price. If you fail the mission you return to your village without enough rice to feed your malnourished family. I only get three carts, because it’s the beta version, and one of my children dies of starvation. I clock out at five without a call from Susan/Linda.

It’s against company policy to bring a work laptop home so without Angry Oxcart Driver I decide there’s no better time than this weekend to test out an idea I have: convincing mom that dad is a ghost. I hope it will trigger some repressed memories i.e., their wedding day, my birth, or that one vacation to the Keys.

Dad says it’s worth a shot, and we start with him walking in front of mom while she watches Antique Roadshow.

“Wait,” I say next to her on the couch, “did you see that?”

“The vase?” she says, “Your piece of shit uncle broke a vase like that when we were kids.”

Dad sits down next to me and asks if I have any other bright ideas.

Then mom turns off the TV and says, “Denny. I want to go to the cemetery.”

So we go to the cemetery, which is about a quarter mile on the bike path cutting through our backyard. There’s like this hill half way there and when we get to the top we find a clown squatting in the middle of the path. It’s young, maybe a few months old, and holding its one arm awkwardly.

“He’s hurt,” I say.

Before you can bat an eye mom kicks the baby clown square in the jaw.

“You son of a bitch” she yells. The clown goes down right away, out cold.

Dad and I just look at each other, completely shocked.

But that’s not the end.

Mom continues to kick the knocked-out/possibly dead clown yelling: “Give. Me. Back. My. Husband.”

Then a pair of joggers come by—this like Swedish Olympian couple. They stop and take in the situation: a family of three—that is, us—blocking the cemetery bike path, and the mom kicking an unconscious clown and shouting for it to resurrect her dead husband.

So that’s my weekend in a nutshell.

Monday morning rolls around and Rob has exercised one of his two allotted sick days, which means I’m doing field calls.

I’m barely on my second cup of coffee when Wendy sends me out to West End to retrieve a clown from a tree. “Apparently this Rottweiler chased it up an old Elm,” she says, and then adds a “Be careful hun.” I ignore this as I grab Rob’s C-R&R Gas Pack.

The company field van is this white Chevy cargo with no windows. The inside smells like Rob, which is to say greasy fries and spearmint—the smell of the C-R&R Gas, which, as our proprietary research indicates, clowns have an irresistible affinity for.

I drive really slow to kill time and when I arrive at the address, this dumpy two-step ranch with blue windows, there’s neither an old Elm nor a Rottweiler to be found. I try calling Wendy but she doesn’t answer; I figure she’s on another call or eating or both, so I leave the pack in the van and mosey to the front door.

This women in a long t-shirt with wet hair answers. On field calls we have a script that goes: “Happy day sir/ma’am, I’m here to safely eradicate this premise of clowns, could you please direct me to the infestation,” which I say word-for-word.

“Hey stranger,” the woman says, and I realize I’m face-to-face with the real Susan/Lisa.

“Wow,” I say, “It’s you.”

“Me.” She flips her hair gently and as she does, her shirt lifts up to reveal more of her legs.

She props open her screen door and invites me inside.

I follow her into the kitchen where she was drinking of the bottle of a beer. “You want one?” she asked while already popping the top. What would you do in this situation?

For the next twenty-five or so minutes we have sex on her living room futon. She doesn’t take off her t-shirt, which I’m okay with. She even provides a condom, and I make a point of stopping in the middle of it all to thank her for that. I also make a point of kissing her thighs a lot. I get a lot of saliva on them, and she tells me I don’t have to go any higher. I listen. When we’re finished she offers me a cigarette and excuses her self to go pee.

I feel like this must be love. I don’t know what else you could possibly call it. She was a beautiful woman and I admire her stack of magazines next to the futon while she’s away. The name on the addresses is neither Susan nor Linda, but Todman. One name.

“I could read one of these to you,” I say when she gets back. There could be nothing more romantic than me reading to her while she rests her head in my lap, even with wet hair, and we smoke her cigarette.

But then she says, “Oh I’m through with that. Now I have this compulsion to have sex all the time. It helps a lot.”

I’m still sitting on the futon while she stands, telling me this.

“And, like, if you hadn’t come, I would have called the pizza guy.”

I hold myself together long enough to make it to the van, but not inside the van. Because waiting for me outside the van is a group of clowns. Seven clowns. All fourteen eyes looking at me, and what do you know, I’ve left the gas pack in the van.

Gone from my mind is everything I’ve read on our website re: this scenario. I can think only of my dear mom kicking that one baby clown. And the color of her rage. Pink with misplaced hatred, a confusion. I go in fists clenched.

I pow one right in the kisser and my mind dislodges itself from my corporal body. It goes to the memory of me and mom and dad sharing pink cotton candy at the fair. The blue sky, our joy. Clear as day. My fists hit another clown and I’m back in our old mini van, the three of us singing the Bee Gees after my baseball game. I can hear my dad out of tune. I can feel my seat belt.

I plunk and plunk and plunk them all in their faces until it’s just me standing in the middle of the street with all these zonked-out clowns. And it’s over. I’m breathing heavy and I can taste blood on the inside of my bit lip. And there’s no image in my mind.

**Hans’ Dead Wife, The Bodybuilder**

Hans is selling his dead wife’s bodybuilding stuff. Not just the dumbbells, but her leotards, trophies, even the newspaper of when she squatted a mini-van in ‘97.

“All must go,” Hans says in his heavy Swiss accent, “priced to sell.”

It’s hardly light out on a Saturday and he has me hauling it all around, directing me here and there, etcetera. I’m instantly sweating. It’s all the residuals of last night when my ex-girlfriend, Cindy, and I got together under the guise of another “this is just a one-time thing.” This has been pretty regular for us. I beg her every time to take me back. She does, then I do something to mess it up. It is my identity.

I’m panting and thirsty and Hans only has these tiny water bottles from the German grocery store. I down one and start like tossing the dumbbells, making huge dents in the lawn and cracks on the sidewalk. Hans gives me this look.

“Stop. Stop.” He’s waving his arms. “We move squat rack.”

Hans owns nothing with wheels. Zilch. No dolly. No skateboard. Not even a damn scooter. So we’re like dragging this squat rack down the driveway.

I ask Hans how his bodybuilding wife died. The guy starts to tell me and drops his end of the squat rack on his foot. Instantly broken.

I find my car and drive him to the hospital, which is two towns over, and he’s screaming out the window the whole ride. “I am dying,” he yells as we pass the boys cross-country team, “death is so painful.”

It’s a miracle we make it to the hospital.

Turns out doctor’s got to operate immediately or he might lose the foot. Hit it just right apparently.

Hans is in hysterics. They have him butt naked in one of those paper gowns. He has me holding his hand.

I sit there with him until they come in to drug him.

The nurse says family only and who am I.

Before I can say anything, Hans goes: “My oldest and dearest friend.”

“Hubby?” she asks.

I’m shaking my head and Hans says, “of course.”

This will help the pain she says and drives the needle in. I watch the fluids run into his arm. His eyes go as big as half-dollars, his chest puffs out and then he lets out a deep sigh of serenity.

“Stedman,” he looks at me, “the room is so white.” He has this face like he’s seeing the divine light.

His last words before he’s out are something like: “run the garage sale” and “keep all the money.”

I set up shop in a beach chair around all these autographed pictures of his dead wife, Mary Pat, all bronzed up and flexing her biceps and calf muscles.

Perhaps because I was still hung over earlier, I didn’t realize that half the garage was full of trophies and medals. Trophies stacked on trophies. People will be lining up to get a piece of Mary Pat Whitticker-Olson.

I tell myself I will give it all to Cindy.

I poke around in the house for something professional to put the money in. There are more collector’s items inside. Signed magazine covers framed on the wall.

You know infomercials for the vacuum attachment hair clippers? I find like 10 in the upstairs closet. Still in the box. I put one under each arm.

It was only a matter of time before I would find their wedding album, this dusty thing Hans had buried in the TV cabinet. I grab it and head back outside.

No one’s come yet—I guess it’s still early—so I plop myself in the beach chair with the wedding album. They’re your standard wedding photos. Mary Pat, completely ripped. A lot of pictures of her in her gown and her weightlifter girlfriends all around her. Then the bride and groom, the newlyweds. The Whitticker-Olson’s. Smiling. In love.

I think about all the times I’ve been high on drugs and asked Cindy to marry me, and all the times she said her dad would shoot meet with his hunting bow. “It would just end tragically,” she’d say. Maybe she’s right. But, think whatever you want of me, I’d trade losing Cindy for a binder full of our own wedding pictures. I’d give the world for that.

I end up not selling a single thing. Apparently Hans forgot to put an ad in the Pennysaver or whatever and no one knew about it. I pack the back seat of my car with trophies and a few dumbbells. Figure I’ll try working out again.

I take the wedding album too, throw it under the TV stand. I fall asleep on the couch to one of Mary Pat’s fitness videos. I don’t know how much time passes, but later I’m woken by the phone ringing. I pray for it to be Cindy. The voice on the line says I need to come pick up my husband.

**MEMO TO ALL EMPLOYEES RE: THE ANGRY SPIRIT HAUNTING ME**

When I took over Eternal Memorial Funeral Home it was out of an innate love of the death machine—of burials at dusk; of late nights vacuuming hearses; and the inconspicuous trips to department stores to buy cheap bras for the deceased because their family forgot to include one.

I’ll never forget the thrill of hosting a clandestine smoke session in my office so the Larsen family could enjoy Marijuana laced with their loved-one’s cremated remains. Or the time we let the Dewalski’s bend the rules on number of bodies in a casket.

These are the memories that I’ll bring to the grave. But I regret to inform you these might be the last ones I’ll have as director of EMFH.

I have recently learned that I am haunted by the angry spirit of a buried client. The spirit of Anthony William Bologna Sr., or as you might remember him from the renowned Sausage Giant™ commercials, Togna Bologna.

Moments after the funeral ceremonies of Bologna—who was very significant win for our sales department, by the way—I became ill with intense stomach ache. (Note: I can definitely rule out the sausage platters the folks over at Sausage Giant™ so generously provided. I have always been a pescatarian.)

My stomach ached deep into the night. Around hour 16— Did you know you could get high on Tums?—the pain was joined by the roaring of one-thousand voices in my ears cavity. Over the past six days these one-thousand voices have combined into one, singular resonation: B-O-L-O-G-N-A.

The spirit of Bologna has since caused me unimaginable pain and suffering. Even as I type this in the den of my converted farmhouse, where there is not a corporal body for half a mile aside from my wife Helen, I can hear the ache of Bologna. Though, to be certain the auditory cries are livable. The stomach pain is not. No longer can I keep down those kaloches I have grown to love over decades serving the Czech-Pole community. In fact, I can’t keep down much at all. I’m withering to my bones.

I fear this is exactly Bologna’s intention—to reduce me to a gangly skeleton for his post-life Sausage Giant™ workforce.

Bologna. Must. Be. Stopped.

I can’t eat.

I implore you to help me tonight in digging up the human remains in plot 1076 (note: those who accompany me will earn time and one-half). I want to talk to this dead sausage tychoon. I believe he can be reasoned with. I plan to remind him of the bargain he got in purchasing our EMFH Plot and Coffin + Flowers Package. The spirit once used these lifeless remains as a vehicle for its evil. I hope it still knows a good deal when it sees one.

For those of you joining me tonight, prepare to face evil the likes of which you have only seen on our List of Haunted or Cursed Clients taped to the inside wall of the reception desk. Also, please be sure to sign up for a digging time slot on the attached Google doc. For those who cannot attend or are already at overtime, I hope I have taught you the value of delivering eternal customer service.

In perpetuum,

Swansby Akerman

**NOBODY IS ALLOWED ON THE INTERNET UNTIL IT IS SAFE**

There are these videos going around on the internet of young women deep-throating vegetables. I run into this sicko watching one of them on the train while I’m on my way to Galactic 9-storey Golf: a college-age woman sliding a zucchini into her mouth.

Here I am with a bag full of irons. Next to this pervert watching his smoke show. On the subway in broad daylight. And I think: What if my kids were on this train? What if they were exposed to this? My two little nuggets? No, no, no, not acceptable. I confront him right there.

“Hey you guy. That’s disgusting.”

He looks up from his screen and pulls out his ear bud.

“I know, isn’t it,” he says, “people are finally bringing attention to the cause.”

“What do you mean *cause*?”

“You know,” he says, “for women in the adult film industry.”

I don’t even know what to say, where to begin.

“This is a public place,” I start to tell him.

He looks around the train. “That’s a smart idea, we should show more people.”

I swear to god I could strangle this slime ball right here, but it’s my stop. Lucky for you buddy. I grab my bag, irons jangling, and saunter past him.

Above ground the air is humid, the sky overcast. I rest my bag on the sidewalk and take it all in: another beautiful day in God’s freest country. I tell myself to forget about that clown and there’s no better way than a dog from Sal’s, which is conveniently on the way to Galactic 9-Storey Golf.

Sal’s got his daughter, the one with pigtails, running the register. I tell her I want a dog extra relish. Sal waves to me from the grill in the back and for some reason the unmistakable similarity between the sausages and the cucumber in that sicko’s video pops up in my brain.

I tell Sal’s daughter I want to cancel my order, but I’m too late. Sal’s already sliding the dog on the paper boat across the tiny counter. I could vomit right there.

“He doesn’t want it,” she says to Sal.

“I forgot I’m meeting a friend for lunch,” I lie.

“Here.” Sal gives the dog to his daughter. “You eat.”

Oh god no, what have I done?

“Actually never mind, never mind,” I plead, “I’ll take it.”

I throw it in dumpster around the corner. Then I decide to cancel my bay reservation at Galactic 9-Storey Golf. Someone has to stop people from seeing these sicko videos.

Back on the train I go. It’s the middle of the day and there’s a huddle of junior high girls in uniforms in the back of the car. All with their phones out. Giggling their little junior high kid giggles. What makes these kids different from my kids, Abigail and Jasmine? Nothing.

“Excuse me girls.” They all stopped and look at me like frightened kittens.

“You know some guys like to watch girls put vegetables down your throat,” I begin.

To which a few murmur, like, uhm.

“And some girls film themselves doing it because, you know, some vegetables look sexual. We all understand each other?”

There’s some nods, a few “sures”, and “yes” or two. At the next stop they all get off, and as I watch them run to a security guard I feel warm inside knowing I’ve made a difference for the better.

Soon as I get home I grab a marker and a sheet of paper and write NO ONE IS ALLOWED ON THE INTERNET UNTIL IT IS SAFE and affix it to the fridge with the lady bug magnet. Right next to sweet little Abigail’s rendering of our family. Pink construction paper with crayon. My little artist. I want nothing more than her doing that sideways lean-in huggy thing around my waist.

I fire up our computer and hop on the internet because I’ll be damned if I let one more of those videos ruin a lean-in huggy thing for any other dads.

Take a guess what pops up when you type in some combination of the words: GIRL; BLOWJOB; and VEGETABLE.

Eventually I get to the source, Ctrl + c it like the girls showed me and then Ctrl + v it in an email. I shoot out this email en masse to the Pickering’s, St. Piere’s, McJunkins’, and Fitzsimmons’.

Now I’m really boiling. And when I’m boiling, I clean my guns. It’s both therapeutic and my second amendment right. I lay out the Winchester, which has been in my family for two generations, on the kitchen table and am just about to get to work when I hear a knock on the door.

Low and behold it’s two officers, a short fat one and a tall skinny one. Thank god.

“Evening officers.”

“Robert Fargiotini?” the short one asks.

To which I say, “Call me Bob.”

The tall one, having an obvious height advantage, peers over me into the kitchen, ostensibly noticing the Winchester on the table.

Then he says, “Mr. Fargiotini we need you to come with us.”

**Carrots**

There’s an old timer holding a dog leash with no dog. Jesse’s riding a bus cutting through the night. He’s three days without a drink, but it’s the old man at the bus stop with a shaking hand.

He looked like one of those cigar Indians, a face carved by the Rockies, with wild white hair. Moths orbited the street lamp above him. The driver, this hulking man with braids, asked if he was on or off. The old man just shook.

On the bus Jesse ran his hand over the flask in his pocket, feeling jilted and sad. Earlier in the night a man had given Jesse these orange capsules and kissed the top of his hand. That’s the way it is: you try to quit one thing and end up finding a new hobby. The capsules seemed to have the side effect of clairvoyance and peace of mind and he now regretted taking them. The Earth felt like it was tilting at a weird angle and Jesse kept cocking his head to level everything out. All signs indicated he wouldn’t make it home to Lazlan.

What’s it going to be chief, the driver called into the night. The old timer plucked a cigarette butt from the ground and fumbled with a lighter. He must have known too, the destiny of this missile.

The driver stood on the gas and the bus lurched forward, hungry for its fate.

And then Jesse was thrust into another consciousness. Like a film strip laid over his vision, the memory of Lakshar Gahr played before him. The Iraqi man laughing at him behind beetle eyes and soiled mustache, his head wrapped in a red keffiyeh, body cloaked in a dusty aba. The man cackled with a sickening vitality. No cares. He knew what was about to happen. He’d long ago accepted his fate. And Jesse on the bus is Private E-3 Jesse Thompson again—better known as petrified wood. The silted little village surrounded the two of them. No other souls in sight. God, and the sound before it all went to hell.

Jesse opened his eyes to the world floating in the center of a milky cataract. Squares of color crystallized into images. The bus seats, the blue light on the ceiling, the night in the windows. His hands white-knuckled the lip of the seat. The pores in his forehead stretched, his lungs heaved. His brain chemicals sloshed against the walls of his skull. This was how it felt to return from another consciousness. Neither was really any better than the other so what was did it matter if he lived or died? You have to come right up close enough to kiss death before you can ever be at peace with dying. This episode has just reminded him that he was fine with anything.

Half the driver’s face was visible in the mirror, his one eye locked on the road.

Alright back there, the driver asked.

Just tired, Jesse replied.

Lazlen is next, the driver said, then we’ll sleep like the dead.

Sleep had come in waves since he returned from Iraq. Three days earlier he had visited his VA counselor, Lynn. She had olive skin, black hair. She’d crossed her hands over her legs and he’d seen little tattoos on her arms. One was a dream catcher. In another life he and her were lovers. He listened to the way her words came out of her mouth, let each letter collect in his head. Kick the liquor she told him. It’ll help more than you think. He had no plans to tell her about the pills. He wasn’t ready to get into that yet.

The need for a drink was most intense after an episode. Invisible spiders scuttled all over his body. Just a sip. Just a taste. Just a sniff, they screamed.

He had taped her business card to the flask with masking tape. He ran his thumb over it and the spiders disappeared. They’d be back.

A mess of a man stumbled on at the next stop. The final piece. He seemed to be in the grips of a horrifying drug-induced vacation. His eyes looked like they were purchased at a toy store. His aura pulsed with depravity. He took the seat right across from Jesse and immediately began speaking tongues.

Some night, am I right?

What do you mean, Jesse said.

You didn’t hear about the lights over Tacoma? It’s all over the news, man. People are saying it’s the aliens.

The man shook his hands in the air as if signaling he didn’t think the words coming from his mouth were all that serious.

No I must have missed all of that, Jesse said.

The pills had failed to alert him to these extraterrestrials. Jesse turned to look out the window. The outskirts of Lazlan passed like film fast forward. He glimpsed the sign for the 10-storey cross. WORLD’S LARGEST CROSS! HOLY JESUS!

Jesse peeled the tape away from his flask and brought Lynn’s card closer to his nose, searching for a good memory, but this new arrival across from him wouldn’t allow it. He was barely in his seat, leaned over the aisle staring at Jesse with those crazed eyes.

Do you think it’s the end of the world, the man whispered.

Is that what people are saying?

That’s what I’m saying. That’s my theory. But you know what? I’m okay with it. I’ve come to peace with God, man. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen and there’s no fucking way you or I could possibly change it. So just let it happen.

I think that’s the right attitude to have, Jesse said.

This unique character was worth saving, he thought. The driver must have figured differently because he’d started to really gun it. The molecules of the bus joculated as the speed increased. The man threw himself back in his seat, victim to physics.

We’re moving now, the man said. Then he let out a loud sort of Hee Haw. You mind sharing a sip of that, my good sir?

Jesse rubbed the engraving of the bald eagle on the flask. The little ridges of his fingerprints over the words IRAQ and THIS WE’LL DEFEND. He reached the flask over to the man.

Right on queue the driver jumped on the brake. Like with a train that can’t stop, you anticipate the impact. The whole 10-ton missile went from 1,000mph to zero. Jesse and the man catapulted from their seats. Inside Jesse smiled, hoping for the end.

The day after the Abu Sayyed and his rebels dropped the three bombs in Lashkar Gahr, a Priest visited Jesse and his 24th division. There was no wind. The ground was a dry, open mouth. He’d lay with legs elevated and bandaged in his bunk, watching the guys play pickup football. The Priest introduced himself as Father Skinner, shook Jesse’s hand, and gave him a prayer card.  The angels have instructions, Father Skinner said, if something happens they will take you straight to heaven and report to God. You have nothing to worry about.

Then the guys asked him if he wanted to quarterback a play. Jesse wanted nothing more than to run a route for Father Skinner right then. There would be nothing more American.

Father called hike and the receiver took off like a jet, 30 maybe 40 yards. Beat his man by at least a step. Father Skinner rifled it to Davis’s chest. God had a cannon. But Davis’s hands had turned to tomb stones right then. The ball fell to the ground. Jesse wondered if God could only help one person at a time.

On the bus Jesse woke to a taste like biting into a fork. It was the bottom of the bus seat. Jesse rolled onto his back, the ceiling was dotted with liquid that was surely blood. He stared at his hands. Use us to save the man they said.

He grabbed the back of the nearest seat and pulled himself up. His eyes zeroed like lasers. The man was up by the driver’s seat, his torso wrapped around the pole for the pass card scanner. His hands were splayed out like Jesus on the cross. The back of his head was smashed and dark with blood. Jesse’s gums hurt just to look at him.

Jesse nudged the man’s thigh with his foot. He groaned as Jesse took the man’s hand, something he learned from in the East.

It’s okay, Jesse lied as he rubbed.

The man blinked. His eyes were two celestial bodies, blue and lucid, attuned to how this all would end.

What happened?

We had a wreck.

The man seemed to have forgotten the whole bit about accepting his fate. He started to get up, but Jesse stopped him. You might have internal injuries.

Sure.

The man felt the back of his head then looked at the red on his hand.

What’s your name, Jesse asked.

Felix.

Felix you need a doctor.

I am a doctor.

You need a hospital.

Jesse stepped off the bus and into pouring rain. The sky had shifted from black to purple. Not a star in sight. The driver was sitting on the asphalt leaning against the bus. He seemed to be holding one of those orange road flares. But as Jesse got closer he realized it wasn’t a flare at all. Because the driver was eating it.

Carrots the driver said and Jesse sat next to him. A big stack out in the road.

He motioned his beefy, carrot-less arm over to the pallet a hundred or so feet down the road, cardboard boxes scattered like fallen leaves. They were in fact carrots.

Didn’t see the damn things until it was too late, the driver said.

No, Jesse thought, you found them at just the right time. He felt for Lynn’s card in his pocket. He figured then that he’d call her later, maybe ask her if she saw the lights.

Listen, that other guy needs—Jesse started. But the driver was busy with one of the boxes.

Here. He held out a carrot. Jesse took it and marveled at it. The thing must have weighed a whole pound. A vibrant orange, almost glowing in the rain.

Is it the aliens? Felix had found his way out of the bus. He had removed his shirt and had it pressed to the back of his head.

What’s he talking about, the driver asked.

I think the end of the world, Jesse replied.

Carrot? Jesse offered one to Felix as he sat down. Now they were a trinity out in front of the bus.

I could use a sleep, Felix said. Wake me when they come to take us to the mother ship.

He rested his head on Jesse’s shoulder and that was perfectly alright.

Everything was quiet for a while, but for the patter of the rain on the road and munching of carrots. Jesse finished one after another. They were the most delicious things he’d ever tasted. Someone or something had put them there. He was certain. Maybe Felix was right, maybe it was the UFOs. But it didn’t really matter. That wasn’t the point. The important thing was that right at that moment the universe was contacting Jesse directly.