



*Faraday's
Cage*

C. Sean McGee

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Track 1 (Red)

“What happens when we die? Is there a somewhere else? Is there an after here? And on that note, who are we by the way? And while we’re at it, who am I? Or maybe the question I should be asking is, what is I? What is the self and where in the brain is it? Is a man inside his home just a man, or is he the house and everything in it? Am I my body or, like the man in the house, am I tucked away, somewhere inside? Am I hiding in the attic, peering out through half-drawn blinds at the world outside? The man inside the house is a resident while I, inside my body, am a person. Where does the man go if his house is demolished brick by brick? Does he cease to exist because his house no longer exists? Then where do I go when my body is demolished atom by atom? Do I cease to exist?”

His questions were met with blank stares.

“I think, therefore I am,” he continued. “But do I think, or do I have a brain and it thinks, and I merely experience a brain thinking. I have a voice inside my head yet I cannot hear it. It’s there, I know it is, but it doesn’t have a sound. I don’t listen to that voice, not like you’re listening to me – I experience it. It doesn’t have a sound and yet I hear it all day long; in fact, I’ve heard it my whole life. And it says, ‘I’ every time. So who is this infamous I person? Is it the voice, or is it me? Am I the voice or am I experiencing the voice? Is the voice merely a feature of the body I inhabit? Like a hungry belly, is the voice just a groaning mind? Would the man inside the house think that the creaking in the walls was his voice too? Would that be the proof that he was the house? This voice has been narrating my life for as long as I can remember; an endless commentary on my intero and exteroception. It tells me when I’m tired, hungry, and sore; and it tells me I’m better than everyone else, just as much as it tells me I’m not as good as I think I am. It tells me all the things I cannot do and then makes me feel guilty about doing all the things it told me I could. Sometimes it’s

funny and inspiring, and sometimes it plays my favourite song on repeat; most of the time, though, it's not much fun to listen to at all – worrying about all sorts of stupid things that I can do nothing about. So, is the voice me?"

The children all looked at their teacher, unsure if this would be in the test.

"Is the voice any more mine than say, the commentary is on a football game? And the thoughts and memories; are they mine or am I just experiencing a play by play of every foul, fumble, and spectacular goal? Are my thoughts and memories merely a feature of the mind or is it proof of I? And if so, once again, what is I? If the man is not the attic, the staircase, the furniture, or the house; how can I claim to be the brain I feel I inhabit, the body in which it is incased, and the organs with which it is furbished? How can I attest to being anything other than awareness itself – aware that the attic, the staircase, the furniture, and the house exist, that they are separate from other houses, just as my body is separate from other bodies, and that looking out the attic window, my experience of life on this street is separate from my neighbour - who is also looking out from a window in his attic. Aware too that I am not the grass that grows in my yard, just as I am not the house's façade. I am not the colour of the walls, nor am I the size of the property. I am neither heritage listed, renovated nor dilapidated. But I am aware too that my neighbour thinks I am. I am aware that my neighbor thinks I am my house; that I am the lawn, the façade, and the colour of my walls. I am aware that my neighbour judges me and so I forget that I am not the attic, the staircase, and the furniture; but instead, I go about acting as if I am the house. But I'm not the house, am I? So what am I?"

One child raised her hand, but as it turned out, she only had an itch.

"Before we ask if I go anywhere when I die, we have to ask, do I exist at all? And therefore, can I even die? If, in fact, what I call being me is merely, like the buzzing from an old refrigerator, just the echo or ripple of neural assemblies in the brain, am I actually

alive? Everything we know and touch is carbon. It can be smashed together, built up, and broken apart. And all those things, be they trees, dinosaurs, your new shoes, or even your teacher; they are all at the whim of entropy – my body, just like the house, will age and weather, and one day, it will return to dust. And we can see this in the cracks in the walls and in the lines under our eyes; but am I, as a conscious self, a physical thing that ages and is affected by the ravages of time? When an old man says, ‘You’re only as young as you feel’, is it because his experience has never aged? Is it because, unlike his body, his sense of self – his conscious self – is not a thing at all? What is consciousness?” he said, pacing back and forth, scratching his scruffy beard. “The reason I ask if it is a thing at all is that, as a scientist, I want to be able to measure things. I want to see it in a telescope or a microscope or with my own two eyes. But consciousness and all of the selves, they can only be experienced, and subjectively we can compare our experiences. But our words work for what we can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste – do we even have the right language to compare what we cannot measure? And how do I know that you are even conscious at all? If the man in the house is peering out through drawn curtains, how can he be sure that there is also someone peering out of the drawn curtains of the house across the street? He never saw anyone move in, so how can he assume anyone lives there at all? As a scientist, this is why consciousness is such a hard question. Am I conscious or am I consciousness? If the man is in the house, what part of the house is he in at any given time? If I am consciousness, where do I stay in my body? Do I live in the back of my head watching the world go by, or am I in my toes, feeling the sand disappear beneath my feet? Am I in my stomach, feeling myself full and incapable of eating another morsel? Am I on the other side of the street, feeling the person at the bus stop staring right at me? Or am I in you, when, even though you say you are fine, I can tell that you’re not. If I am not the voice in my head or the thoughts and memories it narrates; if I am not the body and all the cells and atoms that make it, what am I? What do I look like? What do I sound like? Do I have

a shape or form at all? Do I have a reflection? Do I cast a shadow? Would I even know myself, if I caught myself outside of my body? Am I but a flame; an incandescent flicker born of a carbon man breathing air? Or am I something more? Am I observable? Am I provable? Am I deducible? Am I refinable? Am I measurable? If I am none of these things, do I even exist at all?"

The children looked terrified. Those that could, gripped one another's hands beneath their tables. Those that couldn't, clutched to the seams of their shorts. If doubt were a seed then its fruit was ripe in their eyes.

"Consciousness," he continued, "is quite rightly, a hard question. And it's fair to say that until we can answer the hard question, we can't even begin to tackle the easier ones like, what happens when we die? Let me rephrase that. We shouldn't be wasting our time tackling questions that, in all likelihood, amount to nothing. So forget Heaven and Hell and forget being reborn as an eagle or a cane toad; until we can be certain that any of you exist at all, any theory about life, it's meaning, and whether there is or is not an after-life is an untested hypothesis posed as an absolute theory."

A boy with fret in his eyes raised his jittery hand.

"Yes?"

He was almost too frightened to ask.

"Does The Easter Bunny exist?" he said.

The other children huddled together. Their little hearts thumped in their chests. Panic swept across their little faces like a plume of soot and smoke. They held their breaths, and those that could, shut their little eyes. The suspense was merciless.

"Of course the Easter Bunny exists," said Miss Stevens, sweeping across the room like a light breeze, blowing the thick plumes of fear and indecision away. She smiled at the children before turning to scowl at the man whose speech, he thought, had gone remarkably well. "Have you no notion whatsoever?" she said in a hushed voice; one that was as coarse and combative as it was soft and surreptitious. "They're seven years old for Christ's sake."

Her face was shaped like a gavel.

“What’s wrong with you? It’s Daddy Day. What does my daddy do? That’s it. Not, what does my daddy think will happen when I die? How is this a conversation for children?”

She turned for a second and smiled at the class.

“I’ve got an idea,” she said, her face now shaped like a pot of gold. “While I talk to Nathan’s daddy, why don’t you all show how good our counting has gotten and show all the other daddies see how high you can count together. I bet you can count to fifty,” she said.

“I bet we can count higher,” shouted a girl; and all the kids agreed.

“That’s awesome,” said Miss Stevens. “Super-duper awesome. I bet you can too.”

Her smile could stop a fever.

“It’s Graham, right?” she said, turning back to the overweight man at the front of the classroom, still scratching his beard but with a naïve look on his face as if he were unsure what all the fuss was about; as if the offense the teacher had obviously taken was read between the lines of a language that he himself did not speak. “Listen, Graham, I’m sure you really are a nice guy, and a great father, and an even better scientist. I’m sure you do important things, and by the sounds of it, you’re asking some really big and important questions. But here’s the thing. They’re kids. They’re seven years old. They believe in fairies, magic, and wishes. And yes, they believe in The Easter Bunny too. They don’t have existential questions. ‘Two times eight,’” she said, her face shaped like a boxing glove. “That is the hard question.”

“Can I interject?”

“No.”

It felt like he was seven all over again.

“Now, you’re going to start from the top except this time all you’re going to tell the class is who you are and what you do. That’s it. Keep it short. Keep it simple. Keep it fun. And if you scare my kids,” she said, her face now shaped like a truncheon, “I will punish you.”

Then she turned back to the class with a rapturous smile.

“Twenty four?” she shouted, pumping her fists in the air. “Wow! You guys are the best. You’re awesome. You’re spectacular. Woo-hoo! Aren’t they just amazing, dads?”

The other fathers stood shoulder to shoulder at the back of the class. They looked awkward and out of place, like a half dozen rooks in a dollhouse. As awkward as they seemed, though, it was no stretch of the imagination to see how proud they were.

“Ok, Nathan’s dad,” said Miss Stevens. “How about we start again and tell these awesome kids what your name is and what awesome grown-up job you do.”

Her face was shaped like an olive branch.

“Hello everyone. Who wants to learn about the hemodynamic response function?”

Miss Stevens shook her head; then tilted it as if to say, “Softer.”

“Ok,” said Graham, starting over. “My name is Graham and I’m Nathan’s dad. And, uh, I’m a research scientist. Do you know what that is?”

“No!” shouted the class.

And what that meant was, ‘tell us more’. Miss Stevens smiled at Graham, urging him on. Her smile could earn her a Millennium Prize. It was proof, if anything, that the hardest of problems could be solved in the easiest way; and in no time too.

“My job is to think of a big and important question, something nobody has tried to ask before, like...”

He paused for a second, looking for the right analogy.

“Where does my other sock always go?” shouted a boy.

“Exactly,” said Graham. “Why is there always only one in my dresser?”

The kids all laughed. One even lifted her pant legs to show her mismatched socks. The whole class thought it was hilarious. Her father, though, did not. He had dressed her this morning.

“So, I ask this question and then I do lots of research. I study everything about socks and how we use them. And I get as much

data as possible. So I might look under the bed, in the laundry, and maybe even in the fridge. I might even put cameras to record the data and maybe see where I take my socks off. I get all the information I can. This is the hard bit, and it takes a long time. Then when I have all my data, I can make a guess as to, not only where the sock ends up, but also, why it always goes missing. I call this guess a hypothesis. Then, when I have my hypothesis, I have to test it over and over and over, and when I'm pretty sure I know where the missing sock goes, I'll do what's called, drawing a conclusion, and I'll say that every now and then, my washing machine gets hungry and eats one of my socks."

The kids all laughed; mainly because it was true.

"And this," said Graham, "is my theory. And then I share my theory with everyone, and this is what's called publishing – and it's really important in academia, which is kind of like gym class for the brain. And so that's what I do every day. I ask big questions and I do lots and lots of experiments using a big machine called an fMRI to solve them."

"Wow, kids," said Miss Stevens, her face shaped like a lightbulb. "That sounds super-duper spectacular amazing, doesn't it?"

The kids all cheered.

"Now, does anyone have a question for Nathan's dad?"

A dozen hands darted up in the air. Graham braced himself for how to answer their questions. Surely they would ask about the machine. "What is an fMRI?" they would say, and he'd tell them that, like a magician or superman, the machine allowed him to see into people's brains. They would cheer and clap and ask him to tell them more. Then he'd tell them about neural assemblies and Bayesian brains, and the kids would be so impressed they wouldn't want to listen to Pedro's dad who's a policeman, or Evelyn's dad, who built classrooms for poor kids in Vietnam. They'd ask him what his big question was and he'd tell them and they'd roar with applause. And he'd stand there while everybody whistled and chanted his name.

"Yes, Pedro," said Miss Stevens.

Track 2 (Yellow)

At the end of the day, it didn't matter how big or how important his question was, nobody really cared. Kids weren't into data; they got their fix from danger. They liked eruptions and explosions, and things that went as fast as the speed of light. They liked rocket ships and handguns, and trying on cowboy hats; there was no way he could compete.

He didn't chase down bad guys in the dead of night, nor did he pilot a jumbo jet over the Dead Sea. He didn't put out fires, rustle cattle, or hobnob with the rich and famous. He wasn't as brave like the other dads, and he was nowhere near as cool. Kids didn't want to be scientists; they wanted to be superheroes and superstars – they wanted to save the day, no matter what the cost.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Graham," said one of the fathers, getting into his convertible. "Sounds like you're working on some really exciting stuff."

"Yep," said Graham, biting his cheeks as he smiled. "Same for you too."

Then he hurriedly placed his son in the back seat.

"When I grow up I want to be like him."

"You do?" said Graham, as patient as he could manage. "That's nice."

"He flies airplanes all over the world."

"I know," said Graham. "Lucky him."

"I want to fly airplanes when I'm older."

"You do, do you? You don't want to be a scientist like your dad?"

"Nope. Science is boring. I wanna fly planes."

"Good for you."

Graham struggled to buckle the belt.

"He's been everywhere in the world."

"Has he?"

“Yep. And he even met the president, once. You don’t know any famous people.”

“No I don’t,” said Graham, silently cursing life as much as he was that damn belt.

“And he races airplanes too. He is so cool.”

“I know,” said Graham. “I was there too, remember?”

“I want to be just like him when I grow up.”

And then the belt clicked into place.

“That’s nice, son.”

“His car is much better than your car, dad.”

“Is it?”

Graham drove away at a snail’s pace; the fastest the car could handle. Anything over forty and the engine hissed and rattled, making the car jerk around like an amusement park ride. The oil light was always on, the handbrake didn’t work, and the back seats were stained with yoghurt and melted gummy bears. It wasn’t fancy but it got him from A to B – most of the time.

“Max’s mum and dad are rich. They live in a big house with a swimming pool, and a playground, and servants, and a pool table, and a trampoline, and a....”

Graham’s headaches had returned recently. They were worse than ever before.

“.....and a horse, and a helicopter, and another swimming pool, and a hundred TVs, and a million computer games, and the new Transformer, and...”

The pain would pass; it always did.

“He even has a TV in his room.”

“Good for Max.”

“Can I have a TV in my room?”

“No.”

Graham wiped the sweat from his forehead and cleared his throat. In the back seat, his son rattled off the thousand and one toys he wanted for Christmas or his birthday or if one day they ever became rich. All the while, Graham stared at the red lights on his dashboard and at the tufts of hair that poked out from his

poorly fitted shirt.

Neither he nor the car had aged well.

“Are we poor?”

“What?” shouted Graham, as if the thought alone were as offensive as it was absurd – just as it was probably true. “No,” he said, “we’re not poor. Who the hell told you that?”

“Mum.”

“Your mother? Why would she tell you something like that?”

“I heard her talking to grandma.”

“Your grandma’s old. She’s out of it. She wouldn’t know what she’s talking about. What did they say?”

“Mum said there’s never any money for bills and that she’s sick of being poor.”

“She did now, did she?”

“It’s ok if we’re poor, dad.”

“We’re not poor.”

“I know, but it’s ok even if we are.”

“We’re not bloody well poor, ok? Get that rubbish out of your head.”

“If you are, though, you should just go to the bank. They give money to people there. You just tell them you don’t have any and they give you some.”

“Oh yeah? It’s that easy is it?”

“Yep,” said the boy, matter-of-factly. “You didn’t know?”

“I guess not.”

“You should just do that; that way we wouldn’t be poor anymore and grandma wouldn’t have to give us money.”

The thought of his mother in law licking her finger as she counted out note by shameful note made him sick in the stomach. He knew every word of the lecture that would have followed as she stepped from her high horse right onto her pulpit; one built on the backs of every penny she had ever lent. She was the kind of woman who gave gifts only so she could collect the thanks and appreciation of others as leverage to hold against them in the future.

So Graham chewed on his cheeks and curdled the rage in his

belly. What else could he do? For the moment he had a job that brought him honour and prestige, but what could he buy with that? Both were currencies that were traded only amongst his peers and all they could buy was respect or ridicule; pride or envy.

Beside him, on the passenger seat, sat a folder with a handful of papers that were meant to be handed out to all the kids in the class. Inside were pictures of gargantuan machines that looked like something from a space odyssey; the children's minds should have blown right open. That alone should have won them over, if, as it had turned out, that his speech had not. There were scans of brains that looked like - proof that aliens existed. They would have screamed with delight and hung them on their walls and stuck them to the front covers of their science books. And finally, there were dozens of Fourier graphs. They weren't as interesting, but still, this folder had taken him weeks to prepare. In the end, all the children really wanted was to try on a couple of stupid hats and pretend to be cops and cowboys.

Why the hell didn't anyone care as much as he did?

"I think I want to be a policeman," said Nathan. "Pedro's dad is a policeman and he said his car has a siren that he uses when he chases villains. And he also has a gun like Iron Man. That would be really cool. I could save the world and have a siren."

"And what about being a scientist like your dad?"

"Science is boring. I want to be a policeman. Their job is more fun. You get to shoot all the bad guys and be a hero;"

"Scientists are heroes too, you know? Who do you think invented all those things? What about Iron Man? He's a scientist too."

"Yeah but I only like it when he's blowing everything up."

"Of course you do."

Graham stared at the red lights on the dashboard, then at his bulging stomach, and then finally at the file full of papers. He looked exactly like he felt – flabbergasted. Then he let out a loud and exacerbated sigh, but one that brought him no relief.

"Everyone wants to be Pedro's friend now."

The boy sounded sad as if his ice-cream had just melted.

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s because his dad is cooler than all the other dads.”

“Lucky Pedro.”

“No-one wants to be my friend.”

The boy sulked the rest of the way home as if everything in the world were his father’s fault: having to do homework, not having a TV in his room, being poor, not having friends, and probably global warming too – even though his teacher said that probably there was no such thing.

The car rattled and coughed as it stopped at the verge.

“Alright, son, Get your sister.”

“Why?”

He hoped the answer was candy.

“Just get her.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere. Just grab your sister. I don’t have all day. We gotta be quick.”

“Is there candy there?”

“Maybe. Just grab your sister, please.”

“Isabel,” screamed the young boy in delight.

He could barely muster another syllable.

“Is-aaaaaa-belllllllllllll.”

“What?” screamed Isabel, the contempt in her voice, impossible to excuse

“Dad wants youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.”

“Tell him I’m busy,” screamed Isabel.

“It’s importaaaaaaaant,” shouted Nathan.

“I don’t care.”

“Candyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy.”

“I’m coming,” shouted Isabel.

No matter what she was doing, nothing was as important as candy.

“Nathan said you got candy,” she said, sliding into the car

door. "Is that true?"

"Hello to you too."

"Hi, dad. Love you. Missed you. So... is it?"

"Hop in."

The two kids squealed as they jumped in the car.

"We have to run an errand and then if I have enough, I'll get you both something – but something small, ok?"

"Where are we going, dad?"

Isabel was the oldest of the two; only by a couple of years but she acted as if it was twice that. She may have asked the question a hundred times, but she did so considerably as if she knew that each time was like a pin in her father's soft and impatient ear.

"The mall."

"Yes," shouted Isabel. "You're the best dad ever."

"Like I said, we're just running a quick errand. We get your socks and that's it. In and out. Super-fast."

"And we can get some candy, right?"

"If there's enough money left over, yes."

"Cool."

"I wanna go on the rides," shouted Nathan. "Can we go on them, if they have them?"

His excitement bordered on insanity. He wriggled, not only in his seat but in his skin and bones too; his fingers clenched and his eyes charged. The boy was an explosive device. Graham knew this so he chose his words fittingly, careful to cut the right cord.

"Yeah, maybe, I don't know, no, maybe."

"Can we have an ice-cream?"

"Maybe."

"I want a giant balloon," shouted Nathan flopping around in his seat. "One that will go up to the sky if you let it go. But I promise, dad, I won't let it go."

The stress was already starting to build. It gathered in a gyrating clump between Graham's eyes. He tried to remain inconspicuous but by the time they parked, the constant twitching in his right pinkie had become a dead give-away.

“Are you mad?” asked Isabel.

“No,” said Graham.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“You look mad.”

“No, I am not mad,” said Graham, enunciating every syllable without any inflection whatsoever. “Look,” he said, kneeling down to look both kids in the eyes. “I need to make this clear before we go inside.”

His expression said, ‘Expect nothing’.

“What are we here for?” he asked.

“Socks,” said Isabel.

“Giant balloons,” shouted Nathan, jumping around again as if gravity were not a thing.

“Socks,” said Graham. “We are here for socks. Socks and only socks. I have exactly the money for two pairs of socks. I don’t have money for anything else, only socks. Understood?”

“Yep,” both kids said.

“Ok, so just to confirm. What are we here for?”

“Socks,” said Isabel smiling.

“Good girl,” said Graham.

“Giant balloons,” screamed Nathan, knowing too well that wasn’t what they were here for, but convincing himself more and more each time that it was.

“It’s ok,” said Isabel, taking her father’s hand. “I don’t want anything. I know we don’t have money. The balloons just pop anyway. And besides, the people who make those games and rides are just trying to steal our money. They say it’s fun, but really it’s just a trick to fool us,” she said. “It’s a paradox.”

Graham had once explained what a paradox was, having witnessed his young girl mystified by an unexpected and sheer absurd occurrence. From that point on, everything was a paradox. If there were clouds outside but the weather report said it was supposed to be sunny, it was a paradox. If there was no cheese in the fridge and she had thought that there was, that too was a paradox. And she

looked so proud whenever she said it as if she were privy to wisdom and insight meant only for grown-ups; and not any old grown-up too – only the smart ones like her dad.

“Look, you guys know if I could I would buy you every toy, every ice-cream, and let you go on every ride, right?”

“I know, dad. It’s ok. I’m just glad we finally get to spend some time with you and at the mall too – probably the best place in the world; except for the park of course and the beach, and buffets – they have so many fun rides, and the cinema – but the cinema is inside the mall so...”

Her eyes lit up.

“Woah, that’s a paradox,” she said.

“Yes,” said Graham, mildly delirious. “It’s a paradox.”

Then he dragged his heavy out-of-shape body upright again.

“Ok, so we’re in and out, as quick as possible. Next time, I promise, when I have money, I’ll get you guys an ice-cream or something.”

“Can it be a soft serve?” asked Isabel, preparing her expectations.

“If that’s what you want,” said Graham breathing a sigh of relief.

“Definitely. I’m gonna get passionfruit and strawberry and mint and....”

“Pretty sure they only do vanilla or chocolate.”

“Oh,” said Isabel a little disappointed. “Well, that’s ok then. I’ll have vanilla.”

“Ok, good,” said Graham realizing he had dodged a bullet.

“Hey Nathan,” said Isabel. “What ice-cream are you gonna get?”

“We can get ice-cream,” shouted Nathan, jumping in glee.

“Yay, ice-cream, ice-cream, ice-cream.”

He should have bought the socks online.

Getting from A to B was no easy feat. The department store was on the far side of the mall and between here and there, he would have to pass a dozen stands selling everything from

bubble-gum to teddy bears and at least half a dozen toy stores with flashing lights and inflatable dinosaurs out front - all of them impossible to miss. If he could survive the first then he would, at the very least, have some kind of leverage for the rest.

"Toy store," both kids shouted. "Can we? Can we? Can we? Can we?"

"I can't," said Graham.

His face was shaped like a grazed knee.

"Maybe next time. I'm serious; we have to be super quick. Plus if we go in, your brother is gonna want to get something and then there'll be a tantrum and....I don't have the money to buy anything at all."

"I know," said Isabel. "We're poor."

"We're not poor," said Graham defensively. "We just don't have money. It's different."

Before he could even gather his senses, Nathan ran into the toy store and in the time it took for Graham to curse, Nathan had already found the toy that was the best toy ever invented and in that brief instant, he had convinced himself that if he didn't get it now he would never get another chance again.

"Please, dad," he said, running towards the door with an enormous box in his hands. "It's the best toy ever invented. Check it out," he said, flipping the box over to show the instructions on its back. "It has all these weapons and you can transform it into a car and a truck and a plane and a dinosaur."

"They're four different Transformers, son."

"It has four Transformers? Woah."

"No, it's advertising. There's just one in the box but it doesn't matter, I told you, I don't have the money to buy a toy."

"Oh please, dad, please. I promise I'll never ask for another thing."

"It's too expensive."

Already it was clear what was about to happen. The ground was about to rumble and split in two. And from the centre of the Earth, a fire-spitting magma monster was about to burst out and

completely possess his cute little boy so that he became scorned, enraged, and demented – a creature from a nether world that was as impossible to reason with as it was to please.

“Fuck it,” said Graham taking the box. “How much is it?”

The attendant zapped the box.

“That’s six hundred and ninety-four dollars,” she said.

“Fuck me, are you sure?”

“That’s what it says on the computer, sir.”

“That can’t be right, can it?”

The Attendant just stood there with the same stupid grin on his face.

“They’re small enough to fit in a gumball machine. And they’re plastic. I mean, isn’t oil cheap? What the fuck? Right?”

“So...” said The Attendant as if none of that had transpired. “Shall I wrap it up?”

His face was shaped like a fried egg.

“Yes, please, dad, wrap it up. Unwrapping’s the best part. It’s like a surprise.”

“But you know what’s inside?”

“And that’s the surprise.”

“It’s like a paradox,” said Isabel.

“It’s not a paradox, Isa. It’s a...”

His head was about to explode.

“No, it is, dad. He knows what’s inside but somehow it’s still a surprise. It’s a paradox.”

“That’s not what.... Ok it is but... It’s not a surprise if he knows what’s inside and... Look it doesn’t matter. I don’t have seven hundred dollars for a couple of shitty plastic toys.”

“You shouldn’t swear, dad.”

“I know.”

“Don’t worry,” said Isabel. “I won’t tell mum.”

Her face was shaped like a fulcrum.

“It can be our secret.”

“Look, I can’t afford it.”

“Please, Dad, please, dad, please, dad. It’ll be the best present

ever. It's the best toy. It's better than all the other toys and it has these things on it that are like guns and I think they're like rockets and you can stick them on the...."

"Look," said Graham. "Is there any cheaper one?"

"No, dad," screamed Nathan. "It has to be this one."

The Attendant was still there with that one learned expression.

"We can't son," said Graham. "Not right now."

"Dad doesn't have any money," said Isabel.

"That's not what I said,"

Graham could feel The Attendant judging and smirking.

"Yes you did," said Isabel. "You said you didn't have any money."

"That's not what I said," said Graham. "I said, I didn't have money to spend on toys. It's different."

He was speaking to Isabel but the context was meant for The Attendant.

"Next time," he said. "I promise."

"If you want, you can do it in up to twenty-four instalments, no interest," said The Attendant. "If you don't have the money."

"Who said I don't have the money?"

All of a sudden the discussion had become less about a toy and more about his masculinity. What kind of man was he if he couldn't provide for his children? He knew exactly what kind of man he was.

"It's nothing to be ashamed about. Lots of families have difficulty buying things outright. It doesn't make you a bad father."

"Fine," said Graham, his face as mean as a fistful of bloody knuckles.

"So you'll take it."

"Yeah. Whatever. Wrap it up," said Graham. "Before I change my bloody mind."

"Yay, daddy, I love you. You're the best. This is the best day ever. Transformers are the...."

"That's not fair," said Isabel. "He got a toy; I want one too."

“Fuck it,” said Graham. “Go pick something. Be fast and make it cheap.”

Isabel did her best; she wanted to make her father proud always. It was hard to be rational, though, when she was surrounded by a collection of the most awesome and modern unicorns in the world; that and any number over one hundred was just as big as a hundred, just spelled differently.

On the way out to the car, both kids were beaming.

“Best day ever,” they both said in agreement.

All Graham wanted was to get home. His head ached, his back ached, and his haemorrhoids ached. All he wanted was a cup of tea. So frazzled was he, he forgot all about the socks.

“Don’t tell your mum about the toys.”

“Oh I promise, dad, we won’t,” said Nathan.

It’d be the first thing he’d do when he got in the door.

On the way out, though, a group of young louts appeared out of nowhere blocking the exit at the stairs. They were all dressed from head to toe in delinquency and every one of them wore the same no-good expression.

“So I fucked him up, I did,” said The Leader. “I grabbed him by the throat and I just started punching him until half his teeth fell out. Then I threw him on the floor and I stomped the rest out with my fuckin boot.”

He must have stomped the ground at least fifty times, making all the faces he would have made if even half of this story were true. And he didn’t hold back on the cussing either.

“Fascist cunt,” he said.

Then he spat on the ground and looked straight at Graham, his eyes sharp and narrow, as if the world were a crack in a fence that he was peering through.

There wasn’t space for Graham and the kids to pass by; but even if there was, the way in which these young men loitered, there was no way they would make it through unscathed. The children gripped their father’s hand and he, theirs.

The young louts could smell the fear. They didn’t just thrive

on it; it gave them a sense of purpose. Even the frailest of the lot – with their gaunt faces and arched backs – looked savage. They puffed on their cigarettes and puffed out their chests, and then chewed on their gum as if they were chewing on the ends of dynamite.

Graham could feel his heart in the back of his throat. It was as if fear was a weather condition. Just as a warm front could sear one's skin and an unseasonal frost could do away with one's toes; fear, like an inexorable amalgamation of the two, could melt a man from the inside out yet leave him shivering as if he were being frozen to death by some arctic wind.

Still, the louts puffed and chewed and spat. It should have mattered that he was older than them. It should have mattered that he was bigger too. It should have mattered that he was a father and an academic and that he was only trying to get to his car. It should have mattered that he was a person at all. It didn't, though.

The Young Louts laughed and taunted the father and his children; not with words, but with their demeanour. It was heinous. They didn't laugh in any traditional sense; it was more so in the smug looks on their faces – a beastly swirl of mocking and menace.

Graham wished he had the courage to just walk right through the middle. He wished he had the courage to do what any other man might do – one with a great deal more courage than him. He wished he could just walk right up to the biggest thug and punch him right in the face; knocking his head clean off and send a clear message to all the others.

"Come on kids," he said, trying to sound calm as if it were his plan all along. "We'll walk around."

The other exit was a fair way away.

As they walked back through the shops and took the long way round, Graham's fear turned to burning hot shame. It curdled in his stomach and the more he thought about it, the more it steamed in his mind, scorching his face and casting a stony lump in the back of his throat where his beating heart had once been.

No-one said a word; not Graham, not even the kids.

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By the time they got to the car, Graham's thoughts had turned wicked and vengeful. As he gently buckled the kids into their booster seats, he imagined himself, over and over, confronting The Leader and saying something tough and smart like, "I'm not gonna ask you twice."

And he would have said it in such a way that The Leader would have folded like paper and scrunched up with the rest of his idiot friends on the ground and all the other shoppers would be clapping as he made his way to the car – even the mall security guard. Given a second chance, that's exactly what he would do.

"That was close, wasn't it?" said Isabel, now that they were safe in the car. "Those bad guys probably would have done something if we didn't get away."

"Should have just punched him, dad," said Nathan. "That's what I'd do."

"No, you wouldn't. You'd be even more scared than dad."

"Would not."

"Would too."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"I said you shut up first. So shut up."

"Make me."

"Both of you, shut the fuck up!" said Graham.

All that fear had worked its way out.

"Sorry, dad."

"Yeah, sorry, dad," said Nathan.

Graham stared in his mirror for a good minute before starting the car. What kind of world was it where evil was allowed to run amok like that?

"Who said anything about me being scared?" he said.

No-one responded. It wasn't the type of question that warranted one; especially with how he said it. Isabel was just happy to be out of harm's way; for everyone's sake. But there was no way she would mention it again. It was one thing her daddy being scared and it was another to make him angry. Besides, she had the best

ever half unicorn, half Pegasus giant teddy bear that she had wanted her whole life; ever since she found out it existed twenty minutes ago.

“For fuck’s sake,” said Graham as they left the carpark. “I forgot the fucking socks.”

For the rest of the day, and especially as he lay his head on his pillow that night, Graham obsessed over what had transpired. And though to any sane person, it might have been nothing at all, to Graham, it was no such thing. It enraged him to be scared like that in front of his kids. More than that, it tortured him.

“I should have done something,” he said, as his wife drew faces in her crossword.

“What’s that?” she said, hearing only the sound of him talking.

“Those assholes at the mall. I shouldn’t have bloody done something. I shouldn’t have just let them get away with acting like that.”

“Are you still going on about that?” she said, clearly oblivious as to the magnitude of worry in her husband’s mind, and more so, to the heavy burden that came along with it.

“They think I’m weak.”

“Who? Those guys?”

“Nathan and Isabel.”

“They think no such thing. Don’t be daft. You’re their father, they worship you.”

“I could have done something.”

“I’m sure you could have.”

“I should have done something.”

“And we’re all glad that you didn’t.”

“What, you don’t think I could?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Well, that’s what it sounded like.”

“Can we talk about something else?”

Graham was on the very edge of the bed staring out the open door into the long dark corridor. In his head, The Young Louts

were fifty feet tall. They had arms like railway carriages and they were no easier to stop. With his eyes shut on his pillow, he set upon them time and time again with savage blows and heroism. And he must have felled a dozen louts more than a dozen times each before it became clear that there was no way he would ever win this fight, not as long as it played out in his mind.

Unless he did something about it, he would never sleep again.

Track 3 (Yellow)

Very few people slept well in their beds that night, but none as much as Graham. It's not to say he was ever a sound sleeper just that tonight was unquestionably the worst night he had had in quite some time.

Getting older had never really been an issue, or at least he hadn't thought it had, until now that is. It was around one or two in the morning the first time he woke up, sweating profusely and gasping for air. Then again at three, three-fifteen, three thirty-two, four; and then every seven minutes or so until finally he pulled himself out of bed and stumbled towards the bathroom.

He stood in front of the mirror, heaved over the bathroom sink, catching his breath. His heart beat as if he'd just run a marathon while beads of sweat dripped from his brow and collected with tears that ran down his cheek.

"Who are you, old man?" he said quietly to his reflection. "I've seen you in times before. Is this – the face that greets me – the mask I always wore?"

He wasn't an old man – not by any measure - but he wasn't a young man either; that ship had long since sailed. He was, by all accounts, halfway through the race and by the looks of him, his laces were still untied.

The boy he thought he had been this whole time was somewhere under this man-sized fat suit, suffocating. He looked as if time had made him its bitch; as if life had been slapping him in the face each night as he slept.

Graham stood there for maybe an hour never quite catching his breath, moving between sheer panic and quiet desperation. And the whole while, a single thought echoed in his head.

"One day I'm not going to exist."

Track 4 (Red)

“You look like shit,” said Isaac.

“Yeah, well, one day you will too; just keep that in mind.”

“Seriously, though, you look pasty. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” said Graham.

As he said that, he could feel his left knee, a haemorrhoid, and his right wisdom tooth flaring up. All three of them caused him a good amount of bother and a fair amount of pain. The older he got, though, the more liberal the definition of fine had become. These days, whatever the problem was, as long as nobody else made a fuss, he was fine.

“So how did the school thing go?”

“Fine,” he said.

“Your son must’ve been proud.”

Isaac, the younger of the two scientists, had the most stupendous smile on his face. He had the naïve wonder of a child, curious about everything that was far from his reach and out of his sight. He asked a million questions, and when he did, he had the face of a young boy desperate to grow up; in stark contrast then to Graham, who, after years of failed experiments and rejected papers, had started to look like an over-ripened fruit.

“Ah, you know?” he said. “Kids.”

He shrugged it off as if it were nothing.

“Must be so good to have that.”

“A son?”

“The whole works; the wife, the kids, the dogs, and guinea pigs; someone to love you; someone to come home to – you know, a family.”

His face was unspoiled as if he’d never had a moment of disappointment in his life. He looked like a young boy, dreaming of owning his first guitar.

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Graham. “I love my family, but

it's hard work. You're young, single, and still bloody fit – you should be mowing your own lawn, not losing sleep over mine. Trust me, before you know it yours will be overrun with weeds and you'll be as old as balls too."

Isaac stood there smiling. It wasn't a smug smile, but it was irritating.

"What, you don't think you'll ever get old? You don't think I wasn't once like you? Young, dumb, and full of..."

"We got the grant," said Isaac.

"What?"

He still had that stupid smile, except now it could talk.

"We got it," he said. "We got the grant."

It took a second or two for the words to make sense.

"Get the fuck out of here," said Graham.

His face was shaped like a mix of surprise and relief. He looked like a villain who had just sneezed his way out of handcuffs.

"I'm serious," said Isaac. "The approval came through. So, unofficially we got the green light. I'm pretty sure that's what today's meeting is all about. Dotting the I's and crossing the t's."

"I swear if you're winding me up I'll throw you off the mezzanine."

"Relax, old man. You can smile. Look at it this way, everything else may be going to shit, but at least we get to do science – right?"

"Finally," he said. "Something's going right."

The two scientists stared in a quiet bliss at their surroundings. To call their office disorganised would be generous; the room was beyond a mother's care. There were papers scattered on the floor, chalkboards stacked in the corners, and piles of folders sticking out of the floor like stalagmites. There was a smell too – like month-old meat, stuck beneath a fridge.

"There's a lot to do," said Graham.

"Yep."

"Have to contact all the test subjects."

"Yep"

“And book in the fMRI.”

“Yep.”

“And the anaesthetist.”

“Yep.”

“You’re not gonna stop smiling, are you?”

“Nope.”

Finally, Graham let himself go. For the first time in a long time, he too smiled.

The two walked the hallways with a renewed swagger. For Graham, he no longer felt the weight of his potential being dragged along like an anchor behind him. Unlike Isaac, whose curiosity was founded on a childlike want to discover, Graham was driven by a primitive need to prove himself – to his peers, his superiors, and his students; just as much as he did to his family, his father, and worst of all, to himself. The proof was as much about the science as it was his own ego.

And so he walked with a swagger, the kind of heroes, marching to war. Though the hallways were empty, he imagined thousands of people jostling with each other just one look at as these extraordinary men as they set off on a quest for greatness. He imagined kisses being blown from windows, confetti raining down from the stairs, and roaring applause; the kind fit for Nordic gods and Korean pop sensations.

“Take a seat, gentleman,” said The Rector. “Firstly, Graham, happy belated birthday. I meant to give this sooner but...”

He handed him a small card and a present wrapped in a tea cloth.

“I made it myself,” said The Rector. “I’ve been taking a seamstress course.”

They all stared at the tea cloth, completely ignoring the gift inside. It looked as if it had been sewn in the dark. There was no specific pattern or order to any of the patches and there was no consistency to the sewing whatsoever. Some parts even looked glued. If schizophrenia were an object, it would be this tea cloth.

“It’s an online course,” said The Rector. “It’s the future

really. You can learn anything now. Last month I learned how to draw Disney princesses. Amazing! I just want to do all of them. So,” he said, “what do you think?”

Graham smiled. He was a father after-all.

“That’s a great effort,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “I wish I could do something like that.”

The Rector smiled.

“Go ahead and read the card,” he said.

It was a poem.

“It’s a poem,” said The Rector, proud as punch. “I wrote it myself.”

Graham read the poem in his head. It was terrible. It reminded him of that time his son tried to draw an octagon. He said the same thing now as he said back then.

“You’ve got a real knack there.”

The Rector smiled.

“I suppose you’ve heard the grant came through?” he said.

The two scientists feigned surprise.

“I shouldn’t be surprised; news travels fast around here; even when it’s not supposed to. Gossips galore; the lot of them.”

“We have the funding?”

“Yes and no.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yes you have the funding, but no, not for the whole experiment; at least not outright anyway. There are a few concerns from The Ethics Committee but on the whole...”

“Oh fuck the committee; bunch of sensitive conservative stalwarts.”

“And I couldn’t agree with you more but...”

“Look, you’re scared of any blowback, I get it. But when we prove this theory...”

“I’m not worried about your theory.”

“Publishing then? It’s almost guaranteed. This is breakthrough science.”

“Not the publishing. Well, yes the publishing, of course, it’s

the whole point but...”

He’d practiced this speech all day and it had gone swimmingly every time. Now, though, when it actually mattered, the way he felt was getting in the way of what he had to say. He wished life were as simple as a tea towel.

“Do you intend to kill people?” he said.

Now that he said it, he felt like he could say anything.

“You make it sound like we’re recklessly endangering lives. We’re professionals. We’re scientists. Nobody is being killed. We’re not hitmen.”

His itch, though, had not been scratched.

“Let me be clearer,” he said.

“Fine,” said Graham.

“I’m asking so that I can defend you and your experiment to The Ethics Committee.”

“I know,” said Graham. “And we’re grateful for that.”

“Do people have to die for your experiment to work?”

All he wanted was for the answer to be no.

“I like to think of it as a controlled unresponsive state.”

The Rector sat himself down before his legs could give way. He wasn’t an old man, even though he may have acted like it. What he wasn’t, though, was a traditionalist. He was fond of Graham in the same way that he was fond of stories about elves and pixies and other kinds of sprites that did magic in forests and lived on the inside of leaves and vivid imaginations.

“You’re scared,” said Graham. “As you rightfully should be.”

“You’re not making this any easier.”

“This is fringe science. We are on the cusp of greatness; of course, it’s bloody scary. If it wasn’t, it wouldn’t mean anything. But that’s what we do as scientists; we replace fear and superstition with theories and proofs. Great science is done in spite of fear.”

The Rector loved a good heroic speech. Kids these days loved their Rambos and their Rockys, but he knew the real heroes were the Copernicus’ and the Newtons of the world and it was just a matter of time before the other kids caught on too.

“Consciousness, though,” said The Rector sounding perturbed.

“We will prove,” said Graham, looking as sure as the words he used, “that near-death experiences are mere occurrences in the default mode network.”

“But who cares about near-death experiences? They’re entirely anecdotal. What’s next? Looking for God? This is why nobody touches consciousness. I mean, will you even get reputable publishing? There is little to no peer review in consciousness studies and the university needs, more than published papers, cited professors. How the hell are we supposed to get more bums on seats if we all we’re doing is teaching? You need to publish. The university needs you to publish. I need you to bloody well publish.”

The vein on his forehead was the size of a brown snake.

“If this goes pear-shaped,” he said, “I’ll be the laughing stock.”

And thus was the crux of his fear.

Graham, though, would have no bar of it. He was a father of two; there was no stubbornness that he had ever come across that wasn’t, in some way, tickle proof.

“Proving NDE as a physiological experience will, at the very least, give greater insight to the complex nature of the Bayesian brain and top-down neural communication. We may not be able to measure consciousness now, but one day we’ll have the right tools and the right mathematics to do so; and it’s research like this which will have paved the way for those, even bolder, discoveries. We are mapping the seafloor of consciousness and what it means to be human. We are the Jacques Cousteau of neuroscience.”

The Rector loved oceanography. His notebooks were covered with stickers of dolphins, sea otters, and pufferfish. Space may have been the final frontier, where the greatest discoveries had still yet to be made, but the ocean was where dreams came true. Whereas other children dreamt of being astronauts and fighting aliens in space warping battleships; even to this day, The Rector dreamt of nothing more than swimming with mermaids and singing crabs.

“Just promise me nobody’s going to die,” he said.

“You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs,” said Graham.

“You don’t break an egg to make an omelette, Graham; you crack it. A broken egg is a disgusting smelly mess that’s a bugger for everyone to clean up. Cracking an egg requires finesse. Just tell me I’m not going to be wiping egg off the floor.”

Graham smiled.

“So we’re good to go?” he asked.

“I’ll have to smooth things out with The Ethics Committee but yes, you’re good to go. Oh, and your funding came in twenty percent lower than you had asked but that’s not on me, it’s that way across the board. Gender fluid bathrooms don’t pay for themselves. You’ll just have to stretch out what you have.”

The look of disappointment was a hard one to feign. Happiness could be feigned; so too could interest and surprise, but disappointment, whether it be on the face of a young boy getting half of what he had asked from Santa or a grown man getting the same raw deal from his alma mater, was as impossible to mistake as it was to hide.

“That’s fine,” said Graham.

And so the two scientists walked idly back down the halls without any fanfare whatsoever. Both looked somewhat shell shocked as if neither actually believed this thing would get off the ground. Both had expected, at least, a great deal of push and a hell of a lot of shove but neither had really thought that in a week or two they’d be killing people in the name of science.

“So,” said Graham.

This had been weighing on his mind all morning.

“I was thinking of taking up karate,” he said.

The two walked along for a bit, silent, and pondering that thought.

“You ever done it?”

Isaac had to think long and hard.

“No,” he said. “But I watched a lot of Kung-Fu movies as a kid.”

He made it sound as if that alone were enough, that, should he ever find himself surrounded, outmanned, and outgunned on a dark night in a quiet alley, he needn't worry because he more or less kind of knew everything there was to know.

"Yeah," said Graham, clenching an iron fist. "Me too."

The thought resonated more with Graham than it did for his younger colleague. He felt like he could if he had to, fight his way out of any situation. And he would have done it yesterday were it not for his kids. He could have wiped the floor with all those young men with both hands tied behind his back. They had no idea how lucky they were; at least that's what he tried to tell himself in the midst of all that willowing shame.

"So," said Isaac, jovially "Do we celebrate?"

The answer should have been a resounding yes. There should have been no debate and even less debacle. Both men should have already been filling their first glasses to the brim. There should have been music blaring, and ranting and raving as they crowed their brilliance and toasted to their ensuing success.

"I would if I could," said Graham. "I've got some errands to run. You know...family stuff."

He made it sound like he had to spend the weekend cleaning grout with his fingernails. "But you go out, celebrate for the both of us," he said.

"Yeah," said Isaac, dragging the word out until it sounded like a no. "I don't know. I've got a lot of stuff to do back at the apartment so...."

"This is a big thing," said Graham.

"I know."

"Well, then you should be out there enjoying it. Go get drunk and get laid. You're young, live like it. Trust me," he said, his words wrought with lore. "If I could, I would."

That should have been enough for the young scientist to be rid of his miserable doldrums and just thrust himself into the swirling vortex of whichever tornado he needed for the sake of doing what young people did and bloody well enjoy life for once.

“I don’t know,” he said.

He was fishing for a reason to not go.

“What about your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Well then go out and find one.”

“Most girls I meet aren’t....you know....They’re not The One.”

“The One?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to meet just anyone. I’m looking for that perfect girl.”

“You’ve been watching way too many romantic comedies. Here’s a little life tip. Everything you read in a book or see on a television is made, it’s not real. I don’t care if it’s a porno, Rambo, or How to Make Tortillas; anything you see on TV is an unrealistic dramatization of common and often quite dull life experiences. Life is not like the movies. Nobody fucks like in a porno, and nobody loves anybody like in those bloody movies you watch. Not everything has to be special to be fun. And trust me, there is no The One.”

“What if she wants to move in, though? I don’t think I’m ready to live with anyone; not yet at least. I mean, yes, that’s what I’m looking for but what if she’s not the right one? She’ll probably want a baby – you think?”

“Who?”

“You know...”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“You know, theoretically. What if the girl I meet thinks I’m The One but I don’t think she’s The One, and we end up living together and having kids and neither of us is happy.”

“Is that how you think about things?”

“Why?”

“You just need to get out there and meet some people. Talk to girls. You’re not going to be great at it at first, but you’ll get a little worse each time. Who knows, maybe you get lucky the first time. But you have to actually put yourself in harm’s way. Get on

one of those dating apps or something. Have some fun.”

“You think?”

“Of course. Jesus, youth is wasted on the young. I tell ya if I could be in your shoes.”

He made it sound so easy.

Track 5 (Blue)

It should have been the happiest day of his life, and it was, to be frank. But instead of dancing on tables and toasting to the merit of good luck and hard work, Isaac sat alone in his apartment staring blankly at a television that was rarely plugged in. On the other end of the sofa, Huxley, his fluffy Persian, stretched and then yawned and then went back to sleep.

Isaac was a quiet man who felt more at home in the audience of his own thoughts than he did in the company of others. He wasn't depressed like some might have said, it's just that the things that brought him the most joy, such as writing, studying, and thinking to himself, were best done on his own.

Whereas teaching might have been a burden and a strain on most researchers, for Isaac, it was a stage where he could suffice his needs for social engagement, but entirely on his terms. Like a stripper, he could parade in the spotlight, but nobody could get close enough – nobody could ever touch.

That's not to say that he didn't want to be touched. Isaac longed for companionship just as much as he did the sense of belonging that came from a circle of friends. After all, his three favourite things in the world were love, romance, and wishing people well. And often, when people in movies toasted to unbreakable bonds and lifelong friendships, he would cry for hours, lamenting over the joy that he missed; that same joy that others took for granted.

And that was just it. It seemed that nobody else in the world loved love as much as he did; in the movies, yes, but in reality, most people were hardly as concerned. Love was like a book they had read in tenth grade; something they knew of in context and summary, but alas, something they knew very little about.

Isaac was an expert on love – theoretically at least. He had

read every book, seen every movie, read every poem, and sung wholeheartedly to every bittersweet ballad. Were love an illness, he would be able to diagnose it from its onset to its catastrophic end. Were it a work of art, his critique would only lend to its value. Isaac loved love as much as people love other things.

Isaac had, though, no family or friends. The former, it's said, was no fault of his own but as for the latter; he made little to no effort in making a friend out of anyone that he met. He had, if anything, become somewhat of an artist at keeping people at a bay. Friendship just felt like an appliance that he didn't need for his home at this moment, and so he turned down every offer to take one home and try them out for the weekend.

And though he spent every second of his personal life alone, Isaac never felt sad, depressed, or lonely; he never felt lacking of anything in his life. He had his cat, his favourite records, and he was learning to paint; what more could he possibly need?

And so, as the summer rains poured down, Isaac sat there staring blankly with a phone in his hand. His heart was beating, his eyes were glazed, and his veins were pumping with rapture and joy; how a child might feel after a mouthful of sugary treats.

It was the happiest day of his life. He wanted to scream and shout and tell the whole world. He wanted to climb up onto the tallest tower, beat his chest, and declare his love for science. He wanted to buy the world a drink, hug a room full of strangers, and dance to terrible music until the sun came up.

Instead, he sat there on his sofa with the phone in his hand with a blank look on his face because he couldn't think of a single person to call. He had no friends, acquaintances, or mates of any kind. He sat there paralysed in the stupid realisation that he had pushed everyone out of his life.

It wasn't the sad days where he needed a friend. The solitary life was more often cosy and warm on days such as these. It was only now, on the happiest day of his life, that Isaac realized that there was no lonelier feeling in the world than having the

most amazing news to share, but no-one to share it with.

And so he stared at his phone, feeling, for the first time, completely alone.

Track 6 (Yellow)

Graham sat with a phone in his hand too. As the rain beat down on the car, he struggled to hear his mother and father, talking over each other on the other end of the phone.

“Great news, mum,” he said.

“What?” replied his mother. “I can’t hear you over the noise. What is that? Is it rain? Is it coming down, is it? You’ll have to shout, I can’t hear you.”

“I have great news,” shouted Graham.

He could barely hear his own voice.

“That’s great,” shouted his mother back. “How are the kids?”

“We got the grant, mum?”

“The what now?”

“We got the grant.”

He shouted the words as if he were buried beneath a tonne of rubble.

“Who’s Grant?”

“What?”

“Is he the one you work with? Or is he a different one?”

“What? Mum, you’re not making sense.”

“I’m not making sense? You’re the one going on about a Grant.”

“The grant, yes.”

“Who?”

“What?”

“I’m confused.”

“The funding, mum. I got the money from the university to do my research. I got the grant.”

“Oh Jaysus,” she said. “I thought grant was a person.”

Then she broke out in a fit of laughter.

“Didn’t you use to go to school with someone called Grant?” she said.

"I don't remember, mum; maybe."

"I think I was mixing myself up with Grant from school. Do you see him at all, do you?"

"Mum, I have no idea who you're talking about."

"How are the kids?"

"They're fine. Listen, I'm just calling to tell you the news. It's a big thing. Me and Isaac have been working on this for a while now and we're both pretty wrapped. It's really exciting. We're going to create an NDE map; show where these experiences happen in the..."

"That's great. I always knew you were a smart cookie. How are the kids? Are they grand?"

"They're fine, mum."

"Ah, that's wonderful. And are they back at school already?"

"They are. So this experiment..."

"Oh you know me and all that sciencey stuff; goes right over my head. I always said you were a smart one. Didn't I?" she said, outside of the receiver.

"So, anyway mum..."

"Oh, your father is here. I'll put him on. You'll have to speak up, though, the noise there is awful loud."

"Yeah, I'm in the car. Just waiting for the rain to pass before I head into the pharmacy."

"Are the kids sick?"

"No, they're fine, it's just..."

"Here's your father."

"Ok, I'll speak to you..."

"How are you, son?"

The old man spoke in a soft and quiet voice as if they were sitting across from each other on the sofa. He was breathing heavy, as he always did, sounding as if he wasn't at all prepared to be handed the phone and was just doing his best to say whatever came into his head.

"I'm, uh, I'm good, dad. So, I was just telling, mum, we just got the grant."

“How’s the weather then?”

“The what? The weather?”

There was no way the old man couldn’t hear the rain. It sounded like a thousand toilets all flushing at the same time.

“It’s hot here,” he said. “Of course your mother won’t open a bloody window.”

“What about the mosquitos?” said The Old Lady in the background. “They’ll eat me alive. Not to mention all the AIDS. You don’t know who that mosquito bit before you.”

“Well then put on repellent.”

“You know I don’t like that. It smells like a chemical factory and for all you know, it could be what’s giving people all that cancer. Honestly, if you look at the facts it makes sense.”

“What facts?”

“All the people using repellent for one. There’s more of them, and there’s more people getting cancer every day.”

“Correlation does not mean causation,” said Graham.

“Your son says correlation doesn’t mean causation.”

“You see,” said The Old Lady. “Graham agrees with me.”

The two argued for some time while Graham stared at the neon lights of the pharmacy. The way the rain splotched, it made the windscreen look like a canvass.

“Well then you’ll just have to decide,” said The Old Man.

“Decide what?”

“AIDS or cancer.”

“I’ll do no such thing. I’ll leave the windows closed is what I’ll do.”

“Well then, can you put on a blasted fan?”

“Not with that tone of voice, I won’t.”

“You know how the heat makes me.”

“Ah, the heat is a poor excuse. You carry around a temper like ratchet set.”

“Dad,” said Graham, finally having enough.

If he didn’t, they would have gone on like this for days.

“One second, son,” said The Old Man. “Listen, love, I’m on

the phone and I don't have time for any of these goings-on. Now, Graham, are you there, son?"

"I am. How are you, dad? Are you ok?"

"I'm grand, yeah."

"That's good."

"So how's the weather, son; is it raining there?"

"It is, dad."

"It's raining, is it? Well, that's always good for the garden, it is. I can hear it coming down; sounds fierce it does. Could do with a bit here. So, you're grand then, are ya? That's marvellous. And the kids; how are they?"

"Dad, I have to go."

"OK, son."

He sounded more relieved than anything.

"Well, it was good of you to call. You give the little ones a kiss and...hold on, son, your mum. What is it, love?"

"Did you go and put on the repellent?"

"I did, why?"

"After I just told you the smell turns me foul?"

"Well, you were the one who started going on about AIDS. I just..."

Graham hung up the phone. It didn't matter that he was forty-something and a doctor of sciences; it was just as hard getting their attention now as when he was six.

Before he could get in the pharmacy door, his attention was captured by a neon sign across the street. The words 'Wu-Shun Karate' lit up the night sky like a flickering epiphany. Instantly, he dropped the shopping list and wandered across the street like a toddler, chasing a bouncing ball. Cars braked hard and swerved but even that was not enough to break his spell.

He peered through the dojo's front window at an older man dressed in a black kimono, chopping and kicking at the air. Though he couldn't hear because of the wind and rain, it was obvious that the man inside was screaming and shouting with every strike; probably some mystic verse passed down through the ages.

What struck Graham the most was that this man looked no different to him. He was as old as him, if not older and he was balding in all the same places. What really stood out, though, was the size and stature of his stomach. He looked as if he were in the final trimester of a pregnancy that wouldn't end. His belly was even bigger than Graham's. That, if anything, made him feel like this was the kind of place where he belonged.

He stayed for some time with his face pressed against the glass watching as the man in black instructed a class full of wide eyes pupils. There was not one distracted face on the mat. Each stared with gripping attention as if whatever was being taught to them could decide the fate of another man's life.

He wanted to know what they knew. He wanted to be able to do what they could do. He wanted to be dressed in black, sitting cross-legged with everyone else too. And that's when the man caught him looking.

He looked just like a black bear, standing there with his hands by his side and his gigantic belly, sticking out from his black kimono. He had the face of one too; a look in his eyes that was part curious animal and part savage beast. He looked like he could tear the face off the side of a mountain, and yet, at the same time, he had this attentive ponder, as if he were weighing up whether it was worth the bother.

Eventually, he walked right to the front door. And it was scary as hell too.

"What's your name?" he said in a thick British brogue.

There was no kindness in his voice whatsoever. Put the man in a suit and he could be bouncing a club or making rounds for loan sharks and the mafia. But he wasn't in fancy clothes. He wasn't in a tank top or a tracksuit either. He stood there in the doorway with his hands cupped around the knot of his black belt, looking meaner than any bear and tougher than any golden gloves boxer.

"I'm Graham," said Graham.

He sounded nervous and a little fraught, as he bloody well should have been. The man in black didn't twitch a single muscle.

He stood there still like a wax statue; barely breathing. Graham, on the other hand, was on the verge of coronary.

“I am Master Wu-Shin,” he said, in his thick British brogue. “But those who learn my way know me as The Master.”

His face was shaped like a Buddhist temple.

“Are you ready to learn the art of the whispering tree?” he said.

Graham floated towards him; he could not escape his gravity.

“Yes,” said Graham. “I want to learn.”

“Very good,” said The Master. “Then I shall show you the way.”

Track 7 (Yellow)

Graham arrived home close to eleven; hours after he was meant to be. He half expected an inquisition or at the very least, some cynical slights on his fidelity; not that he had ever cheated or was even capable of such a thing, but that wasn't exactly how most arguments played out. At the very least, there should have been some form of conundrum and on his part, a simple and timely explanation.

"Hello," he said. "I'm home."

But there was no response.

It was odd that not even the dog should be barking. He peered into the living room expecting everyone to be laid out on the sofa or on cushions on the floor. The television was on but there was nobody watching. So he went to the kitchen where he could hear music blaring. The radio was on, yes, but there was nobody was dancing.

Every light in the house was on and yet still it felt like nobody was home.

Half the chairs were flipped over and drawers, piled with papers, had been pulled out and were scattered all over the kitchen table. The fridge and freezer doors were both wide open and tap was left on with the water already overflowing and starting to spill on the floor. And finally, at the bottom of the stairs, there was a hammer that was normally kept in one of the drawers.

"Where is everyone? Guys?"

Graham slowly crept up the stairs half expecting to stand on a handful of nails or a severed finger. The destruction continued upstairs. Clothes were scattered along the hallway, while in the bathroom, toothbrushes and old razors were spread out on the floor. In the sink, there were splotches of blood that lead out through the bathroom door.

There had been a struggle here – a violent and bloody fight.

“In here,” said a woman’s voice, sounding defeated, as if she were teetering on the tip of her very last breath.

Graham edged towards the bedroom first and snuck his head inside, expecting the worst. It looked like a crime scene photo. Whatever had happened, it had started here. Then he turned away and edged yet again, with fret in every step, towards the children’s bedroom.

And there he saw her – Mary, his wife - with her legs spread out on the ground. Her body was lumped against the side of the bed, twisted in the most heinous fashion. Her eyes flickered as he stared at her, the inch of faith in her heart, fighting to keep them open. Beside her body lay his daughter Isabel, her body curled up like a ball. And wrapped in his wife’s arms was Nathan, his seven-year-old son.

“What the hell happened?”

Mary looked at him as if it were the last look she would ever give him.

“You’re late,” she said.

“I know, I’m sorry, I should’ve called it’s just...”

“I told him you’d be back at nine.”

Graham looked at his watch – it was eleven fifteen.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I lost track of time.”

Her face said that she didn’t care. She wasn’t angry and she wasn’t disappointed either. She looked like a week-old balloon as if she were spent of all her colours and siphoned of all her emotion. She looked as if only a single breath of air was all that was keeping her up.

“Bad episode?” said Graham, staring at the boy in her arms.

He looked angelic, curled up in her arms – nary of line of worry on his face.

“What do you think?”

“Sorry, I got distracted at the pharmacy and before I knew it, time had gotten the better of me.”

“Did you get the chocolate bars at least?”

“Oh crap,” said Graham. “I didn’t even go in.”

Then, as if he had just discovered a precious mineral.

“Oh shit, the chocolate was for Nathan.”

If she could, Mary would have given him a slow clap, but the look that she gave him did just that.

“Fuck it,” she said. “The worst of it is done. Help me put them to bed.”

Graham heaved as he lifted both children and dropped them into their beds. He remembered a time when they were light enough to be laid out like a placemat. Now they were like a couple of wet sandbags. Neither child seemed to bother, though. They both wrapped up in their blankets and went back to sleep.

“What’s with the blood?”

Mary nodded towards their daughter.

“All of a sudden our girl is getting self-conscious.”

Between her eyes, at the bridge of her nose, was a big piece of toilet paper, held on with dried blood. It didn’t look like a little nick either.

“Jesus, are we at that point already?” said Graham, collapsing on the floor beside his wife.

They both stared silently as if, for the first time in nine years, they had finally had a chance to come up for air. And even now, it was all about to change. Today she was shaving her mono-brow; before he knew it she’d be shaving her head and coming home in police cars.

“So you didn’t get anything?”

“No,” said Graham. “I had to do a thing. I didn’t get time.”

“What thing?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. It’s just a thing.”

If it was just a thing, then why did he call it an epiphany on the way home?

“Well can you go tomorrow then? I really need the vitamins. Plus, Nathan will go ape shit if he doesn’t get at least one bloody chocolate bar this week.”

“You know vitamins are a waste of money. You get enough from your food. It’s just money down the drain and unnecessary

work for your liver.”

“I need the folic acid,” said Mary.

“Ah, ok,” said Graham.

It took a second, but then it hit him.

“Folic acid? But you only use that when...”

Mary stared at him. Her face was shaped like a soft-serve ice-cream cone. Then both of them stared at the sleeping children.

“Oh shit.”

“I think I want another baby,” she said.

Track 8 (Red)

“You look nervous,” said Isaac.

“I’m fine,” said Graham.

He looked anything but. He paced back and forth with a look of unease and discomfort on his face. He hadn’t sat down since they arrived and all that pacing was starting to make everyone else in the office on edge.

“We just follow our protocols and everything will go well.”

“It’s not that,” said Graham.

Something was the matter; it didn’t take a doctorate to figure that out. And it wasn’t just Isaac who was picking up on some clear signs of worry. The participants in the study, all seven of them, watched Graham nervously as he walked in troubled circles like the captain of a doomed vessel.

“You’re about to give everyone a heart attack. You’re scaring me for Christ’s sake.”

“It’s fine,” said Graham again before taking a deep breath.

“Then take a bloody seat.”

“I can’t,” he said, almost on the verge of tears.

Then he leaned in Isaac’s ear.

“Haemorrhoids,” he said.

“Again?”

It wasn’t just the haemorrhoids, though. There was also the shortness in breath and the constant perspiration; that and the heart palpitations too. It was as if the future was a horror movie that he was constantly playing out in his mind. Not a second had gone by since his daughter was born, where he wasn’t terrified or traumatised by one thought or the other. And now she wanted another baby? They could barely clothe the two they had, let alone cover the cost of school material and circus lessons for a third.

“I’ll take the interview,” said Isaac.

“You sure?”

“It’s cool. Go sit on some ice or something. I have this. Relax. And go see a doctor.”

“It’s fine,” said Graham. “It’ll pass. It always does.”

And then he hobbled out of the room.

“OK,” said Isaac, putting a song on repeat; Grieg’s ‘Morning Mood’. “Let’s talk about death.”

Isaac dimmed the lights and turned everyone’s attention to a projector where he showed images of the machine they would be using as part of the experiment; where each and every participant would be brought to the point of death before facilely being brought back to life.

“This is a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine or fMRI for short. Some of you may have seen this type of machine before – maybe in the movies or on a television show, and some of you may have even experienced one in person. What this machine does, is that it allows us to take real-time images of your brain in lots of little slices, like layers in a cake, so we can see which regions of your brain are active when you are consciously reacting to stimuli. And we do this by measuring the blood flow to regions in your brain.”

“Like mind reading?”

“Not at all. The fMRI doesn’t tell us what you were thinking; it tells us where you were thinking – which is just as useful and important. We don’t have machines that can see thoughts just yet, but maybe one day soon, who knows?”

“Is it dangerous?” asked one participant.

Isaac had a confused look. He wore it like a medal.

“Now, you were all explained the nature of this study in your individual interviews. You were all selected based, not only on your prior experiences but also on the fact that you were aware of the dangers and you all signed off on them.”

“Oh yeah, no,” said The Participant. “It’s not what I meant. I know about the risks, I was just...I just wanted to ask a question.”

“Ok,” said Isaac. “The machine itself is not dangerous, no. It’s big and clunky, yes, and it sounds like a demolition, but really

it's nothing more than a few magnets that measure the movement of protons in your brain. When we introduce a signal, a certain group of protons will move out of alignment. This is the part of your brain that is working at that moment. Then, those protons move back into alignment, and that is the signal we measure. We send a frequency in, and we measure the frequency back out. Kind of like how whales use sonar to measure the distance of objects in the ocean. They send a signal out, and they measure the time it takes to get the signal back and that tells them how far away something is. Well, with us, we are measuring what part of your brain was active when you had your near-death experience. And our machine here at the university is a 7-Tesla, which is very powerful and allows us to more accurately map your brain. Any questions so far?"

"We are still getting paid for participating, right?"

"Yes," said Isaac. "You will all be compensated, as mentioned in your contract, for the time you spend in the lab. If I'm quite right..." he said, flipping through a couple of thousands of sheets of paper.

Both he and Graham kept terrible records.

"Eighteen dollars," said a participant.

"That's right," said Graham. "And your train fare compensated."

In all fairness, it was enough just to be a part of something so radical and profound. For most, it was a chance to prove once and for all that God either did or did not exist and to alleviate their fears either way. For one, though, more than anything, it was a chance to earn eighteen dollars and get a free bus ride into town.

"So let's talk about what to expect," said Isaac. "You have all died before; and that, principally, is why you have been chosen for this trial. We had over three hundred and fifty people apply and you, I'm happy to say, are the lucky seven."

They all smiled. It was nice to feel special and better than other people. Truth was, though, they were the only seven that had applied.

"NDE," said Isaac. "Or the near-death experience is

ubiquitous but it is not common. There are ten times as many people who have suffered cardiac failure, been resuscitated, and not had the experience that you have all either claimed to have had or that someone in your family has. That's not to say that the experience is not physiological by any means. What this says is that, if anything, you are indeed special."

Once again, their faces lit up like ripe tomatoes. If he kept talking like this, he wouldn't even have to pay them the eighteen dollars. Most of them had gone their whole lives without feeling as important as they believed, deep down, that they truly were. And here was a handsome young scientist telling them just that.

"Now, does anyone know what a double-blind trial is?"

The participants all shook their heads.

"Let me explain then. We will be using two drugs during the trial, both administered by a colleague here at the university, a research scientist like myself, whose focus of study is consciousness. As I mentioned, there will be two drugs administered; one of which will be to simulate cardiac arrest, where hopefully we can measure and pinpoint the appearance of a near-death experience; while the other will be a control drug called N-Dimethyltryptamine."

Neither participant knew what he was talking about; nor did they care. Most had already signed their waivers and were just waiting for the fun to get underway.

"Neither you nor I will know who will receive which drug. This is what we call a Double-Blind. Now, this is a near-death experience, so yes, you will have a controlled death experience. I say controlled because at all times, trained physicians will be at your side so to speak."

"So to speak?"

"An anaesthetist and nurses will be waiting in the adjoining room ready to bring you back to back once the magnets are turned off. This takes barely seconds. I don't want you to feel worried in any way. Think of it like having lifeguards on hand while you take a bath."

One of the participants, a seven-year-old pageant girl,

wasn't the least bit frightened. In fact, her face was brimming with delight. Her mother, meanwhile, sat beside her with a smug and pompous look on her face, knowing too well that no other mothers would go to this length for their daughter's success and glory. Winning pageants meant everything.

The other participants too had nary a look of fear or trepidation on their faces. A couple passed as unfed and unbathed while another, though dressed in his very best, looked as if he had little else to lose. There was an old lady who looked as if she were supposed to be waiting at a post office, and an evangelist, who sat prim and proper as if Jesus himself were watching.

"Oh, look," said Isaac, "Speak of the devil."

Standing in the doorway was a strange-looking man who, before he even said a single word, defined eccentricity. He wore an old Victorian suit with a frilled blue scarf around his neck and an odd-looking pendant clipped to his right breast. He held a cane in one hand and a single spectacle in the other; pulling it up to his right eye as he peered at the participants as he might, a rack full of top hats and knickerbockers.

"I'd like to introduce you to the esteemed Professor Emmanuelle Van Guardé."

The strange-looking man tipped his hat and then bowed in such a way that it seemed as if he ought to be showered with roses and deafening applause.

"Charmed," he said.

Though he sounded as if he were thoroughly disgusted.

"Professor Van Guardé will be responsible for bringing you all back from the dead, so to speak," said Isaac.

The participants all clapped. Some of them oohed and aahed. The Professor, though, ignored the adulation and instead turned to Isaac and spoke surreptitiously, "I trust all waivers have been signed?"

Isaac had his copy of the document sitting in his lap. Truth was, he hadn't the courage to bring it up. He was hoping that, like a rotting tooth, the problem would somehow sort itself out. How

on Earth was he supposed to convince a group of people to sign a document that relinquished their rights to any civil or criminal prosecution should any harm or foul come to them? Should he be serious and consoling like an oncologist or a first responder, or should he tell a few jokes to lighten the mood? What if they said no? What if there was a revolt and a protest? What if the entire fate of the trial came down to this? What if the trial was shut down? What if Graham and The Professor were stood down?

“Great things have been said of your potential,” said The Professor, leaning into Isaac’s ear.

He got close enough so that Isaac could properly see his pendant. It was shaped like the tip of a small child’s finger if all that was left were the bone.

“Lest not we err,” he said, “and come to mar such sweet remarks.”

Isaac nodded.

“I was just getting to that,” he said.

Then he packed up his anxiety in a little box and stuck it deep in his belly

“You can be sure that every precaution has been taken,” he said. “Every ‘I’ dotted. One does not achieve excellence being any less than excellent.”

Then he held up his copy of the waiver and addressed the room.

“Has everyone had a chance to read through the terms and conditions?”

Everybody nodded their heads even though they hadn’t. Their heads wobbled back and forth in such spasmodic fashion, it was as if their spines were moulded from plasticine.

“Are there any doubts?” said Isaac, feeling a breeze of relief blow against his skin.

He was expecting to be bombarded with dozens of questions and at the very least, a handful of accusations. The risks involved were astounding. Each had, in a way, donated their living tissue to science. The participants, though, all smiled aimlessly as

they shook their heads.

“Ok,” said Isaac, surprised.

Before he could say another word, The Professor swooped in with his binocular in one hand and small wooden stick in the other.

“Open,” he said, forcing the stick into The Evangelist’s mouth.

He wedged the man’s mouth open, forcing the stick down the back of his throat, humming the tune that was playing in the background – the oboe, clearly his favourite.

“Please, to hold,” he said.

His English was painted with a thick yet delicate stroke of French. His words sounded like colours, with every request like a work of art. The way he spoke, even the most appalling news would be heard as a blessing.

The Evangelist remained entirely still as The Professor took a small camera from his waistcoat pocket and took dozens of photos of the old man’s uvula. And when he was done, he did the same to each of the participants, wedging their mouths open and prodding about inside. Then, without much ado, he stowed his tiny camera, took his cane and monocle, and quietly left the room, acknowledging nobody.

“Ok then,” said Isaac. “I guess that’s it. Any last questions?”

“Who gets to go first?” said one of the participants, an impoverished looking writer.

Those eighteen dollars would definitely come in handy.

“One of you will be chosen at random, and then once a week for the next six weeks if all goes well. And by that I mean if there are no administrative delays. As it is random, we do ask that you not travel, or if you do, to let either Graham or myself know in advance. Also, for the remainder of the trial if you can adhere to the diet outlined in the term and conditions.”

The participants all looked blank.

“So for the duration of your time, please refrain from any or all kinds of peppers and spices, and if possible, avoid sex and

masturbation.”

The old lady gasped.

“How else am I supposed to get to sleep?” she said.

Track 9 (Yellow)

“Stop pacing around, Graham, you’ll wear a hole in the carpet.”

He’d been restless since he got home; unable to sit still on his feet and in his thoughts. And though it should have been work causing him all this bother, there was something else crawling beneath his skin; something far more severe than as much as he tried, he couldn’t resist.

“I was thinking,” he said, unsure how to start the conversation.

“Yes,” said Mary. “And?”

She had an armful of laundry in one hand and a handful of toys in the other. Graham, on the other hand, looked like a lost child with one hand on the edge of his enormous belly and the other pressed against his face as if he were hiding behind the very next thing he was about to say.

Graham didn’t so much have butterflies in his stomach as much as he did a colony of feuding wasps. He wanted to tell her but he was afraid she wouldn’t understand. He wanted to tell her but he was afraid she would laugh. He wanted to tell her but he was afraid that she would say no.

“If you were thinking about giving me hand; the thought counts, sure, but the effort goes a longer way.”

She was only half-joking; the other half would bide its time.

“I want to do Wu-Shun,” he said, bold and defiant.

He hoped that was enough. He hoped she would drop everything and look at him as if in the morn he would set sail for war. It had already taken him so much just to muster those words; he wasn’t capable of giving her a reason why.

“I’ve already made chicken,” she said, dumping the laundry onto the dining table and the handful of toys halfway up the stairs. “Nathan, come and pick up your crap,” she said. “Remember the rule, if it’s on the floor it goes in the...”

The boy came running down the stairs.

“No!” he shouted, jumping onto the pile of toys and scoping them under his body; shielding them as if they were helpless ducklings that he was protecting from a callous and savage wolf. “Don’t you dare throw them away.”

“Well then don’t leave them dumped all over the bloody floor.”

“I was using them.”

“They’ve been lying around for a week.”

“It’s not fair to just throw things away. They’re not even yours. They’re mine.”

“They’re yours as long as they’re in your hands or in your toy chest. Anything left on the floor is mine to keep, sell, or throw away.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will.”

“I won’t let you.”

“Try me,” said Mary, making a pile out of Graham’s worn and oversized underwear.

“It’s a martial art,” said Graham.

He was still standing in the same spot, in the same way, with the same pale expression on his face; and those damn wasps had burrowed through his stomach and were setting fire to the back of his throat.

“Mum and dad are coming over for dinner by the way. I’m pretty sure I told you. It might have slipped my mind. Can you give me a hand cleaning this place up?”

“It’s just your mum and dad.”

“Exactly, it’s my mum and dad. The best way to educate kids is by leading by example. The least we can do is make a little extra effort here or there. And yes, for my mum and dad.”

“I can’t,” said Graham.

“What do you mean you can’t? You can’t what?”

“Nah, I mean I can’t be here.”

“Whattaya mean you can’t be here? I had this planned for a

week.”

“Yeah but you only told me now.”

“Well, that’s hardly my fault.”

“Well, it’s hardly mine.”

“You’re never bloody home, Graham. And even when you are, its work. So what is it this time?”

“A class,” he said.

“No, you don’t. You don’t teach on Tuesdays.”

“No, not the university.”

“You need to learn to put your foot down, you do. Stop letting them bully you around. If you should be doing favours for anybody at all it should be your bloody family, not that stupid Rectum.”

“Rector,” said Graham.

“I know what I said.”

“It’s nothing to do with work.”

“Well, then what? You don’t do anything else.”

“It’s a martial arts school,” he said.

“Marital what?”

“Arts. Martial arts. It’s fighting.”

“What do you want to go and do a thing like that for? People get hurt at places like those.”

“Exactly,” said Graham. “That’s the whole point.”

In his mind, he was imagining flying through the air like some seventies TV ninja, jumping down from a cloud and single-handedly disarming scores of trained assassins and making a small mountain out of their bruised and broken bodies, before calling for his cloud once more and vanishing in a gust of wind.

“No,” said Mary. “You’re not doing any martial art. I mean, first of all, look at the state of you.”

She was right. At best, he looked as if the exercise alone might kill him.

“I have to go,” said Graham.

“What do you mean you have to go? You don’t have to do anything. You have to be here is what you have to do.”

“I already paid for the first class.”

“With what money? You know we’re tight.”

“Really? What about the money you borrowed off your folks.”

“Bloody Nathan.”

“What did we talk about borrowing money? You know I don’t like them involved in our affairs. Especially your father; he holds it over us like a fucking Mistletoe.”

“Don’t swear.”

“What did you borrow the money for anyway?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” said Graham. “Nothing is ever nothing. It has to be something.”

“It’s not anything I want to talk about now.”

“Well, that just makes it worse. We don’t need your dad’s help. I’ve got the bills covered.”

“It’s not the bills.”

“Well, then what it is? We’re supposed to be open, right? That’s what happily married people do. They talk. So, what is it?”

“Nobody married is happy. That’s what being married is, having to deal with everybody else’s shit.”

“Mum?”

“Not now, Isabel.”

“Mum.”

“What’s up darlin,” said Graham, his tone blunt but considerate.

“She’s fine,” said Mary. “She had a stomach bug this morning. Had the runs. You’ll be fine, Isa. Just keep drinking water and go lay down. You’ll sleep it off.”

The girl had tears streaming down her face.

“I can’t,” she said.

She looked stiff and desiccated, incapable of walking or even swinging in a breeze. She stood, at the top of the stairs like a mangled tree; her body twisted into a wretched angle.

“I pooped my pants,” she said.

“Oh, Christ.”

“I thought it was a fart.”

The way she spoke, she might as well have stepped on a landmine and be uttering her last remarks; such was the severity in her tone – one of sheer helplessness. Her face carried all the hallmarks of having just given up.

“I’m so sorry,” pleaded Mary, and at the same time holding back what she would describe as, a panic induced, wave of laughter. “I should have warned you, Isa. Oh, my poor girl. For the next twenty-four hours at least if you feel anything down there, you rush to the toilet, ok?”

Graham was already halfway up the stairs.

“I’ll take this,” he said. “Then I have to head off. I’m already late.”

“What time are you home?”

“Not sure. I’ll try not to be late. It’s the first class so I don’t know what to expect.”

“I’ll save you some chicken then.”

“Thanks, darlin. Love ya.”

“Yeah? You better.”

Then he turned to the scared little girl on the stairs.

“You have to lift me,” she said.

Track 10 (Blue)

Isaac sat alone in his apartment, trying in vain to calm his mind. It was no use, though. It was like trying to quieten a hurricane by shouting over the top of it. He thought about everything that could go wrong, and from there, all the hell that would come of it. And it didn't matter, either, how innocuous or trivial the problem might have been, he thought about each as if it were a plane crashing into the side of a mountain.

Worst of all was the thought of not being published.

"Now it's your turn," said The Man on the TV. "Won't you paint with me?"

Taking a deep breath, Isaac prepared little dollops of paint on his palette and sat quiet and attentive as the man on the television explained why he had pre-painted his canvas in a liquid white.

Inside his apartment, there were barely any furnishings at all. The brutalist design left no space for art or décor. There were no paintings on the walls even though, at first glance, he seemed to be a man who appreciated - more than he admired - fine art and reverent culture. Yet the walls were bare and all the rest of his apartment was barren as if he hadn't decided upon this kind of life yet.

There was no furniture outside of the stool that he sat on and a futon in his bedroom. Even the television he had was meek. It was no bigger than a cereal box and no matter what he was watching; it looked as though it were being filmed in the middle of a blizzard.

"So let's start with some Alizarin Crimson," said The Man on the TV.

He made it sound so easy.

"Careful, now, to spread the paint evenly through the bristles."

Isaac had no idea what he was going to paint. It both excited and worried him. He wondered if the man on the television felt

the same way too. Seeing how nicely he swept his brush across the canvass, he didn't at all seem bereft with worry, not like he ought to be – not like most folks were.

“And don't be put off if you leave a bit too much paint here or there,” said The Man on the TV, sounding as if nothing in life was worth getting upset about. “Well, they're just happy little accidents.”

Isaac cursed when he said that. His canvas was full of little accidents and none of them were happy or merry or brought any kind of joy. Try as he might, he just couldn't see the world the same way.

So, while The Man on the TV slowly unravelled a sprawling paradise, hidden in a Prussian Blue mist, Isaac swished his brush across his canvass in almost a trance-like state, at first adding a touch of shadow to a sprawling mountainside and then, overcome away by thoughts of loneliness, isolation, and failure, he vigorously painted the whole thing black.

“Isn't that just the prettiest thing you've ever seen,” said The Man on the TV. “I'll confess I say that about everything I paint, but it's true, though. None of it's a lie. I just love to paint as much as I love a good cuddle with my wife and a kiss on the nose by itsy bitsy puppy dogs.”

Isaac could feel his anxiety swarming – painting would not do the trick. He stared at his phone. There was a message from a girl he had only just met. Her profile didn't give much away, only that she was grateful to God for her health and all her success.

Isaac had never been on a date. He would, though, like the man on the television, like to be married so he too could cuddle his wife and gets tonnes of slobbery kisses from the puppies they raised while they waited to have children.

“You busy?” the message read.

He had no idea what to respond. He'd never felt this scared in his life. He tried to imagine himself as the cool protagonist in all of the romantic comedies he had seen – the same debonair and nonchalance he felt when he watched them. Real-life, though,

was so much more different.

“Hey,” he responded, wishing there was a handbook for this kind of thing. “My name is Isaac. It’s nice to meet you. I’m a research scientist. What do you do?”

“That’s it, don’t be scared,” said The Man on the TV. “Just get in there and see what happens. You know, painting is a lot like life in that way.”

“Motel on Arlington,” she responded. “Meet me at the church across the street. Thirty minutes.”

“Now, just a dash of Sap Green,” said The Man on the TV, amazed at how easy it was all coming together, seemingly with no effort at all.

Isaac assumed she wanted to have sex, but then again, what if he was wrong?

“???????” her next message read.

“You see what it does to the leaves?” said The Man on the TV, amazed by the texture of such a simple stroke. “It just gives the tree this wonderful colour and a whole new life. I bet all sorts of critters are getting about on the branches and the leaves.”

“Fuck it,” said Isaac, thrusting himself into that swirling vortex. “Ok,” he wrote.

And that was it; he had a date.

“I like to look inside,” said The Man on the TV as Isaac rushed about his apartment frantically. “And I like to pretend that all my little friends live there; tucked away, nice and safe.”

Graham, too, was rattling his own tin of nerves and excitement. And as he stared at himself in the mirror, dressed in a white kimono, he felt, for the first time in his life, like an actual hero.

A gong was struck and an almighty crash echoed through the dojo.

“Come, my students,” said The Master in a wise and noble tone. “Sit before me and let us utter the creed and give, not just our oath, but our entire selves to the spirits of Wu-Shun. Seat yourselves, as a leaf upon a pond, or a flea upon the wisping seed of a dandelion. Gather your attention as dust, adrift in the sea of

conscious being. Gather your spirit and repeat after me.”

Graham had never felt so nervous and giddy in his life. He wondered if any of the X-Men had ever felt this way, the first time they were fitted for latex and leotards.

“I solemnly swear,” said the class, “to listen with undivided attention to my master’s sacred wisdom. I solemnly swear to take his word as the only word, and, like a shadow, to follow closely on his enlightened path. I solemnly swear to use with honour and integrity, the mystical powers of Wu-Shun bestowed upon me by my master. I solemnly swear to protect others, for under Wu-Shun I am a guardian of light. I solemnly swear to use my powers for good.”

Already, Graham felt like he could probably save the world. There was an energy inside of him that wanted to burst out of his chest and electrify the world. He hoped this class would never end, and yet, at the same time, he just wanted to rush home and tell his family everything about everything he had learned so far so they could feel as amazing as he did.

And while he prepared himself to unlock the secrets of the ancient arts, on the other side of town, Isaac prepared himself for a date. Her name was Emily. She was twenty-seven and she described herself as being an outdoors type, though she preferred a movie and popcorn to a campfire and smores.

Isaac had never met a girl out of the blue before; not like this. He wondered if he should bring her chocolates and flowers and maybe even go so far as to write her a poem and stick it inside.

But then what if she was allergic to the flowers? Or what if certain flowers meant certain things, like Chrysanthemums? Did a rose mean anything? It was the only flower he really knew. Did a rose mean, I love you? Did he love her? They hadn’t even met? What if she fell in love with him and he didn’t fall in love with her? What if she wanted a baby? He wasn’t ready for children; he was hardly capable of keeping a cat. She’d have to move in. There’d be no space. They’d have to get a bigger apartment. But could he afford that? And what about the right school? Not to mention the

violence, pollution, and who knows if there'd be gainful employment in the future, what with A.I almost immutable at this point. What was the right flower to say, 'Hi, I hope this goes well'?

His phone buzzed.

"Meet me at São Tadeu Cathedral. 19h00, sharp."

It was already a quarter to. He had barely enough time to comb his hair and brush his teeth; all the 'what ifs' would have to wait. And so he chose a shirt that was the only one clean, and he splashed on some cologne, the only one that didn't smell like detergent. And then he rushed out the door and raced towards the cathedral, worried about being late instead of the thousand other things.

Graham, on the other hand, was awash with naive splendour. Barely half the class had passed, and already he had learned how to render a man tetraplegic, with barely even a flick of his own wrist.

"This next move that I will show you," said The Master, rolling around the dojo in his black kimono. "Is the most lethal of all. It is so dangerous that it is banned from all cage fighting tournaments."

He darted about, here and there, like a dragonfly, seemingly incapable of capture. The rest of the class looked on in serious wonder. They weren't doe-eyed like Graham. This wasn't their first circus. Still, though, there was something about The Master that was magical, and be they an expert or a beginner, his magic always caught them unaware.

"The mystical art of Wu-Shun," said The Master, standing statuesque with his hands on his hips. "Is the only true art that, until today, is still passed down only from a one given master to his chosen pupils. Just as my master – Master Wu-Xan – passed his wisdom onto me, and his master onto him, so too shall I bestow," he said in a great thundering voice as if to remind each pupil of their creed. "The ancient wisdom of Wu-Shun unto you, my dear pupils. You will not find Wu-Shun in any book or being taught in any dojo or temple. Just as it is the deadliest of all the arts in the world, so too is it the most exclusive. For this reason, you are, not

only students of the one true art but also carriers of the light; patrons of honour and guardians of destiny. My son,” he said, pointing to Graham.

Graham’s face was shaped like a Kinder Surprise.

“Yes, Master,” he said.

The Master smiled.

“Are you ready to cast the spear of destiny?”

Graham had no idea what he meant.

“Absolutely,” he said.

He’d agree to anything at this point.

“Then come, my child, and I shall show you how to kill a man, without even a single touch.”

At the end of the class, Graham lined up with the other pupils in order of the colour of their belts. He was the only white belt but he wasn’t made to feel weak or inferior. It was the opposite in fact. The class had welcomed him as their brother; like them, he was a warrior.

His hanged off his body like a shield.

“The art of Wu-Shun is a subtle art for death can be struck with nary a blow. Yet it is more so a subtle art because of those who practice it; because they do not utter a word outside this sacred temple. The art of Wu-Shun must be preserved. To do this, one must not spoil the art by inviting it into the hands of unskilled and dishonourable practitioners. Go into the night, my guardians and carriers of the light, and may Wu-Shun be with you.”

“Wu-Shun be with you too,” said the class.

Back at the cathedral, Isaac sat through much of the same proceedings. There was talk of divine intervention and spiritual reckoning and there was a great deal of singing scattered throughout. But he wasn’t nearly as drawn in as Graham.

“What the hell am I doing here?” he thought.

Then he looked to his right and saw the woman sitting beside him, her hair pulled into a tight ponytail, a serious expression drawn upon her face, dressed in a wine coloured blouse that was buttoned all the way to her neck, and a grey plaid skirt that covered

her knees, even when she was sitting.

It was too late to back out now. Besides, the mass had to be over soon. It had to have been an hour or two already; at least that's what it felt like. His buttocks hurt, his back ached and his knees were squashed against the pew before him. Worse still was The Priest's voice which sounded as heavy and muted as most things did in the midst of a terrible fever. Still, though, he watched on and even pretended to listen while he wondered if she had meant church instead of sex.

"Corinthians 6:18," said The Priest. "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins, a person commits outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body."

There was so much fervour in The Priest's voice; it was as if sex itself had nailed Christ to the cross. Were this a less formal setting, he might very well be spitting by now and throwing cups and cutlery across the room.

"Do you not know," cursed The Priest. "That your body is The Holy Temple and God is in you? And when you defile your body, you not only smear filth on his temple, you smear filth on God himself."

Isaac wondered how he could sneak out without making too much of a fuss. She seemed like a great girl. They hadn't really had the chance to say anything to each other; as soon as he arrived, she took him by the hand sternly and they sat down at a pew. She did seem nice, though.

Finally, though, after what felt like an eternity, the priest spoke.

"You may go in peace."

A wave of relief washed over Isaac. As he stood up, he could feel every bone creaking and every muscle stretching. He felt like a bandage had been taken off his head or a giant boulder, lifted from his back. All of a sudden, he remembered he was on a date, and again, his heart palpitated and the nervous panic set in.

Emily waited until they were out of the church and then took him by the hand once more. Like a mother dragging their child

around a supermarket, she yanked on his hand and dragged him towards the motel across the street.

The whole while, Isaac's mind was racing.

"We're going to have sex. Are we going to have sex? Am I supposed to say something? Do I have to ask about her hobbies? Should I have brought her the rose? What if there's no..."

In the room, Emily stripped naked and got down on all fours. She turned and smiled. Her face was shaped like a mandala. She looked beautiful, confident, and free; whereas Isaac looked awkward, scared, and confused - like a sheep trying to cross a busy highway.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Did you want me to eat your asshole first?"

Track 11 (Blue)

The first participant arrived at the hospital two hours early. He came alone and sat against a wall humming the words to his favourite songs.

His body was riddled with nerves. Like worms, the fear and anxiety wriggled and writhed in his stomach and crawled beneath his skin, on its way to lay eggs inside his brain. He tried to scratch it out but that only made things worse. All he could think of were terrible and unfortunate things. It was almost too much to bear.

At nine o'clock he was brought into a waiting room and there he sat for another half hour. The silence was the worst of all; that and not knowing what to expect.

"Five more minutes," said The Nurse, popping her head in through a half-open door.

He tried to distract himself the best he could, focusing only on his breath but it was no good; his imagination was far too savage to tame. Nothing, not even the most ghastly and despicable terrors in the world, could compare to what his imagination would conjure up – dark inescapable nightmares.

"We're ready for you now," said The Nurse.

He followed her through a maze of corridors, terrorized by the echoes of gurneys being knocked against swinging doors. Were he a boy, she would sense his worry and she would pick him up and carry him in her arms. She'd whisper in his ears and smile at him so that he knew there was no need to be scared. She'd kiss his forehead and then tell him a silly joke or sing nursery rhymes about pandas and penguins whenever there was a banging sound or when they passed half-clothed patients crying in their beds. All he really wanted was to hold her hand.

"After you," she said, holding the elevator door open.

The ride down to the basement took far longer than it should; time enough to ruminate on a lifetime of poor decisions

and whether this was any better or any worse.

“Watch your step,” said The Nurse.

She guided him down a long dark hallway towards an enormous set of doors where only trinkets of light peaked through. He could only imagine what kind of horrors lay inside.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?” she asked. “This will be your last chance.”

Truth was, he didn’t know. He’d never felt his body like this before. What he really wanted was to disappear in a puff of smoke and run for dear life. And he wouldn’t stop either, not until he was underneath his blanket with all the doors locked, the lights turned off, and his eyes clamped shut.

But then what would change? He’d spent the whole of his life mere seconds from soiling himself – constantly drawn towards the fringe but never having the courage to peek over the edge. What would change if he went home right now? How would his life be any better?

“I’m ready,” he said.

Were this a movie, the cinema would be littered with chewed up fingernails.

He was then led through an enormous set of doors into an enormous room where he stood, dwarfed, by an enormous machine at its centre.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” said The Nurse.

The Participant stood there dumbfounded. The machine itself looked like something out of a science-fiction movie. It could have as easily been a portal to another dimension just as much as it could, some kind of intergalactic kiln fit for making space mugs and alien pottery.

“Do you have any metal on your body?” asked The Nurse.

The Participant half heard the question, still awestruck by the size of the machine; whether it was awesome or awful was up for debate.

“The magnets are quite strong,” she said, peering at first into the bore and then back at him. “They’ll be ripped right out of you.”

Then she lightly tapped on the side of the machine, inviting The Participant, as if he were a sleepy kitten, onto the table. She asked him innocuous questions as he laid himself down in his best effort to be comfortable. The table, though, was cold and there was no colour in the room whatsoever. How could anyone be comfortable in a place like this?

“This may feel a little tight,” she said, guiding The Participant into the coil - a contraption that encased his head like a bottle cap, stripping him of his peace of mind. “You may feel a little claustrophobic,” she said. “It’s only natural, but this will pass. We just need to ensure your head remains secure and stable so that the machine can properly do its job.”

“It’s fine,” said The Participant.

Not that it really mattered.

“Soon the doctors will start the machine. You’re going to hear all sorts of loud clunking and clanging sounds, but don’t you worry, it’s just the sounds of all the coils and magnets being moved around. It sounds far worse than it really is. I just want you to know that you’re totally safe and in good hands,” she said, smiling, for the first time, through the gaps in the head coil.

She could take the worry out of a public hanging.

And then she was gone. The enormous doors shut behind her and then all of a sudden, The Participant was left alone on a table in a cold room with nothing but the silence to console him.

But that quickly changed.

“Good morning,” said Graham in the other room.

He didn’t bother introducing himself.

“We will be commencing the trial shortly,” he said. “Firstly, I would like to explain the stages and what you can expect. Before we begin, do you have any questions or doubts whatsoever?”

He had a thousand questions but he didn’t know where to start.

“No,” said The Participant, unable to shake his head.

His face was shaped like an amygdala.

“Good,” said Graham. “Now the trial will be divided into

two stages. In the first, you will be shown images on the screen above you. I want you to try and focus as much as possible and just let yourself think and feel. This part will be quick. In stage two, you will be administered a drug by Professor Van Guardé and we will measure your brain activity in light of any possible near death experience. When the drug takes effect, your heart rate will increase rapidly – I don't want you to worry unnecessarily. This is to be expected and we are here the whole time, monitoring you. You will not be alone in this whole process. What I do ask is that you vocalise your experience. Whatever visual or audible hallucinations you have, I want you to do your best to remain lucid and to describe them; this goes for when you are revived and your consciousness is returned. This stage is a little longer but if all goes well, we should be wrapped up just before lunch. They're serving churros in the canteen. Also, as The Nurse explained, during the course of this trial, you are going to hear a lot of loud banging and strange noises. This is just the sound of the machine working. Though they may be startling, you can rest assured there is nothing at all to be worried about. It sounds a tad difficult I know, but we don't expect more than you're capable of, so just do your best. Now, any questions before we start stage one?"

"I still get paid today, right? After the trial?"

Graham didn't answer straight away. He was distracted by something that Isaac had said that had both of them erupt in a fit of laughter.

"Commencing stage one," he said.

And that was when the whirring started.

At first, it wasn't too bad; it was actually kind of soothing. It sounded like his head was inside a laser printer. The light swishing had him almost drift into a trance.

And then the machine screamed.

If sound were a colour, this one would have been bright red, and it would have been flashing. It was the sound that accompanied air raids, tsunamis, and structural collapses. It sounded like disaster and danger. It sounded like the end of the fucking world.

It was so loud that he screamed along with it.

And then, at the height of his panic, the machine's screaming stopped – just like that. It started to swish again, gentle, almost like a mother, shushing her restless child to sleep. He even managed to smile.

And then it screamed again.

Coarse. Vile. Agonizing. Violent. Stabbing. Depraved.

It wouldn't end. It kept on and on, and just as he was about to concede, it would turn sweet and tranquil once more. All the while, a tiny screen above him showed pictures of children on swing sets, dogs on the end of colourful leads, lovers sharing ice-cream, and elderly couples holding hands in the rain.

He felt sick. He wanted to end it now. He wanted to get the fuck out of there.

"You look exhausted," said Graham. "Late night?"

Isaac blushed; it could only have meant one thing.

"You didn't? You did? Who is she? Is it a thing now? Are you seeing her? Look at that bloody smile."

Graham was genuine. He didn't gloat or praise all that often so when he did, he tended to get a bit carried away, which was the excuse he made if he ever went a tad overboard.

"I don't know," said Isaac.

"Like that, was it?"

His gloating now turned into boyish posturing. Were this a movie, he would have slicked back his hair and lit up a cigarette by now, and he would have had the rest of the packet rolled up in his sleeve. He might have even broken into a song and dance, almost as a test of his manhood, demanding that Isaac tell him more.

"Did you have a good time at least?" he said.

"Aw, you know?"

Isaac acted coy as if the experience were exactly what Graham had had in mind instead of what it really was, which was nothing of the sort. Even if it had been, he had no idea how to have this kind of conversation. The movies he watched had far less muscle cars. Love wasn't something you boasted about to your friends; it

was something you confessed – neath the twinkling of stars or the in flicker of a candlelit room. But then again, what he experienced wasn't love.

“She didn't say anything,” he said, sounding as if he were recounting his escape from a German bunker. “Not even when we were done.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Not a word. She just took off her clothes and that was it. We had sex. And then she got up and left.”

His face was shaped like a hit and run.

“So what's the matter?”

Logically he knew there shouldn't have been which is why he felt all the more embarrassed about assuming there was. It didn't feel soft, delicate, and special like he had hoped it would. It didn't feel like making love. And maybe that was why he cried half-way through - which, more than likely, was half the reason why she got up and left.

“Nah, it was great,” he said, doing his best to sound like a chain-smoking cowboy.

Both scientists ignored the man wriggling on the screen before them. The sound too was muted so they couldn't hear him weeping.

“I have to admit,” said Graham. “Had my first full night's sleep in years.”

His silence implied that Isaac should ask more.

“You had sex too?”

Isaac was just happy the attention was off him.

“Ha!” said Graham, almost falling back off his chair. “That's cute. I'm twenty-three years married. We don't have sex; we argue and then eat curry. No, not sex – not that I wouldn't mind – but no, I uh...”

He quickly checked his surroundings, sure that nobody was spying.

“I started a martial art,” he said.

And though he knew he shouldn't, still he had to tell.

“Wu-Shun,” he said furtively as if he had just uttered the name of the shooter on the grassy knoll. “But I’m sworn from saying any more.”

Were this a movie, he would have already said too much. There’d be an explosion and the room would fill up with noxious gas just as scores of federal agents swooped in through ceiling ducts and by holes, blasted through all of the surrounding walls. There’d be no chance for escape. Both scientists would be hog-tied and gagged, and escorted to a secret underground facility where they would never be heard of or seen again.

“That’s Ok,” said Isaac.

Talking about fighting made him nervous, almost as much as a real fight.

“Alright, you twisted my hand,” said Graham. “So basically throw out everything you know about karate. Here’s what they won’t tell you in any school – the real secret to winning any hand to hand combat – it’s all in the way that...”

His excitement bordered on mania. Were there a trampoline in the room, he’d be doing somersaults and backflips by now. If either one of them had bothered to look at their screens for even just a second, they would have noticed The Participant’s heart tachycardiac. If they weren’t so caught up on sex and karate, they might have heard him scream.

“I changed my mind,” shouted The Participant. “Let me out. I wanna go home.”

His voice, though, ‘neath all that whirring and banging, was deaf even to himself. When the machine finally did stop, it was so quiet that he had no idea what to do. His ears rang and his thoughts of escape, though insoluble, had dissolved into a trillion itsy-wincy pieces that floated around his head leaving him mesmerized, astonished, and confused.

He didn’t know how to speak. He didn’t think he could. For a man of letters, that was a strange thing. He just lay there petrified, like a punished child, having an instinct to protest but totally unsure how.

A second later the enormous door opened. It did so suspiciously - suspiciously because it was done with the care of a thief or a neer-do-well. The Participant, trapped inside the damn machine, held his breath and stiffened every muscle in his body for it was the only thing that he had the liberty to do.

"You must be XT-416," said The Professor, slithering in beside him, pressing one of his hands on the man's ankles before pulling tighter on the strap that tied his leg to the table. "In your file," he said. "Under profession, you have written artist."

He smiled in a way that could unsettle a rattlesnake.

"That's right," said The Participant. "I'm a writer."

He didn't at all sound pleased or proud in any way.

"Are you famous?" asked The Professor. "Have I heard of you?"

It was a question he was often asked.

"I don't know," he said.

For it was a question that he had no idea how to answer.

"What do you write?"

"Fiction."

The Professor gasped.

"What a delight," he said.

The Participant had, for the moment at least, forgotten his ordeal. He didn't struggle in his restraints nor did he feel like he was trapped inside one of his terrible stories anymore.

"Never is man closer to God than when he is acting as one."

His face changed. His eyes looked hollow; like holes in the earth, bored to its very core. They were black and misshapen. They looked like the void that was often written about in biblical texts.

"To create," he said. "From nothing. From a formless void come light, and from light come man; and unto man, do what thou wilt."

Then he tip-toed around the side of the machine, peeking in through the gaps in the coil-like as a prowler would; peek through gaps in the blinds.

"Of all the colours," he said, his voice changing as swiftly as

his demeanour. "Which is your favourite?"

A question like that should have sounded pleasant.

"I don't know," said The Participant.

He could feel him there gawking and creeping about.

"One would think you should know your favourite colour," said The Professor. "What if it were to be the last thing you should ever see?"

At this point, neither man had seen the other's face. By his voice alone, though, The Professor sounded as if he were the type of scholar who lectured in zeppelin's and spent his weekend atop of high horses, sicking bloody thirsty hounds onto vile and wicked vermin – at least that's how The Participant felt.

"What if you were confronted with all the colours in the spectrum and on your very last breath you were to look at the wrong one?"

Then he pressed a button and the table exited the bore.

"There you are," he said, smiling.

One that was shaped like a snake's forked tongue.

"Why do you look so scared?"

"I've changed my mind," said The Participant. "I don't need the money."

The latter was a lie. He was a writer; of course he needed money.

"If you had the will to change your mind I might be more convinced to believe you," said The Professor. "Do you believe in free will?"

"Of course," said The Participant. "I mean, yeah I suppose."

"You should not," said The Professor.

He made it sound as if, like pouring juice into his anus, the idea of free will were a fad that he should avoid altogether. The way he spoke, it was clear that this was not a debate.

"As a matter of consciousness," he continued. "You are no more able to change your mind than say, a fish is able to change the tide."

He was like a cat playing with its food.

“I suspect that should offer you comfort somewhat, no?”

There was nowhere for The Participant to look except into the madman’s eyes.

“Please,” he said. “I want to leave. I don’t wanna die, not anymore. I’m not ready.”

The Professor touched the side of the man’s face.

“No-one ever is,” he said, “Even when one is.”

Then he tapped on his broach as if it were a hint or a clue.

“A proper ending,” he said, “Must come as a complete shock, but as such, as little surprise.”

And then he pressed the tip of a syringe gently into The Participant’s vein.

“You’re going to die now,” he said as he slowly pushed the liquid into The Participant’s vein. “This will sting a little bit. But no more than a light sunburn. Tell me,” he said. “Do you believe in God?”

There was nothing inappropriate about the question except maybe, how it was asked. It came across as more of a threat than anything else.

“I don’t know,” said The Participant, though he was leaning more towards a yes, now that his heart was starting to race.

Truth was, he had never actually thought about God; no-one ever did, not until they were dangling from the edge of a cliff or looking down the business end of a shotgun. Now that he was about to die, though, the idea of a Heaven and angels and leprechauns and fairies seemed more than ideal. At the very least, it seemed like nothing to be ashamed of.

“Should I?” he asked, his voice garnished in worry.

The Professor smiled. It was an odd smile; troubling one would say.

“It does not matter one way or the other,” he said, his voice peppered with reason.

And then he removed himself from the room.

Track 12 (Yellow)

“Who are you?” shouted The Master, his hands clasped to his enormous belly like some hardened mountaineer.

There was silence in the class as if each were conditioned to know that not every question should be answered; as if there were no answer, none that they would know in their pubescent wisdom. So they stood with mouths agape, waiting for said wisdom to be bestowed upon them.

Graham, too, looked on with sheer wonder in his eyes. He didn't dare assume he knew anything; not within these four walls. It was as if his kimono had been woven, stitch by stitch, from a single thread of cotton that had been toiled with bloodied hand from a single seed of humility. It stripped him of his ego, of his esteemed and higher self, and with it, dissolved him of the fears and anxieties that so often followed suit. Gone were the thoughts of getting older and, not only having to mourn his youth but also, having to surrender to the inexorable will of entropy.

“You are not,” said The Master. “Just as I am not, too.”

Were this a Hollywood movie, smoke would be billowing out from beneath him while packs of wolves howled in the valley below. There would be flashes of lightning and claps of thunder on the ends of his every syllable, and he would be levitating, like a God, above the very mountaintop from which he stood.

“Am I my body?” he said. “Or am I somewhere inside of it. And if I am my body and it is inside this room, then am I also the room, the Earth, and the entire universe? Am I my thoughts and ideas, those which come unto me like the rising of a tide or the clouds that paint portraits in the sky? Am I a direction; left or right – a set of ideals, wrong or right? Am I good or bad, a God or a devil, or am I the canvas that is as much a work of art as it is the formless mess of a young child? Am I the version of me that I, like Hamlet, proclaim to be, or am I the version of me how others

see me? Am I the hero or the villain? Am I the father or the son? Who am I if I am none of these things? Who am I if I am if I am all of them?"

This would have been the point in the movie where hundreds of ninjas appeared out of the smoke, flipping and rolling around the screen like pert balls of spinifex.

"The first rule of Wu-Shin is to accept that you are no more in control of yourself than your self is in control of the stars in the sky and the ocean of darkness that divides them."

It was like every movie Graham had watched as a boy except now he was the ninja, or at the very least, he was becoming one. He didn't just listen to his master's words; he absorbed them like a drop of rain on a droughty seed. Second, by second he could feel himself changing as if the person he had thought he was all these years were not a person at all, but instead, a poorly imagined thought.

"I am a single point of consciousness," continued The Master. "My focus is the tip of the brush and my will is the painter's hand."

Then he struck the air a dozen times with his iron-like fists at a speed that would be absurd to even try to measure. Any man his size would have struggled to move at even one-fiftieth of his pace; but The Master wasn't any other man, and his students who watched on in delirium were, like the calm before the storm, in awe of what they would one day become.

"When we fight," said The Master. "We pray to many gods. In the ring, in each corner, we pray to a single God to bless us. In one we pray to the God of Earth so that our bodies may be as strong as mountains, impervious to the will of man. In the next, we pray to the God of Fire so that our blood boils like magma that erupts from our crushing fists. In the third, we pray to the God of Water so that we are formless and move with grace and fluidity around any brutish obstacle. And finally, we pray to the God of Wind so that our lungs are always full and in war, we never tire."

Were this a movie, this would be the point where the camera

turned to focus on our hero whose eyes were more magnificent than the sudden death of a thousand suns. The camera would slowly pan down to his hands which, like the birth of some gargantuan black hole, clenched into planet smashing fists.

“If I told you my past,” he said. “Where I have come from, and what I have had to endure, I am certain that none of you would believe me – but it’s true.”

He didn’t elaborate; he didn’t have to.

“Have I killed a man?” he said, again, letting the silence speak for itself. “If I have, it was because I had already weathered every possible alternative. No warrior longs for death. He loathes it. He fights for love and peace and to one day have hands that just as easily foster life as they do, so swiftly take it away. It does not matter if I have or if I have not killed a dozen men; what does matter is what has kept me grounded all these years.”

Though he looked incapable of any more than a second helping; that alone was part of his mystique. The whole class, though, followed his every word like scripture, baited to his mystical lure.

“Footwork,” he said. “Today we focus on footwork,”

A quiet awe swept the room.

“If your fists are the noble nectareous fruit that swing from your long arboreous limbs,” said The Master, holding his clenched fists like swollen cantaloupes. “Then your feet are its bitter and humble roots. So then, what does this mean for the martial artist?”

He wiggled his toes as if there was little sack of gold attached to his feet.

Graham looked on like a child listening to their father explain the mysteries of the universe. Every word was the absolute truth and like the young child, the more he listened, the more he forgot about the world outside.

“The footwork represents that which keeps us whole and humble as human beings so that we are not toppled over by the weight of our momentous spirit and our own best intentions.”

And then he spun around in fantastic circles, seeming as if he was out of time with the music playing in the background, and

out of touch with his own centre of balance as he heaved and hoed, like a bag full of lard in the open sea.

Never, though, did he tip. Never did he fall.

“Footwork” he shouted, prancing about to Mozart’s Violin Concerto N°3, but a version that sounded as if the orchestra were playing from inside of a wood chipper.

His grace and style were undeniable; it was incomparable. Though the top half of his body sloshed about unevenly, his feet grasped themselves to the floor and each seemed to have their own mind, bending and turning so as to allow The Master’s body to jerk about inconceivably whilst still having perfect centre, perfect balance, and like a mongoose, always ready to strike.

“I want to confuse my opponent, to lead him out of rhythm so that he is dizzy and incapable of sound judgement. Watch my feet,” he said, as his stubby little toes fluttered about. “Watch how they keep time with the music. But watch too how my body and arms act independent of one another, neither keeping the same rhythm. I strike with my feet first. Now follow me.”

The rest of the class followed suit, zipping around the room like their master, each with the most splendiferous poise. The tops of their bodies slung about drunkenly as if evading a plethora of deadly strikes; while the lower half of their bodies shifted and turned with magnificent precision.

“It is not enough to have feet,” he declared, his majesty seemingly unaffected by his obligation to orate. “You must plant yourself in them.”

Graham stopped for a second to consider what that meant. Unlike the others, he couldn’t twirl and pivot while he talked or thought; it was one or the other. And whereas everyone else seemed to glide about with almost as much charm, Graham stumbled about as if legs were something he had only recently acquired, tripping over himself and anyone within reach. There was no splendour in how he carried himself and he, more than anyone else, knew this.

“You are in your head, swinging about,” said The Master, lifting Graham back on his feet. “It is no wonder you have no

balance. Your thoughts whoosh about and they are heavy and filled with rocks and dirt and mud. Am I right?"

"It's stuff at home," said Graham. "And work is...."

"I do not care," said The Master. "And neither should you. Your work here will transcend to your personal life but only if you let go of your personal life. You cannot help it or anyone else if at first, you cannot help yourself."

Then he wiggled his toes as if each held its own specific meaning.

"Footwork," he said. "Represents family and loyal friendship; both of which are vital if one is to stay grounded, especially in a world where trees are named after their fruit. Here is your family. We are your brothers."

The whole class high—fived.

"You are too much in your head. You must stop being you and just be. Let your consciousness sift down to your feet and root itself there. It is from the feet where you will fight, not from the head. Understand?"

Graham had no idea what he meant, but he liked hearing it.

"I do," he said, even convincing himself. "I get it now."

Then he joined the rest of the class as they twirled around the dojo.

Outside the wind and rain bellowed. It carried in its roar, the last scream of a dying writer, scratching on the glass in a desperate bid to scour its way back into the weak and tender parts of Graham's mind. Neath its roar too, was the great depression that was all that had gone wrong in his life.

For the moment, though, draped in his warrior's attire, and neath the spell of his master's wisdom, none of that mattered. He was not a failed scientist, nor was he an impotent husband or the ire and doldrums of his children.

All those things waited for him outside but in here, at least for this brief moment, he was whoever he willed himself to be. And it was easy, dressed as he was, to imagine himself as the hero in everyone's story including his own.

Track 13 (Red)

The second and third participants both arrived on the same day. There had been a mix-up in communication but in the end, it worked out well – not for the participants, but for the scheduling. Both participants once again responded poorly to the drugs and were unable to be revived. It was frustrating, to say the least, but a few hitches along the way wouldn't deter the two scientists – failure was a mark of success. As pressure mounted, though, cracks were starting to show.

“At least we have the waivers, right?” said The Rector, looking, as he always did, on the brighter side of misfortune. “Some data is better than none.”

Now, though, he was clearly mocking.

“We have data,” said Graham. “We have tonnes of it; just....”

“Not enough to draw any valid conclusions.”

“Not as much as we would like.”

“Well, what if you changed the question? I mean, you have the results.”

“I'm afraid you lost me there.”

He knew; he knew.

“What if you take what you have and propose a different hypothesis? What if you change the goalposts? Or hell, what if you even change the sport altogether?”

“Hand it over to another department?”

“Either that or change your question. The Stanford Experiment may have failed but the data didn't. The experiment proved nothing about the abuse of power, poor administration saw to that, but what the results did show was the effect of such power – how to strip a free man of his will to be free. If they'd asked a different question, they could have put good use to that data instead of what it became. What it comes down to then is whether you have the courage to ask a different question.”

He had spite, scorn, and anger; he had indignation, pride, and fear. All of them inspired him in one way or another like paint to an artist or God to a marauding army; they were what lifted him when his mind was full of doubt and fatigue. What he didn't have, though, was courage.

"This is my research."

"I understand, I do. Probably nobody understands more than me. I have always been your biggest advocate. At the same time, the board is on my back - enrolments are down. We need exciting research. And we need publishing."

"You don't think this is exciting?"

"Me? Oh contraire. No, I think it's riveting. Of course, I do. It's just the board, and really enrolments in general, are leaning more towards....alternate science."

"Grievance studies?"

"It's a changing world, Graham."

"Is this a university or a thrift shop?"

"Without students, we'll be neither."

"Look, all I need is one," said Graham.

"One what? You mean person to survive?"

"Yes, exactly. We can lose fifty for all I care so as long as we get one. All I need is to confirm the data we have with a survivor account. That's it."

"What was the term you used? A controlled..."

"Unresponsive state. And it is that," he said, adamant. "But, for whatever reason resuscitation failed."

"It would be nice to know what that reason was, don't you think?"

"We're working on that."

"How are you, Graham?" said The Rector.

"How am I what?"

"How ARE you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't been you lately."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. You seem distant as all. Different. Not your usual self."

"I'm fine," said Graham.

"How's Mary?"

"She's fine."

"And the kids?"

"Everyone's fine, Sam."

He could be cruel without knowing it.

"I miss the get-togethers we used to have," said The Rector, aloft in a moment of blissful nostalgia. "They were always so much fun. Your boy was just a baby when I saw him last. Geeze, he must be getting on...."

"He's seven," said Graham.

His face was shaped like a bag of cement.

"Wow," said The Rector. "It's been that long? Feels like yesterday. You think he remembers me?"

He looked sad and lonely and in need of a hug.

"Sure," said Graham, shaking his head as he did. "I mean, why not?"

There was an awkward silence that followed. It felt like a disinterested kiss.

"You get one more shot," said The Rector, his voice cold and sharp.

"That's all we need," said Graham, himself on the back foot.

"One more death and I'm pulling the plug."

Track 14 (Yellow)

Graham got home with a heavy head that evening. He had no-one but himself to blame really. Failure, after all, was integral to the process. Still, he was disappointed. And in no time, his disappointment turned to frustration and his frustration to puerile anger. After having talked himself up for months, the last thing he wanted was to have to admit to his family that he wasn't half the man he made himself out to be.

"How was your day?"

The question wasn't asked. It was more or less shouted from just outside the back door. And for all Graham knew, it was probably rhetorical.

One again the TV was blaring and nobody was watching. There were toys strewn about the floor; along with bedsheets, pieces of ripped cardboard, a bowl full of half-eaten apple pieces that were covered in ants, and a cat – looking shell shocked by something that had probably happened only a minute or two before.

Graham took an almighty breath and sighed in almost sheer relief and then collapsed on the sofa, throwing his bag full of notes to the far end of the room. It wasn't the most comfortable sofa, but it was if he could position himself just right. After years of being jumped on by a couple of manic children, the springs had worn out and flopped about like an old man's testicles, whilst the cushions moulded to whatever weight was put on them. But when he wriggled just the right amount, Graham sank into that sofa as if it was a cloud, a bath, or a tar pit, and he stretched out his legs in absolute bliss.

"Hi, dad," said Nathan, running into the room with two guns in his hand. "Missed you."

"Did you?"

"No, just joking," said the boy, laughing. "Hate you, dad. Love you, dad. Hate you, dad."

And then he ran back up the stairs hunting interdimensional space monsters.

A minute later his daughter came down the stairs and collapsed on the sofa beside him; curling up in his arm while pretending to fall asleep. The TV was showing cartoons that were probably inappropriate but at the same time, it seemed like wasted effort to change the channel.

“How was school?” he asked.

“Worst day ever,” said Isabel. “My best friend got in a fight with another girl at school.”

“An actual fight? Like a fist fight?”

“No. Louise said the Sofia wasn’t actually good at doing cartwheels, even though yesterday she said she was and then Louise told Sofia that she didn’t really do proper handstands because her feet always touched the wall; and the Sofia got really mad because she can do proper handstands, it’s just that the one time Louise saw her, one of her feet touched the wall; but that was just an accident – I know cause it happens to me sometimes too; but I’m a lot better than both of them, at handstands and cartwheels.”

“Hold on,” said Graham. “Which one is your best friend? I thought your best friend was Laura.”

“No, dad. You don’t listen.”

“Well, then who was over last week?”

“Ugh, dad. Me and Laura don’t talk anymore.”

“Well, what happened there? You guys were best friends.”

“It doesn’t matter. Besides, you wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m your dad. It’s my job to care or at least to give it a shot. Try me.”

Then the girl stormed off. She didn’t yell anything; she didn’t have to. The sound of her feet deliberately stomping each step as if each one were a precious hope and dream was enough to explain, more or less, how she really wanted to say.

Once again Graham exhaled – almost triumphantly.

He hadn’t for a second thought about work. Even if he wanted to talk, it’s not like anyone would let him. And who could blame

them really - all those big words and all that stupid data? The kids would be bored in a second. Not to mention the whole 'dead body' side of things. Sure, the kids would dive on that, but if he shared that part of his job, they wouldn't sleep for a month. Plus, they all had more to share with him so in a way; it was nice to be on the other side of the glass.

"I got some chickens," said Mary, plopping herself down on the sofa.

"Chickens? Can we afford chickens? And what about the cats and the dogs?"

"They were free. And we'll get free eggs out of them so we'll end up saving money. Plus they'll eat the scorpions."

"We have scorpions? Since when?"

"I told you; I found one in the bathroom behind the toilet. I swear you never listen."

"I'd remember if you told me we had scorpions. Jesus Christ. I'm not going to be able to take a shit anymore."

"Speaking of that, did you make the appointment?"

She didn't need to be specific; he knew just what she meant.

"You didn't, did you? Bloody hell, Graham. You know sometimes you're just as impossible as your son. You may call it stubborn, but I say you're just scared. And you shouldn't be; it's your health."

"I was going to do it, I swear. Things got out of hand today at work. The first trial was a balls up – had to spend the rest of the day dealing with all the paperwork and...."

"Didn't go well?"

In the time it could have taken him to say no, he ran through his mind, all the slights, errors, stuff ups, cock-ups, distractions, poor reactions, and in the end, the cadaver of a forty-year-old writer that had to be catalogued and processed and taken to the morgue. There were the arguments that followed and the things that were said that couldn't be taken back but that would still require a formal apology in the morning. There was also that asshole in traffic who kept flicking his lights behind him, who he knew,

were he given the chance, he could kick his ass.

“It’s just frustrating, is all,” said Graham.

“You’ll do better next time, babe,” said Mary consolingly.
“You always do.”

Her face was shaped like a silver lining.

“Are you doing your fighting thing tonight?” she asked as if there were something else she was vying to propose.

But Graham heard only what played out in his head.

“That’s right,” he said, and his spirits lifted.

And before either of them could say another word, from up the stairs came a scream followed by some shouting followed by the sounds slapping and punching and scratching – and it would come as no shock if there was even a bite. Both kids came running down the stairs into the living room, both with their own version of events and both versions being screened at competing volumes at the exact same time.

“Nathan hit me for no reason.”

“Well, she pushed me.”

“That’s because he scratched me first.”

“Yeah, but she wanted to take my toy.”

“I was only seeing it.”

“No, you were gonna take it.”

“Well, it’s my toy anyway. I’m the one who gave it to you.”

“You see, dad. She said she took it and....”

The two children stepped on their soap boxes and stated their cases over and over again. And both of them had compelling arguments so much so that by the end, it didn’t really matter who did what to whom – everyone was a victim, and everyone was in the wrong.

“Isa, did you take his toy?”

“Yeah, but he scratched me first”

“Nathan, did you scratch your sister?”

The boy slammed his hands onto his ears and stormed off to a corner of the living room and turned his back to everyone. Were he a snail or a tortoise, he’d be inside his shell by now.

“Fuck this,” said Graham. “I gotta go. Kids, stop being douches to each other. I love you both, but I’ve got class.”

“Well can I watch cartoons on your computer?” asked Isabel.

“What’s wrong with the TV?”

“I prefer on your computer.”

“Ok, fuck it. Yes.”

The girl smiled. Her troubles dissolved immediately. The boy, however, would take some effort. Though he looked like a little boy tucked into the corner of a room, were he an animal, there would be hundreds of thousands of sharp quills sticking out of his back urging well-wishers and curious people to keep their hands away. He would come good in his own time; he always did.

“Don’t get home late,” said Mary, sounding just a little suspicious. “And not too early either, if you know what I mean.”

Her face was shaped like a garter belt.

“I didn’t just buy chickens,” she said.

Track 15 (Blue)

“I brought you a gift.”

Isaac sat across from a woman in a bar that was as crowded as it was loud. He was nervous as usual, desperately racing through his mind looking for something to say – anything that would make him look and sound as funny, cool, and interesting as he thought he was.

The woman’s name was Alice and according to her profile, she was a Gemini, loved nature, cinemas, and bars; was sometimes anti-social yet always anti-fascist, and that she was autistic – but the cool kind.

“Do you wanna see it?” she said.

The gift was already in her hands.

“I didn’t know I should bring something,” said Isaac.

About now was when the panic set in. The contents of his stomach sloshed about as his thoughts swirled, and with them, the whole world started to spin in nauseating circles. Soon enough his mind felt became a light, noxious gas while his head felt, like a kite made out of bricks, impossible to keep upright. He wanted to vomit all over her.

“That’s fine,” she said, handing him a small pillow across the table.

It felt anything but, though. Were this a movie, their roles would have been reversed. He, the romantic male lead, would have showered her with gifts that he himself had tailored, or at the very least, had custom made by some child in Bangladesh. And it would have been she who was caught unaware, faintly protesting the need for gifts but at the same, relishing the devotion and keeping stock of each and every one. Were this a movie, he would have at least brought her a flower.

“I hope you really love it,” she said.

Her face was shaped like a night lamp.

It was a small travel pillow, the kind handed out on long haul flights. The pillowcase, though, had been screen printed. On one side were the words, 'Hello Moon'. The letters were yellow and luminescent, and they were on the backdrop of a starlit sky. On the other side was a screen print of Lenin's smiling face, and surrounding him was a circle made out of the words 'Love'.

"I'm a feminist," she said as if presenting a straight flush. "And a communist."

"Oh, ok, cool. Yeah."

Really he wasn't quite sure what to say.

"What about you?" she said.

"Me?"

"Yeah. What are you?"

"Well, I'm a scientist, I suppose. I hadn't really thought about it. I like to paint but I wouldn't call myself a painter."

"Does that scare you?" she said.

"Painting? Well, it's supposed to help with anxiety so...."

"No. That I'm a feminist."

Her face changed all of a sudden; it was shaped like a spine.

"Most men are threatened by a strong woman," she said.

Isaac's face changed too; it was shaped like watered-down jelly.

"Real men are turned on," she said. "Which one are you?"

In all honesty he had no idea; definitely, though, he was feeling like the former.

"I love strong women," he said.

He hoped that was enough for her not to beat him up.

"So you're a scientist?" she said.

Isaac nodded.

"You realise straws aren't the problem," she said.

"Straws?"

"Yeah. You're acting like banning straws is gonna save the oceans. You realise how few straws are in the ocean? And how does a straw I use here in the city even get to the ocean? Huh? Explain to me that. Plus climate change is total bullshit. The real

problem is fat bourgeoisie pigs. Capitalism,” she said, stuffing her face with fried cheese balls. “That’s the real problem. If you want to save the dolphins, first you need to break down the government and seize the means of production.”

“I think the straw is more of a symbol,” said Isaac apprehensively, already knowing that he had unwittingly stepped into a pit of tar that was moments from being set on fire. “It’s a symbol – of change, of shifting attitudes, of consuming less. I mean really, when you look at it, if you can lift a cup to your mouth, you don’t need a straw. You could make the same argument for transgender.”

“So you’re transphobic?”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. Just that, like the straw, if we can figure out how to create more understanding, compassion, and inclusion for transgender, then we’ll be one step closer to understanding how to overcome racism.”

“So transgender are straws? Is that what you’re saying? What, because you suck them both? Sounds pretty transphobic to me.”

“They’re symbols,” said Isaac, feeling himself neck-deep in tar. “The easy battle. But a victory in either one means a greater chance in winning the war on greed and intolerance.”

Alice took a sip of her cocktail.

“I suppose,” she said. “Still....vaccines.”

His heart sank, as did he, beneath the bubbling tar.

“I know that correlation doesn’t equal causation; I’m not stupid, I am scientifically minded. But you look at how common autism has become in modern society since the rapid spread of vaccinations and you don’t need to be a scientist to see that one relates to the other. If you ask me,” she said; which he needn’t for she would say anyway. “Governments, fascist bankers, and capitalist bourgeoisie pigs are making autism the norm so that people are less connected and more connected to their devices and technology to dismantle humanism and the social paradigm, so as to have the proletariat enslave themselves to machines and the internet and robot sex dolls, and...”

“Would Madame like another drink?” said The Waiter,

rushing in like a cool afternoon breeze.

Alice swallowed the rest of her cocktail.

"Bring me two," she said. "Oh, and a straw. It gets you more drunk."

"And sir?"

"Whiskey," said Isaac. "As much as possible."

"Contrary to what anyone else might have told you," said Alice, halfway through chewing this and that. "We're not having sex tonight."

Then she went into great detail about how long it had taken her to make the pillow, which then led to ten minutes of her talking in-depth about her passion for ketamine and rave culture, and her disgust for patriarchy and most men in general, but particularly her father. "So," she said at the end of her diatribe. "What do you think?"

He'd drunk enough now to not be brash with what he truly felt.

"I agree," he said, being too drunk to remember a word of what she has said.

"Not about that, about me. What do you think about me?"

She posed playfully and exaggerating.

"You're great," he said. "I'm having a great time."

"I like you," she said. "You're not so bad for a man."

"Thank you?"

"The world is a mirror, you know?"

"Is it?"

Isaac stared at his glass of whiskey. He had reached that point where, deep inside he knew that, if he drank another drop, he'd spent the rest of the night with his head hanging into a toilet bowl offering reparations to a god he in which did not believe. And in spite of all that, he took one more sip.

"A mirror," said Alice again, this time in dramatic overtone. "The world is a mirror. That's all we're ever really looking for is ourselves. We ask questions like, 'Do you like so and so' because we like that thing and if you answer yes to all of them we love you -

why? – because we love ourselves. I’m looking for me in you and you’re looking for you in me. We’re looking for ourselves in everyone and everything; for proof that we exist – proof for our ego. Wow,” she said, looking down through the hole in her straw. “These cocktails are really tingly. I’m still not gonna have sex, though. So don’t try to nudge me; not even a little. Ok a little,” she said, laughing. “I was speaking to one of my girlfriends the other day. She was saying how her boyfriend is just being a lazy bum and not making anything of his life, just lazing about playing games and making little effort towards reaching his potential; at least in her books, you know? Thing is, she has been on this personal quest for the last couple of months – started exercising more, manifesting positive sentiments, and I’m pretty sure she went vegan too. So I told her she wasn’t angry with her boyfriend, she was angry at herself. He’s a mirror, you see? So, when she looked at him, she saw herself how she used to be a month or two earlier. So it’s not really about him playing games all day, it’s about her not fully appreciating who she is and loving, not just the woman she is, but accepting and appreciating the woman she left behind. I’m a Libra, by the way. But I guess you could tell. Are you sure you’re not a Gemini? I swear,” she said, ordering another drink. “These cocktails make me so horny.”

Track 16 (Yellow)

“Pain does not exist,” shouted The Master as Graham struggled under the weight of not only his body but of his mind too. His thoughts were heavy, and of them, there were many; and all of them hinged upon a litany of his failures.

“Pain is just a thought,” he continued. “And thoughts are but clouds in the mind. Your breath, though, is the wind that blows those worrying clouds away. So breathe,” he screamed. “Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. You are only breathing, nothing more. Your body is carrying itself. There is no weight. There is no strain. There is no pain. There is nothing but the very next breath.”

Graham heaved air in and out of his body. He fought as hard as he could to push the clouds away but the more they swirled about, the more monstrous they became until he could lift his body no more and he collapsed into a sweaty decrepit heap; shaking and moaning and gasping like a punctured tyre.

“I’m impressed,” said The Master, feeding Graham the confidence he craved. “Do not be disheartened by failure. The point of our practice is to fail, each and every time. We push our mind and our body past the point of exhaustion and giving up; for the former is a thought and the latter a choice. We push the body and the mind to failure for there we find and we redefine the limit. If you are not failing, you are sitting still; you are content and you are not evolving. Here in our dojo, we practice the art of failure so that when you go out there in the real world, you climb every mountain, you put out every fire, and you catch every bullet with your teeth.”

The constant pain was almost too much to bear. Graham moaned, as did the rest of the class, only his sounded as if he had swallowed a baby seal that was crying out for its mother.

“You are not here to feel good about yourself. This is not an exercise in pleasure. Let me make this patently clear, you are here to suffer; and inside this dojo, you will suffer.”

“Yes, Master,” shouted the class amidst expedited breaths.
“Thank you, Master.”

They sounded more grateful than submissive.

“You must choose your own suffering,” said The Master, slowly walking between the circle of wrecked bodies. “Lest someone choose for you.”

“Yes, Master,” they chanted, pushing their bodies into unfortunate positions, the kind that toddlers and invertebrates found no challenge in whatsoever - past the point of fear, pain, and exhaustion.

“Life is suffering. We all must suffer. It is part of our growth. A tiny flower hidden neath a canopy of shadows must crane its neck to meet the sun. You will suffer in life; that is a guarantee. But how, where, and with whom you suffer is entirely a condition of your choosing.”

One by one the students collapsed on the floor, their crippled arms incapable of lifting a grain of sand, let alone their preposterously heavy bodies. One by one they fell, and one by one The Master screamed in their ears, reminding them that they had all chosen to be here and so, not only should they get back up, but that they should smile too.

“If you don’t choose your suffering,” he repeated, for the fiftieth time. “A lesser suffering will be chosen for you. What is then,” he said, “a noble suffering?”

His questions were not meant to be answered. Whereas each of his light kicks to his students’ abdominals was a reminder to align their posture and exert more concentrated force, each question was much the same – a slight rattle of the senses or a kick to their beleaguering thoughts so as to be mindful, calculated, and astute in the midst of suffering.

“A noble suffering is the suffering of your choosing that does you well. Most of the suffering I see about, and maybe the reason you came here in the first place, is lesser suffering and most of it born out of pleasure, the kind derived from scintillating your mouths. A baby will discover its world by testing everything in its

mouth. It will derive pleasure, interest, and disgust by its mouth alone. And it will grow to only be interested in pleasure, stuffing its face with burgers, cakes, soda, and kisses until the suffering that is chosen for them is obesity, depression, and bad relationships. If you only seek pleasure, your suffering will be sweeter than any cake and more perverse than any kiss. You suffer here so that you suffer nowhere else,” he said. “You chose this suffering and because of it, every other one of your choices will be embossed in nobility – from the food you eat to the company you keep. Each choice will bring you closer to the light.”

“Yes, Master.”

His words ended right as an alarm sounded and the whole class collapsed on the floor; some of them laughing and some of them cursing, but all of them better in some way, from what they had endured.

“Choose a noble suffering,” said The Master. “Lest a lesser one be chosen for you.”

Then he clapped his hands once and the entire class was on their feet bowing and in no time at all, shaking each other’s hands, and hobbling out the door. Still delirious and shaking from the training, Graham collapsed back onto the floor and huffed and puffed like a dirty old steam train.

“Let’s do some stretches,” said The Master.

Then he sat down beside Graham and twisted his legs in unfathomable positions for a man of his size and stature. Graham tried to follow suit but he had all the elasticity of a floorboard. He tried, though, to twist his body until he felt it about to snap and then he let go, certain that it would. His face was shaped like everything he had ever given up on in his life. He looked helpless, incapable, and on the verge of tears.

“One does not overcome their fears, Graham. A true warrior is courageous in light of them. I have spent a lifetime fighting and even to this day, before every fight or spar, I walk into the ring with fear in my belly. And you can see how much fear can fit in this belly,” he said laughing as he shook his massive stomach like a bag

of milk and lard. “In light of that, I fill my heart with love; and that love makes me more than courageous, it makes me something to fear. Real heroes,” he said, “aren’t the ones who are born stoic; they’re the ones who are forced to figure out a way to be. What would life be without death? It’s the knowing of death that makes a man choose to live. Without death, he would merely exist. And that’s why a robot could never write a symphony; not one that mattered anyway. It’s the same for heroes. A hero is a hero not for having saved a life, but for having chosen to do so – only at that moment is he embossed in heroism. Without fear none of that would be possible.”

“I’m scared of everything at the moment,” said Graham.

It was just the two of them in the dojo. It was late and it was raining again. The tin roof made it sound like there was a hurricane beating down on them and that at any second, the roof would be ripped right off. For the first time in a long time, though, it felt completely natural talking about the things that terrified him most.

Were they kids, those things might have been tarantulas, werewolves, and thunderstorms; now that he was middle-aged, overweight, and balding, werewolves were still an issue, but in place of tarantulas and thunderstorms were tsunamis and parasitic worms – he couldn’t watch anything on a nature channel without imagining his kids being mauled, drowned, or turned into mindless zombies by single-celled organisms.

“What do you do?” asked The Master.

“I’m a scientist; and all things considered, not a very good one.”

“We can be terrible judges of ourselves especially if we have never once seen ourselves accomplish a single thing – even when we have, in fact, amassed a lifetime of accomplishment. We are always looking out at the mountain – inch by inch, problem by problem - we are climbing and yet not once do we ever actually see ourselves on that mountain. All we see is the way we should have gone whereas the rest of the world sees the path we took. It’s not your place to judge whether you are good or a bad scientist. Your

job is merely to do science. Let those watching below from the foot of the mountain judge you. It's their right. And they're probably better at it than you are – more fair at least. They are the ones watching after all."

"Do you have kids?"

The Master stared off into the distance as if he had caught a glimpse of a ghost. Were this a film he would be clearly overacting, aiming his expression for an audience a thousand yards away, but this was real life and nothing was ever that obvious.

"I haven't had an easy life," he said. "I've battled for everything that I have. I can say, though, that I've lived an honest life where others might have chosen a far easier path to success. Everything I have I've built and crafted myself. Everything I have is here in this dojo. It's the only family I have. I made that choice a long time ago – dedicating my life to my art. I sacrificed and forsake the idea of having a family so that I could father the light of Wu-Shun Karate for the next generation as my master did before me. And one day I will find the right student who, when I die, will make that same promise and carry that light."

"You ever wonder if maybe you're doing it all wrong?"

"Never," said The Master as if he were refusing a cookie or a second helping of cheese. "Do you?"

And it seemed as if both were waiting for the other to make the first move.

"Nah," said Graham. "Of course not."

"Yeah, nah, me neither," said The Master.

They both sounded as if what they needed more than anything was a hug.

"I admire you," said The Master. "Maybe even a little envious in a way,"

"Me? Why?"

"You bare all the markings of a hero."

"I do?"

"Trust me; I've seen my fair share."

His words reeked of shell-shocked bravado; the type etched

in stone as epitaphs for fallen heroes. Whether or not they were true was not as important.

“Have you ever been in a fight?” asked Graham.

The Master stared at the rain. His silence said more than words ever could.

“Look at these knuckles,” he said, holding his little fist right at Graham’s face.

They looked smooth, like a fresh tub of butter.

“You be the judge,” he said.

Graham didn’t know any better; just seeing a fist up that close was enough to make him panic. He didn’t show it, though. He acted like he’d been face to face with fists his whole life.

“Your day will come,” said The Master. “You’re different from my other students. I knew from the second you walked in. I told myself, ‘There’s something remarkable about this one here. Prepare to be stunned’. And I was right.”

“Really?”

Were this a movie; right about now was where he would have been presented with an ancient scroll, a colourful sash, and a blessed dagger.

“There is someone I want you to meet,” said The Master.

He made it sound covert and clandestine.

“The Empath; a quantum healer with far-reaching powers,” he said. “A capacity, not just to heal, but in cases like yours, to unlock deep-seated life forces. I will say no more.”

Then he rested his hands on Graham’s shoulders as if he was knighting him.

“Now,” he said. “It’s time for you to be heroic.”

Track 17 (Yellow)

Graham was led out into the night where, with the wind and rain conspiring against them, they – the master and his apprentice – walked as if their bodies were carved of granite, impervious to Mother Nature’s cold wintry wrath.

“We are here,” said The Master.

They stopped at the shop next door, a small chemist for homeopathic medicine where both men stood in reverent awe. Its windows were painted as black as the night sky with trillions of bright little stars and constellations scattered about.

“After you,” said Wu-Shin. “Left foot first.”

The sense of mystery and how seriously it was spoken as if the right foot first might cause some rancid infection, had Graham totally absorbed. As he pressed his left foot down, his whole body seemed to electrify as if an ancient part of his self – something that had existed since long before mankind was even a single cell – had been awakened and unstuck from its broken seal.

“Do not be frightened,” said a voice, a woman’s voice.

If he wasn’t frightened then, he was now.

“Step beneath the cleansing crystals,” she said. “And do not possess a mere thought.”

The Master pressed a firm hand on Graham’s shoulder. It told him all he needed to know. So, in spite of his fear, he amassed enough bravery in his mind and his heart to step into the sparkling blue light.

“He is the one that you mentioned?” she said.

Her voice sounded like waves breaking on the shore.

“He is,” said The Master, his words enamoured in fear and respect.

“Come through,” she said. “And please, wipe the past from your feet.”

As if he had passed through some celestial portal, Graham

felt himself becoming the very person he imagined that The Master believed that he was. He stepped through the blue light and into a dimly lit room where the orange hue from burning incense guided him to the table covered in Jasmine and Thyme.

“You can lie down if you so choose.”

Graham stared at the table unsure really what he was supposed to do next. He looked around for The Master but it was just the two of them now, barely lit by the flicker of incense. Awkwardly, Graham picked at the first button on his shirt for what seemed like forever.

“Is something wrong?”

“Should I take my clothes off?” asked Graham, stopped on the third button.

“That....won’t be necessary.”

She didn’t make him feel any sillier than he already felt.

“Take a breath,” she said. “A real breath; not the kind of which you are accustomed. Start in your belly, let it expand until it can bear no more, then open your and your chest, and then, when it too cannot budge, open your throat and take one last delicious gulp.”

Graham did as she said, feeling every part of his body swell.

“Now let it free,” she said. “But do not force it. Simply allow the air to be free and feel it as it leaves your body. Notice it, in the release of your throat, the sinking of your chest, and in the final purge from your belly. Feel too, the garments of which your ego is garbed – the fears, the anxieties, the obligations, the insecurities – feel them all be swept off your ego, swept away by your escaping breath like cobwebs blown away in a tremendous breeze.”

Graham did as she said. With his eyes closed and laying on a bed of soft cushions and petals, he imagined himself detached from his body and existing on the crest of his breath, riding it from the depth of his gut to the very tip of his nose, and as he did so, just as she said, he felt removed of the fear and indecision which, for the life of him, he had thought was, in fact, the colour of his skin and not a layer of dust that he could wipe clean with such

ridiculous ease.

“Who ARE you?”

“I am Graham.”

“No. You are not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You are NOT,” she said, resting her index and middle finger against his forehead whilst contorting her other hand into strange alien-like symbols, holding them over specific points on his body. “Who ARE you?” she said again.

“Like I said, I’m Graham. I’m a scientist. I’m a father. I’m married. I’m overweight. And uh....I don’t really know what else to tell you.”

“To be or not to be, yes?”

“Yes?” said Graham, assuming he was both right and wrong.

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” said The Empath, in a way that was arguably true.

“Ok.”

“Who is Graham?”

The whole while, she was tapping his forehead, his chin, his chest, and even the soles of his feet; lifting his arm up and down as if she were pumping water from a well.

“Who is Graham to your children? Who is Graham to your wife? Who is Graham to your family, your colleagues, and your friends? Which of these Grahams are you? Who are YOU?” she said again as if this time it would be abundantly clear. “Oh this is interesting,” she said, resting her bent hand on his heart chakra. “Were you ever left alone as a child?”

“I...don’t know....”

“Yes,” she said as if she were shining a torch into the darkest recesses of his memories. “That’s very interesting. Your large intestine energy is quite swollen. The large intestine, of course, having to do with grief, guilt, and regret.”

She whisked around the table as if he were the ingredients for a cake.

“Now I’m just going to check the teres major muscle which is your governing meridian and here we can get a peek at your unconscious mind which, when I...”

Her face contorted with worry.

“Well that definitely shouldn’t be like that,” she said.

Now it was Graham who felt concerned.

“Yeah, you see your governing meridian is all out of whack. Stress will do that; that and diet. Have you been eating poorly?”

If his stomach wasn’t a dead giveaway then his silence was.

“Sometimes living a life always on the go will do that. We just don’t have time to sit down and have a proper meal. It’s a go-go world out there. Now, I’m sensing something in your governing meridian; not the source of all this stress, but maybe some unresolved conflict. I’m feeling the letter J. Do you have anyone in your life at the moment with the letter J. It might be a Jacob or a Jonathon or a Joanne. It could be a man or a woman. It doesn’t even have to be a person. It could be a pet.”

She wowed herself with that realisation.

“It could, couldn’t it? The universe is funny like that.”

If she gave him a week to think it still wouldn’t be enough. Graham was terrible at guessing games and even worse at remembering people’s names.

“What we are connecting to here goes deeper than corporal; it’s more conscious energy. Because you know, consciously, we are neither man nor woman, so it could be a Justine or it could be a Justin. It’s defiantly a J, though.”

“I can’t think of anyone,” said Graham.

“Hmmm,” said The Empath, stumped.

She flicked her fingers around his belly and tapped the bottom of his feet.

“What about an I then? It could just as easily be an I or a K. So you know a Kate or a Keith, or maybe even an Ian?”

“My daughter is called Isabel.”

“That’s it! Hoorah. That makes absolute sense then. The father daughter relationship, of course!”

She smiled at him as if he had made the discovery himself.

“Being a father is not easy, is it? All that stress and worry – not to mention the little ones can be a bit of a handful when they want to be, am I right?”

“There’s Isaac too.”

Suddenly, Graham felt empowered.

“Oh, ok. So who’s Isaac then?”

“We work together.”

“Ah, you see? Family and work, right there at the centre of everything. Have you been feeling tired?”

“I have,” said Graham.

“And do you get weak if you don’t eat.”

“I do,” said Graham, now convinced of her wizardry.

“Well, that’s definitely a symptom that your governing meridian is overloaded. And what about anxiety? Have you been feeling anxious at all?”

“I’m anxious about everything.”

“Interesting. So typical work and family stuff or?”

“I’ve been having these panic attacks recently. It’s nothing serious though.”

“There’s no such thing as an unserious attack of any kind. So what have they been about?”

“Death,” said Graham.

“That’s the big one. Is there someone in your family who’s sick?”

“No,” he said. “It’s me.”

“Are you sick?” she said, tapping his hip and his elbows.

“I don’t know. Every now and then I think I have cancer.”

“Is there a history of cancer in your family?”

“No. Nobody. But there has to be a first, right? I know it sounds nuts but there’s just sometimes I’m absolutely sure I have cancer and that it’s terminal and that I’m gonna die real soon.” “But you don’t?”

“Well no. Not yet. I mean, I might.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“They’d just think I was crazy. Either that or I’d do a test and they’d tell me I had six weeks left to live. That’s how it works, you know. The second you look for it, you’re a goner.”

“The Gotchya Principle.”

“What’s that?”

“Quantum physics,” she said. “I studied it, you know.”

She paused as if waiting for a round of applause.

“I could never get my head around that,” said Graham.

“Oh, it’s easy once you understand the ebb and flow of the universe. I use quantum physics a lot in my kinesiology. They two go together like chalk and cheese.”

This was her chance to prove how smart she was.

“We’re all made of atoms, you see,” she said, pointing to a poster on the wall. “And at the quantum level, that’s all there is. We’re not people anymore. We’re not bodies. Even things are no longer things. Everything is atoms. And we’re all touching. And we’re all connected in this...inter-network...or web of....connection and connectivity where all things are one. Like, if an atom here in this room moves one way, an atom on the other side of the universe will move another. We are all....”

Her thinking face was shaped like a puckering fish.

“Connected,” she said, almost triumphantly. “Amazing, right?”

Graham just liked listening to her speak; it tickled his mind.

“It is,” he said as if it did no harm to agree.

“And the most amazing thing, which is almost proof that the physical world is just a construct of the metaphysical mind....”

She took a second or two to brace herself – so excited was she; for so magnificent was the thing that she was about to say. Were this a movie, it would call for an intermission; were it a book, it would garner a whole other chapter.

“The Gotchya Principle,” she said, the sheer drama impossible to overlook. “Did you know that in the past, people thought that electrons were like planets and sort of orbited a proton like the Earth orbits the sun – always in one place. But it’s not true. We,”

she said as if she were a part of the discovery. “We know now that electrons are here, there, and everywhere at the same time. Isn’t that crazy? And it’s not until you look at it that it sits in one place. So the world, it doesn’t really exist or, you know, it’s here, there, and everywhere, until you turn around and you look at it – then it’s solid and it’s stationary, and it’s real. That’s how amazing quantum physics is. So it’s proof that everything is connected and your cancer is just like that. If you go and look for it, it will either be there or not but if you don’t look for it, there’s a bigger chance that it will be somewhere else. Like, maybe cancer moves around the whole universe because we are all connected, like a spider in a web. And it’s not until we look for it that, almost like musical chairs, the cancer sits still in one place. And it could be a person on this side of the world, or it could be on some alien world trillions of miles away or even another universe altogether because that’s another thing; every time you make a decision or a choice of any kind, you make a whole new universe.”

She smiled proudly as if her universe was always the right one.

“There’s no reason to be scared of death,” she said.

“I’m not,” said Graham.

“Well then why the anxiety?”

“I’m scared of dying too soon,” he said. “My kids are both so young. They can’t be without a dad. That freaks me out, the thought of ever having an accident and them having to grow up without me.”

“You think about that a lot?”

“I wake up every night in a sweat thinking about it. I spend all day at work thinking about it. It’s all that goes through my head. I think that’s the hardest part of being a parent - the fact that you can’t die.”

“You want to die? Are you depressed?”

Depressed? No, of course not. I don’t have the time. But I think being able to die is freedom. You don’t have to worry so much. You can relax more. That’s really what I want, is for them to

old enough so I don't have to worry about dying anymore."

"Interesting."

"Then there's the fact I'm pretty sure they both hate me."

It was as if every time she tweaked his arm or leg, he was compelled to speak.

"I remember when I was their age; I thought my dad was the most amazing man in the universe, even if half the time you were scared to death of him. In my house, though, it's all about unicorns and Ironman. I just want them to like me. I want them to think I'm cool. It's half the reason why I'm doing this karate – so they can see that their dad is strong and tough. Like a superhero. Like Pedro's dad."

"Who's Pedro?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I feel like a fraud half the time. Especially as a parent. Everyone thinks I have all the answers but I don't have a clue. I'm winging it every day. I mean, there had to have been a point after Moses dragged everyone out to the desert where he thought; "Shit, we're lost." Maybe year seventeen or something. And when I think about my dad, I assume he always had a map; that he always knew what he was doing. He was a dad, dads knew everything. My kids look at me the same way I looked at my dad except I feel like a bloody imposter. And it just feels like at some point everybody's gonna find out."

"We all feel like that. Heck, if people's thoughts played like radios we'd hear how completely bonkers and insecure the whole world really is. Thoughts are just thoughts, they're not you."

"Well then who am I?"

It was now that he properly grasped the question.

"Let's ignore the verb to be. Let the writer describe a sunny day, and let the reader call it just that. What do you do?" she said.

"I'm a research scientist."

"But what do you do? I much prefer verbs. I am not a mother. I raise four awesome little human beings. I'm not a good friend. I spend quality time with the people I cherish and listen to them as

much as they listen to me. A life of verbs is one of action. It's not up to me to say who I am or what I am. That's for you and everyone I meet. It's you who can judge. It's you who can say 'She is wise. She is noble. She is mystical. She is extraordinaire.' Not to be, Mr. Shakespeare; not to be. So what does a research scientist do?"

"I study the brain," said Graham. "To be more precise, I study consciousness."

"That sounds really exciting. So I suppose you know a lot about what I'm talking about here then – corporal meridians and how they affect not just the organs, but also the conscious and unconscious minds."

"No," said Graham, trying not to make her magic sound like quackery. "This is all new."

"Really? Well, now I do feel special. Universities in the West really are centuries behind what was always conceived as common practice medicine in the East. And not just medicine either, but common knowledge. We are catching up, though. We'll be doing your chakra balance in a bit. I think that'll really blow your trumpet."

Graham had, in a way, submitted. He neither accepted nor denied what she had to say. He did, though, act as if she firmly believed it. So, just as a child might trust a physician, he too wholeheartedly believed that she believed in what she said and what she was doing and that alone - like a father saying 'It'll all be ok' - felt warm and comforting.

"So your anxiety is high, is it?"

"It is," he said, in profound declaration. "Always."

"And what about at home? How is your relationship with your wife?"

"It's fine," said Graham.

"Fine?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing is fine. Fine is a throw-away word. Fine and good and well and ok; they're fickle expressions. They're common. What's the word? U-bic? U-bac?"

“Ubiquitous?”

“That’s the one. If words were cutlery, fine and good would be plastic sporks. Nobody is ever fine. Nothing is ever fine. Fine is like that toilet paper you get in public bathrooms. You know the one I’m talking about? You could grease a cake pan with it. That there is the word fine and good. When you tell someone, ‘I’m fine’ or ‘I’m good’ what you’re really saying is, ‘You’re not important enough for quality; you’re not important enough for me to tell you how I really feel’. Nothing is ever fine, especially if you think it is.”

“No, it’s not fine. Or it is, I don’t know.”

“Do you fight a lot?”

“No, that’s the thing. We haven’t fought in years. Not directly anyway.”

“Proxy fighting?”

“What’s that?”

“You get mad at the kids when you really want to get mad at each other. You take your anger and frustration out on them. You’re both Russia and America, and your kids are The Middle East.”

“Exactly.”

“Completely normal. When was the last time you actually fought with each other?”

“Years ago I think. We used to fight all the time, then we just stopped.”

“Well, you need to start that backup – and lickety-split. If a relationship is worth fighting for, it’s worth having. You should be fighting. Nothing mean, but healthy fighting is necessary. It means there’s still passion there.”

“Yeah, we kind of became like roommates.”

“So no sex, I suppose.”

She had her right hand pressed just above his pelvic bone.

“Like all marriages.”

“Doesn’t have to be that way. Sure, as you get older your body calms down a bit but...My hubby and I have been doing it twice a day for thirty-five years; sometimes more on public

holidays. How often would you and your wife practice love?”

He should have been embarrassed to say but this felt entirely clinical.

“The last time was maybe eight months ago.”

“Interesting. And when you do have sex, do you dress up, do you swing, do you invert roles?”

She had no shame whatsoever.

“No, it’s just ordinary sex. Nothing kinky.”

“So was it always like this?”

“Not at first. But, you know, we had kids. We got older. We both got fat, so...”

“What you look like has nothing to do with desire.”

“True,” said Graham, though he couldn’t grasp how. “I guess at some point we just stopped trying.”

“There, you see. Life is a constant state of practice. It’s verbs. It’s doing. The second you state, ‘I am’, you stop doing and just assume that it will last forever. Some things are infinite sure. Life is infinite.”

“I’m atheist so...”

“I’m not talking about Heaven. One never knows that they die. You will die, I will die, we will all die, yes. But you will never know when. And when you do, you will never be aware so you just stop existing, but up until that point, it had always been an eternity. Eternal life is very much here and now. You don’t believe in Heaven?”

“Well, if there is a Heaven,” said Graham. “Then there must be gazillions of them, one heaven for each person. Because everyone thinks that they will see their old dog, their grandma, and their long lost loves – just as they had last seen them. If this were true, then either grandma is getting a raw deal having to spend eternity in her nineties barely able to wipe her own butt. Will grandma be how her grandson remembered her, how her daughter remembered her, or how she remembered herself? So if it’s a fair Heaven, then there is a Heaven for each person, one where grandma is ninety and your dog still has glaucoma. But if this is Heaven, then none of

those people are actually there. Heaven is just an eternity in your memories. It seems like an awful lot of Heavens and if it is the latter, considering all those people are just imagined, it sounds awful lonely too.”

“What do you believe happens when we die?”

“It doesn’t bother me to be honest. If I am at a restaurant enjoying a meal, I’m not arguing about what might or might not be on TV when I get home. I much prefer to just enjoy the meal. I still enjoy surprises.”

“What about this? What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

And he didn’t. A year ago he would never have done something like this. He would have laughed it off as absurd, and he would have mocked it and ridiculed it, using reason to reduce it to nothing more than pure charlatanism. He would have scoffed at the idea of even hearing her out.

Were this a movie, this would be the turning point.

“Are you glad you came?”

“Yes,” said Graham.

Because he was.

“You chose to be here.”

“I did,” he said.

“We’re preparing you to live,” she said. “This body of yours is not you. You borrow it. In the same way, if we were at a restaurant, the seat you were sitting on wouldn’t be you. It, like your body, would be how you go about having your experience. And if the seat were wobbly or if it squeaked, we would treat it exactly how we are treating your body now – fixing it so that you can get out there and have a far better experience. You are not your body,” she said. “You have a body. You are not fat. You have fat. There is a difference. It is much easier to lose something that you have than to lose something that you are. You are not your thoughts and emotions. If there was a radio playing, would you say that you are the song? You aren’t even the anxiety. You just experience these things. You are an experience and you become experienced. But you are

consciousness, that's it."

He was like the preacher, taking lessons from the choir.

"Consciousness is in all things," she said. "The Earth, The Moon, and all the far away stars; they are all conscious too. It is the same consciousness that emanates in them which emanates in us only it doesn't say, 'I am a planet' or 'I'm just a crummy old rock drifting through space'; it doesn't declare what it is, it just is. Did you know there are trillions of little microorganisms living inside you right now? Do you think The Earth knows there are seven billion conscious humans making a home inside its belly right now? We'd be like a universe for them – each of us. Seven billion universes all walking about besides each other and all those little micro-fellas can't, for the life of them, see or tell – and it doesn't matter in a way. But getting back on point," she said as if all of that speech had been entirely for her; just another of her spectacular and constant third eye awakening realisations. "You're not fat. You're not lazy. You're not tired. You're not uncool. You're not anything. It's just all about the 'doing'. Everything is practice. Life is practice. Nobody's a bloody expert and if they say they are, they're definitely not. All these bloody twenty-year-old life coaches these days telling you obvious things they read in a book with nary a scratch on their knees. Love is practiced. It should be practiced every day."

"We used to. Back in the day. Now we're just pleasant to be around. Sex is weird now, I suppose. It's awkward."

"Do you love her?"

"Yeah, of course. We say it all the time."

"Why?"

"Because it's true."

"A lot of things are true but you don't go around declaring them, now do you? What you do declare are experiences that you feel and succumb to. How often do you succumb to love with your wife?"

"You mean when I really felt love?"

"Yes."

“The first time I held her hand. My heart was beating so loud I thought everyone could hear it. It was like that time I stole a packet of water balloons when I was a kid. I remember standing in the store for twenty minutes, scared to death, thinking everybody knew what I was about to do.”

“But you did it?”

“Steal the balloons?”

“No, touch her hand.”

“Oh yeah. Of course.”

“And how did it feel?”

“Incredible. I was so scared. But then, when I felt her fingers fold over mine, I had never felt so safe and secure in my life. And it was the same for the first kiss, the first time we made love, and then when I told her I loved her. The fear was gut-wrenching all of those times, but what came after was like an explosion, it’s hard to explain. But, after all these years, that fizzles. You don’t feel that way again. I’d like to, though. To love her, not as a fact, but...”

“As an act.”

“Exactly. Will I ever feel that again? That fear? I miss it.”

“Yes, but you have to understand where the fear originates. It’s not a fear of love or a fear of kissing her; it’s the fear of being vulnerable. Everyone has their impenetrable wall to protect them from the world. They dress tough, talk tough, and act tough but inside, they’re all the same little jelly bean. The whole point of declaring love is to be brave enough to tear down those walls for a second as if to say; ‘You’re the only one I will ever show my jelly bean to’. That’s why it’s so damn scary. And that’s why it means so much. But you can feel that again with her a thousand times over.”

“How do we do that?”

“Be honest. Honesty is an aphrodisiac. What are her fantasies?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think she has any.”

“Everyone has fantasies, especially your wife. You should ask her, and when she tells you, you should listen, and you shouldn’t judge. What made all those first steps so profound was the

vulnerability. You as a strong alpha male exposed your tenderness – your jelly bean - and as a result, became vulnerable. To show your care and compassion, you had to expose your weakness, and when she took her hand, kissed you back, and told you she loved you too, you became stronger again. Love, though, is the trust between you that she knows all of your weakness and for that, you can be weak in front of her, whereas you have to be the constant titan to the rest of the world. If you want to reignite that passion – that flame – you need to be vulnerable with her once more,” she said, casually lifting and pulling his arms onto all sorts of angles, asking him to hold as she pushed against his force. “Do you masturbate?” she asked.

If Graham’s silence were a colour, it would be tomato red.

“Geeze we humans are a weird bunch, aren’t we? So strung up on natural things like sex and masturbation and even small things, like flatulating. Makes us go all uneasy. It shouldn’t, though. Do you masturbate enough?”

“Enough?”

“Oh yeah. Me, for example, I can’t go and do the shopping unless I have a quick wank. If I do, my head’s all a flush and I end up buying so many useless things for the house. A quick prod downstairs and I’m thinking crystal clear and able to make better decisions. This should be taught in schools. Would have saved me a tonne of bother in life if I’d only know to, pardon the French, rub one out as my hubby says, before any major decision.”

“Really?”

“The brain, you see, is hard-wired for sexual reproduction. It’s really the only thing that’s going on downstairs. And consciously, this makes you delusional half the time. I remember math class in ninth grade. I had this teacher, Mr. Fabulous. We called him that. His real name was Mr. Fabula. But he was so damn handsome. Anyway, the second he starts writing on the board, I’d see his butt in those tight jeans and that was it, until I got home that night I couldn’t think about anything else. If I had known then what I know now, I would probably be an astronaut today. To this day I

still can't get my head around fractions. How often do you masturbate? Once, twice, three times per day?"

"I..uh...per day?"

"Now, I recommend sex before coffee, but if that's not possible, then at the very least you should masturbate before you face traffic in the morning. And anytime during the day. If you have an important meeting or a phone call to make you say, 'Excuse me, I'll be back in five minutes.' Then you nip off to the bathrooms and quickly rub one out. I mean that's what bathrooms are for, right?"

Her tapping accelerated on the top of Graham's head. Her rhythm was fast and expounding; she didn't so much tap as she did poke and prod.

"Family is difficult," she said.

"Tell me about it."

"I can feel that here," she said, tapping the sole of his feet. "Kids can be a challenge. You know, there is this proverb that people say, 'When the student is ready, the teacher arrives'. I always thought that meant because I didn't have any teachers around me, that in some way I was never really ready for anything. But you know what? I learned being a mum that – and it's the same for dads too by the way – as a parent, you are both the student and the teacher. You're doing your best to teach them left from right from the pick of your own experiences, and at the same time, you're learning what it's like to be a parent because every day they change – they get older and more independent and a heck of a lot moodier. You know, by the time you figure out who they were yesterday, they bloody well change again. So you're always learning. You're always practicing. Once again, nobody's a bloody expert."

"I don't know if I'm supposed to smother them in love and have them grow up happy, or be strict like my old man and have them grow up emotionally broken, but successful."

"It's somewhere in between. Kids need challenges. They need playgrounds that have space for danger. They need to be allowed to be free enough to climb things and fall and get hurt. Kids build their games around danger. That becomes the game – to

spot danger, get close to it, but avoid it; so that when they get older they can see danger in the real world, and avoid it just the same. It's different these days, though. Now, it's not popular to say this these days but there is a reason mums and dads are the way they are. Mums, you see, are full of love. Their love, though with the best of intentions, will make a child scared and weak if it's all the child experiences. You see mums are scared of everything, so when they say, 'have fun and be safe' what they really mean is, 'Don't you dare die because I'd never be able to go on without you and every second you're out of my sight I'm sure that something terrible is about to happen'. Dads, on the other hand, have other things on their minds and are far too liberal. A mother always lies and a father rarely pays attention. Let's say you drew a circle, but you meant to draw a square, probably you're mum will tell you, 'Wow, what an awesome square'. Because that's what mums do. Whereas your dad will take one glance and say, 'Nice circle, son' completely breaking your heart and making sure you never toy with geometric shapes again. Somewhere in between mum and dad is the truth. We only really see the effect of our parenting when they are around thirty."

"So what do you do?"

"For one, I hope that when they are in therapy, their therapist says, 'None of this is your mother's fault'."

She laughed; a roaring belly laugh that ended with a snort.

"I'm joking, though," she said. "Truth is, all you can do is to try and do your best to clear all the obstacles out of their way or, if they're bored and restless, introduce an obstacle here or there. Life can be tricky and they have to learn that. Plus it'll make em stronger. A tree is known by its fruit, right? Their successes will be your reward. It's like at curling, everybody gets a medal, but nobody remembers that names of..."

"Hold on, what's curling?"

"You haven't played it?"

"No."

"Oh, I love it. I'm a big winter sports fan. Love the Winter Olympics. Anything on ice really – skating, hockey, cream."

And then she laughed again.

“You’ve never seen curling?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. The name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Oh, I love it. If anything, it’s a metaphor for life – for being a parent.”

“What is it, like soccer or something?”

“No. It’s like lawn bowls, but on ice. You have one person who pushes the rock – that’s what they call the big metal ball – delivers it down the ice. Then it’s the job of the other players to sweep the ice to make the rock go faster or to stop sweeping to slow it down. And the goal is to get your rocks close enough to the centre rings.”

“Alright? So what does curling have to do with raising kids?”

“It’s the same thing. I much prefer to sweep. I like to get in there and give a good hand. And this is the job of the mother and father; to tirelessly remove or introduce obstacles to help your child reach their goals – while they are screaming at you what they expect you to do. Here’s the thing, everybody gets a medal, but nobody gives two hoots about the people holding the brushes. They only care about the person throwing the stone. That is, in every right, unconditional love. You give all your damn heart, all your blood and guts to make sure they get the best start possible. And it’s enough, seeing them get that medal – seeing the smiles on their faces and listening to people chant their name. It’s bloody wonderful being a parent.”

“You sound like an expert.”

“And you’d be right to doubt me. It’s one thing to be able to see the forest for the trees,” she said. “It’s another to go and take a dump far from your campsite and not get lost. Now,” she said, tapping on the side of his body. “What about your work?”

“Don’t get me started.”

“A lot of stress?”

“There’s a lot of pressure from all sides. Our research has started badly. Honestly, I think the whole experiment is cursed. I just have this feeling. And I don’t know what’ll happen if we don’t

get published. I haven't had an article published in God knows how long, and... I dunno, I think maybe they might get rid of me. I just have this feeling. I always have this feeling. That and, the money is terrible. My wife is working two jobs and having to look after the kids all the time. I think I chose wrong. Academia."

"Why did you choose it?"

"I didn't really. I just didn't choose anything else. I kept studying. I wasn't ready, maybe. It was always easier to keep doing more postdocs. Then I got associate professor, then professor, and I suppose tenure is next. But I never chose it. I definitely don't want my kids to end up in it. The money is terrible. The egos are worse. And this constant pressure to publish. I just wanna quit."

"Why don't you?"

"I wouldn't know how."

Through the flicker of candles he could just make out her silhouette hovering over him, smiling with such great magnitude as she waved her arms around like the branches of a tree; sweeping up and down his body, pinching and pulling on the invisible threads of his aura and dropping them in a small bin beneath the table.

"So," said The Empath, pressing down on Graham's chest. "Touching your central meridian like this, it's clear that in your past life you were a warrior of some kind."

Then she twisted his wrist, lifted his arm up and dropped it back on the table.

"Yes, you see here, in your spleen, I can see that you were maybe a Viking or a Celtic warrior. Do you have Irish heritage?"

She asked him so gingerly. There was not a drop of doubt in her voice whatsoever. She might as well have been examining his stool sample and asking if he'd had cantaloupe for breakfast.

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. Maybe. The Irish kind of went everywhere, didn't they? Isn't everyone a bit Irish?"

"Your left kidney is telling me you probably do. Nordic Irish," she said so absolute. "Most of the time, when we're not sure of our heritage, it's because we actually are, but we are suppressing our higher selves – maybe so that we can rediscover that higher

self in this new life cycle that we are living. Do you like Viking TV shows? Do you watch them?"

"I might have seen one, I'm not sure."

"Well, there you go. You see, the spleen never lies. More than likely you a leader and probably you would have had a name like Ragnor or Hercules. And if you think about it, I mean, how far off is the name Graham? Just a couple of letters really. Now, I'll just get to your corpus callosum and we can unlock the warrior mind."

She whisked up and down the table, bending her fingers into alien symbols and shapes, touching him here, there, and everywhere in-between; only lightly, though, as if he were an instrument that she was playing.

"Hmmm," she said, bending his arm back into a V. "Now that's interesting."

She was compelling. Were she a movie, he wouldn't be able to look away. There was not an inch of irony in the way she spoke. It was as if with each discovery, she surprised even herself; and this alone made the experience all the more believable.

"The next circuit I'm seeing here is the hippocampus, and this relates to your primal self, which, if it is blocked, makes absolute sense that your warrior mind should be repressed."

She massaged the top of his head roughly before pushing down with as much force as she could muster on his forehead – so much so that even Graham wondered if, at any second, she might push all the way through.

"I can see it," she shouted. "I can see it pushing out."

She was jubilant; full of God-fearing praise.

"Something is stopping it," she said. "I can't get a grip."

But she wouldn't let go; she wouldn't give up. She shut her eyes and spread her fingers across his entire face and squeezed with all of her might, looking for a way in.

"Breathe," she shouted. "Like a hurricane."

Graham did as she asked; heaving every breath as if it might be his very last.

"Don't stop," she said. "I nearly have it. Don't you give in."

Graham's thoughts dissolved and his head felt light enough to float away somewhere above the clouds. His body tingled too, from his fingers down to his toes. Whatever magic she was doing was setting fire to his body.

"Face your repression," she shouted. "Face it head-on. Look it in the eye. Do not fear it. Do not shy away. Embrace it."

Her hands stiffened on his face. Her whole body, in fact, was angled and contorted. Her strain was impossible to ignore; neither was the extent of her worry.

"Do it now!"

And then, at the height of it all, it happened.

"I have it," shouted The Empath with sheer delight.

Exhausted, she stumbled backward into a table full of incense, gemstones, and dream catchers; almost falling over completely.

"I have it," she said again, this time as if hadn't expected she would.

Graham lay there on the table, still thinking about his children, except this time they weren't surrounded by an aura of danger and peril; they weren't teetering on the brink of an uncertain future. Those thoughts had lifted; those thoughts were gone. Instead, he pictured them as they as always were – smiling.

"How do you feel?" said The Empath. "Are you different?"

"I am," said Graham.

"Are you Stronger?"

"Yes."

"Are you more defiant? Unstoppable?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I am."

"Good," she said. "You are free. And our work is done."

Graham left her room, and when he did, he did so as a changed man. He'd be lying if he said that he didn't feel like he could single-handedly stop a railroad heist or bring to justice, a masked comic book villain. All of a sudden, the world felt so capably small.

"What did she tell you?" asked The Master.

“Everything I needed to hear,” said Graham.

Even the way he spoke had changed. His words, too, had grown. They were fuller and more pronounced. There was not a hint of indecision. If words were weapons then his were like two clenched fists – impenetrable and deadly.

“You’re a warrior now,” said The Master. “One of us.”

The two stood side by side staring at their reflections in the shop window. Both had their hands on their hips, and though their kimonos struggled to close over their voluptuous and well-fed stomachs, both men were, by all accounts, the definition of severity.

“It’s easy to get carried away by that power. A true leader, one of honourable spirit, need not unsheathe his sword,” said The Master. “We live in a new world now, one where the warrior spirit has been allowed to willow. There are no more bears to catch, no more dragons to slay, and no more battles to be fought. We are in a time of peace. The once calloused and battle-hardened hearts of man are now soft and frail. Where once the warrior needed to be courageous in the face of his weaknesses; now, for the new warrior, weakness is courageous. Where once we discovered it, now he declares it. This is not a bad thing, my friend. The world is changing indeed, as are the people who inhabit it. Their language is changing; the words that tie them in knots, they too are changing. Their culture is changing. They are more considerate. They are more caring. And as such, we must be too. But they are also more sensitive. They haven’t had hardships like us. Their lives have been perilously easy and effortless. As a result, the soles of their feet are delicate so they cry a lot, about everything. A warrior – today’s warrior - does need to be cruel to be strong, just as, he does need to be weak to care.”

“Thank you, Master,” said Graham.

There was an awkward moment where they stood there looking at each other, unsure what was expected of either one of them. Finally, though, The Master broke that spell.

“So what are you up to now?” he said.

For the first time, he spoke without any mysticism

whatsoever. His voice wasn't sculpted from centuries-old wisdom, irrespective of his thick English brogue. He didn't stand with his hands on his hips as if he himself had once been, or would someday be, carved from stone. He didn't sound like a master at all. In fact, one would say, he was showing his jelly bean.

"You wanna hang out?" he said.

And there it was, his soft little jelly bean, all scared and vulnerable, dangling from the ends of his fears and self-doubt. Gone were his impenetrable walls. Gone too was his veil of necromancy. He was naked and exposed, perched on a rickety bridge that swayed back and forth over a lake of boiling magma, carrying in his hands a tiny jelly bean. Never before had he felt this scared.

"Ahhhhh."

The letters spelled out Graham's discomfort.

"If you can't.... I mean..."

The two teetered on the edge of awkwardness.

"Yeah, it's just I have this thing so..."

"Oh really?"

"Family."

"Nah, that's cool," said The Master, quickly trying to cover up his jelly bean. "You know, yeah, me too. I have this thing too. Actually, I'm probably a bit late so..."

"Oh definitely, You go. Next time, though."

"For sure," said The Master, stupendously confident.

The whole affair was horrible to witness.

"I'll get your phone number and then down the line we can..."

"Yeah, down the line, definitely. So..."

It was like this for another minute or so before both men just suddenly turned in opposite directions and moved hastily to their cars, almost welcoming the rain as a distraction. Then in their cars, they beeped their horns swiftly as if they were the best of friends and couldn't wait to one day do this again.

When he finally got home, the house was entirely lit up with candles. There were arrows drawn crudely on paper leading from

the hallway to the kitchen. It was obvious the kids were not home.

Graham followed the arrows to the fridge. The sign on the door said ‘Open Me’. Inside was a plastic bag; on it was a sign that read ‘Take Me’. Graham peered inside. There was a can of whipped cream, some golden handcuffs, half a dozen sex toys and an egg which may have been a sex toy too, or it could quite have easily been a Kinder Surprise – in this lighting, it was hard to tell.

He took the bag and followed the arrows back out of the kitchen and up the stairs. There were tiny cup candles everywhere. The mix of romance and reckless endangerment was overpowering. Graham started to feel giddy and nervous. It’d been so long since they last had sex he was starting to feel like a virgin again.

When he got in the room he stripped off his clothes and threw himself on the bed. Under the flicker of candlelight, only his best features came to the fore. He sat there with his mouth going dry and his throat aching in wanton anticipation. Finally, after ten or so minutes, he dared to call out.

“Babe?” he said, trying to still sound sexy yet, at the same time, justifiably concerned.

“In the bathroom,” shouted Mary. “Be there in a second.”

She sounded distraught.

“Everything ok?”

In the back of his head, he hoped it was something else.

“I’m fine,” said Mary.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s ok. I think it was the curry. I’ll be there in a second. Just pop on a porno movie. Don’t worry; the kids are at my mums. I downloaded a few films there; I didn’t know which ones you would like. There’s some lesbian ones, a gang bang, and there’s another one there too that I didn’t know. What’s water play?”

Graham quietly flicked through the movies. All of them bar one were dubbed in Korean. He laid out the handcuffs, the whipped cream and the assortment of vibrators, beads, and plugs. He kind of had an idea what most of them were.

“Did you get the bag,” shouted Mary.

She didn't have to shout. The bathroom was just across the hall. She did, though, and that's what made it somewhat upsetting.

"Can you test the anal beads?" she said.

"What?"

"The anal beads!"

Her voice carried like thunder.

"You want me to try them?"

He sounded petrified but compliant.

"No, silly. The beads all light up. It says on the box that each size is a different colour. Can you just test the lights to see if they work?"

Graham looked at the packet. There were no instructions. Why did things like these come with no instructions? He fumbled around with the beads turning them this way and that; flipping them round and round again, trying to find a switch or a button.

"I don't think these ones have lights," he said. "There's nothing happening."

All that thinking had made him lose his erection.

"Are you gonna be long?" he asked.

There was a second's silence; a moment of repose.

"Could be a while," she said, sounding defeated. "But you can start if you want."

Graham stared at his enormous belly and his flaccid penis. It all seemed like too much effort. "It's fine," he said, sounding as if he were politely turning down a coffee or a warmer blanket.

"Is your bum hurting?" shouted Mary, loud enough for the whole street to hear.

"A little, yeah."

It wasn't really, but it felt like a good enough excuse.

"I told you to book in with the proctologist."

"I know," said Graham. "It's just..."

"It's just nothing. I have to listen to you all day whining about your butt. You're in pain; bloody well do something about it. What kind of example are you setting for the kids?"

"I know."

“Do it this week.”

“I will.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ll book it for you.”

Then the toilet flushed and Mary came in looking pale and exhausted, wearing nothing but a pair of octopus pasties on her nipples and some white crotchless panties that pulled so tight against her generous thighs that her legs turned a wonderful candescent red in the candlelight, looking as if she’d spent the day with only her bottom half in the sun. As she jumped into bed, the two pasties swirled in hypnotic fashion. Each of them had eight tentacles which each had small pompoms attached at the tip as if each octopus were cheering along its favourite team.

“Wow,” said Graham, having never seen her dressed like this.

Normally sex was a low key affair; hastily taking off whatever was the last thing they were wearing. This was different; it felt like dressing up for a funeral or wearing a swimming cap at the beach.

If her thighs were generous, then Mary’s breasts were philanthropists. And free as they were, they jiggled about as she made herself comfortable on the bed, propping her pillow up against the wall. As she moved, so too did the two pasties with the little octopus tentacles spinning this way and that in dizzying circles.

“Can’t get them off,” she said, a little frustrated.

She tugged on the pasties but they wouldn’t budge.

“What happened?” said Graham holding back his laughter.

“I used the wrong glue.”

She tugged again but it looked like she was pulling on a couple of appendages.

“This was supposed to be special,” she said.

She had already started to cry.

“You look sexy,” said Graham.

“My tits look like bloody mop heads,” said Mary laughing, but in a heartbroken way; fit for tragedy. “And the panties are about five sizes too small; might need you to cut me out of them. Don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I’m sorry I got home late.”

“That’s fine. I’m sorry I thought I could pull off something like this. What was I thinking? Look at me? My tits are ruined,” she said, wiggling them about as if they were jelly that hadn’t set or a cake that wouldn’t rise. “I love the kids and I’m proud that I breast-fed both of them for all those years but goddamnit, it took its toll. They ruined my body. They used to be firm. Do you remember?”

“They still are,” said Graham.

His consideration bordered on condescendence.

“I love you, I do, but I know my own body. And it’s not even about being fat either. I’m ok with that. It’s that I used to be sexy.”

“You are sexy.”

“You’re not listening.”

“I am. Or I’m trying to.”

“What I’m saying is, I used to feel sexy. I used to know how to walk sexy, to talk sexy, and to act sexy. I used to know how to be sexy. After two kids, though, I have no bloody idea. Being sexy is not like riding a bike; and even that I’m not sure I could pull off. I thought putting on some sexy panties and some stickers on my boobs would do it. Now, look at me. I can’t get the bloody things off.”

“Could be worse.”

“Graham, I have octopuses on my tits and I have to take Nathan to the orthodontist first thing in the morning.”

“Oh.”

“No shit, oh.”

“I can do that,” said Graham.

“It’s not even about that. You know, before the kids I knew exactly who I was. I was young, rebellious; I was gonna die young and leave a beautiful corpse. I was.....”

“You changed. We changed. People change. It’s what happens.”

“I wanna change back.”

“You don’t want to be a mother?”

“No, you doofus. But why can’t I be that girl when I want? Is that too much to ask?”

“We just need to practice more.”

“When? This was the first night off in how long? And if you’re not working, then you’re at your bloody karate classes. Then when we do get time alone, we’re either too tired or one of us has something wrong – you with your haemorrhoids or me with...my everything!”

There was little else to be said really; both of them felt the exact same way. It was cold and silent except of course for the sound of the TV blaring. Finally, when the ad finished, their favourite home renovation show started again.

“Oh, this is on?” said Mary, forgetting her burden and cozying up under the blanket.

Suddenly, all of her doubts and self-loathing fizzed up and dissolved in the sea of her vivid imagination as she willed herself inside the television and imagined being whisked through construction stores and furniture stores, picking out the pieces of her dream life.

“I’d love to get this place re-done one day,” she said. “Just tear down everything and start again.”

Then she tapped Graham’s leg.

“Hide all that stuff,” she said. “Wouldn’t want the kids finding it.”

Hastily, Graham shoved the dildos under the bed. That was when he caught sight once more of his kimono bundled up on the floor.

“Babe?”

His heart was already beating loud enough for her to tell that something was going on. His hands started to sweat and feet got covered in pins and needles. His every instinct told him to get his fat arse off the bed and run – run for sweet, dear life.

“What?”

She was already halfway through a word sleuth. She wasn’t even looking; it had been so long that that was how they spoke.

“Be vulnerable,” he thought.

But he hadn’t been this way in so long, he wondered if he

could even tear out a single brick, let alone bring down the entire wall. He didn't just want to tell her something; he wanted to tell her something that actually mattered, something she didn't already know – something she could never assume; something she would never expect.

Panic swept over him. It punched its way through his chest and gripped his heart, squeezing every last drop of courage from it.

"What is it?" she said, scratching her pen in dizzying circles.

"I..uh..."

The suspense, for him, was almost too much to bear.

"Hey, what's a six-letter word for an expression of fanfare?"

Her face was shaped like a chewed-up pencil.

Graham dug his fingers through the dank and malodorous soil where his jelly bean was buried; further than the root of any plant could travel. He struggled and fought just to hold onto it, let alone pull it loose. It weighed as much as a trillion stars and yet was barely the size of an atom – and the strain he felt was evident.

"Never mind," said Mary. "Hurrah."

It wasn't so much a celebration as it was a six-letter word.

"Sorry," she said, finally putting down her pen and paper.

The second she looked at him, he let go of his jelly bean. By the time he realised, it had already been swallowed beneath a mantle of regrets, mistakes and poor decisions; and he was left-leaning against his impenetrable wall once more, for it was the only thing that propped him up.

"You were saying?"

"Nothing," said. Graham. "It's nothing."

"Ok then," said Mary. "Well can you pass me that whipped cream? No point in letting it go to waste."

Then, with the TV blaring, they both took turns filling their mouths with cream.

"So," said Mary, when the bottle came to an end. "How was your karate thing?"

It was incredible. It was astounding. It was the most amazing experience he had ever had in his life, yet out of his kimono, it

almost felt as if it had happened to somebody else.

“It was fine,” he said.

“Are you getting good?” asked Mary. “All that kicking and punching?”

“I am,” said Graham. “Against the others, I’m still way behind, but to a normal person on the street or thief; I could kill em in a second. I’m pretty much a lethal weapon.”

“That’s my strong man,” said Mary, tucking herself under the covers with Graham, wrapping her arms around his big belly.

It was hard to tell if she was genuinely impressed or just making him feel special. Graham, though, accepted the former and he snuggled up with his wife watching their favourite show. Then when they turned off the lights and rolled to their sides of the mattress, he closed his eyes and like he did every night, he spent an hour or so, imagining himself confronting thieves and villains on buses and in supermarkets, just a common man, saving the lives of common people.

Track 18 (Blue)

Many drinks later, Isaac and Alice were back at his apartment fooling around on the kitchen floor. None of the clocks around were working but it was closer to the time he had to get up than it was to the time he should have gone to bed.

“Aren’t you glad I made you that present?” she said.

Isaac was half squeezed between the fridge and a fruit tray. The little pillow was wedged between his neck and a powerpoint. The discomfort he felt, though, was everywhere else.

“We’re not gonna have sex, though, ok?”

She was adamant about that.

“Ok,” said Isaac.

Her hands, though, were already unzipping his jeans.

“Oh my god,” she said as if it were her first day of drama school. “I don’t know what has come over me. I am never normally like this.”

She openly exaggerated every syllable.

“I can stop if you want,” said Isaac, illiterate to what was written between the lines.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” she said, ripping her blouse open.

Her breasts were magnificent.

“Woah,” said Isaac, slapped with fear, surprise, and wonder.

Were her body a poem, it would be impossible to put into words.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

He felt as if the world was a flower that was only now opening its petals.

“Call me your little whore,” said Alice.

“What?”

Needless to say, he was taken by surprise.

“Do it,” she said. “Call me your dirty fucking whore.”

“I..uh....”

Isaac had never been the vocal kind. At sporting events, when everyone else chanted, cheered, and clapped along, he sat in his seat and celebrated on the inside, while at birthday parties; he mouthed the words while everybody else sung along. It's not that he didn't know what dirty talk was, it's just....he had no idea how to do it.

"Who is my little whore?" he said, sounding as if he were coddling a kitten or bottle feeding a newborn lamb.

Alice laughed. She still had him pinned against the wall and was straddling him so he couldn't escape. She had a smile on her face but her fingers clenched at his collar and her eyes were fierce as if at any second she was about to open up his face with a pair of knuckle dusters. She looked like she was having the time of her life.

"You're fun," she said.

Then she stripped naked, climbed onto the kitchen table, and spread her legs as wide as she could. All his romantic ideals were being provoked and poked fun at; and as a result, he was petrified. Isaac had always imagined sex as a slow Sunday drive on a long country road between endless field of wildflowers; something quiet, soft and delicate. But this was loud, fast, and reeked of gasoline and burned rubber. By the time he built up the courage to get on his feet, she was already masturbating.

"Come on," she screamed, whipping her body around so that she lay on her stomach with her legs hanging off the table and spread open like the pages of a book. "Rape me."

"What? No. Hold on. What?"

She pinned her hands behind her back and pressed her own face into the table, lashing about like a suffocating fish, grazing her forehead against the wall as she did, acting as if she were trying to break free from cable ties and a wretched kind of fate.

"Hold on a sec," said Isaac, his idle expression erupting into one of horrible shock and awkward confusion. "Did you just ask me to rape you or rate you?"

In the heat of passion, it could have been either one. Maybe she was asking for validation, for him to shower her with

adoration, praise, and a hundred thousand synonyms for pretty. That he could do. He could spend the whole night if she wanted to, reciting haikus about the soft and gentle curve in her breasts and how the colour in her eyes likened to the mouth of a river. He could, just as easily, paint a picture for those hundred thousand words.

“Rape me with your giant cock, you bad motherfucker.”

She didn’t want a haiku.

“I thought you said that,” said Isaac as if he’d hoped she said the other. “Just to be clear,” he said, trying to sound justifiably concerned yet still open to new ideas. “I’ve never really done this kind of thing before so....I mean, if that’s what you want.”

He looked upset as if he’d stumbled upon a stack of dead kittens.

“What if....”

“Rape me,” said Alice again, this time as if her patience had worn thin.

Alice smacked her head against the table and, as if they were being pulled apart by some archaic torture device, she spread her legs further until her cunt and asshole were all that Isaac could see – both of them pulsing in heightened anticipation.

“Hear me out,” said Isaac, ignoring her vagina and bare buttocks. “What if,” he said as if they were trying to lift a piano up a set of stairs. “What if we did the sex, you know, just like you are and all that, but.....and this is just a suggestion...but what if we did all that only we didn’t use the R-word?”

“The R word?”

My neighbours might hear so...”

Alice turned her face, enraged.

“What the fuck?” she said.

“Me?” said Isaac a little distraught. “What the fuck, you?”

Even as he said that he wished he didn’t; she scared him.

“What’s the problem?” she said.

She was still on her stomach and rubbing her wet cunt on the edge of the table. Her tone, though, had changed entirely. She had

broken character.

“Look, this is new for me. I haven’t done anything like this before. I’ve never....raped anyone.”

“It’s not actual rape,” she said, clearly disappointed that she had to explain something that, like a joke, should have been pretty bloody obvious. “I don’t actually expect you to rape me. It’s role play. Jesus.”

“No, I know that,” said Graham, his face shaped like a bruised pear. “I was just thinking, you know, why even use the R word? What if I pretended to be the internet repairman or something? That would be kinky too, right?”

“You can be a fucking botanist for all I care.”

“What if we did it differently?”

“Different how?”

The longer he took to make his case, the more pained she made her body.

“What if instead of raping you, I save you from being raped, and then let’s say we spent months, maybe even a year, really getting to know each other and then tonight was the night I professed my love for you and this is the first time we consummate that love?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Here’s the scenario, alright? I was walking home from a party and you followed me in your car until I was all by myself and then you grabbed me, threw me in your trunk, and took me back to your apartment where you bound and gagged me and bent me over your kitchen table. And that’s where we are now with you about to force your cock into my asshole and rape me until the sun comes up.”

“Hmmm,” said Isaac.

“What do you mean, hmmm?”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that. It sounds kind of messed up.”

“It’s a rape fantasy. It’s supposed to sound messed up. That’s what makes it kinky. I know you’re not gonna hurt me, but I wanna

feel as if you might.”

“I get that, but...”

“But what? You’re really making this more complex than it needs to be.”

“I mean, am I supposed to be thinking about raping you as I’m making love to you?”

“Making love?”

“OK, hear me out... what if we don’t say anything out loud, which might I add, these walls are thin. Then, while we’re making...while we’re having sex, you can think that you’re being raped if that’s your thing, and I think we are making passionate and considerate and tender consensual love?”

“So I think you’re raping me but you think it’s consensual?”

“Exactly,” said Isaac pleased as if they’d finally found some middle ground.

“Fine by me,” said Alice.

Then she contorted her body again as if it had been forced that way.

“Please, sir,” she said, pulling her ass apart with her hands and sticking her cunt into the air. “Don’t hurt me.”

“What?”

This time she shouted it; loud enough for the neighbours to hear.

“Please, just let me go,” she screamed, her voice soaked in desperation. “Please don’t do this. Don’t rape me.”

She wept as she spoke; her words a last and broken plea. As she did, she pushed her two index fingers into her asshole, pulling it open, and thrust her body forward until her face was squashed against the wall.

“I’ll do whatever you say,” she shouted, her voice a cocktail of terror and ecstasy. “Just let me go. Please let me go.”

At this point, Isaac was half expecting the police to barge through the door.

“What are you waiting for?” she whispered, breaking character again. “Rape me.”

"I...don't...know," said Isaac.

"Oh for fuck's sake."

She unbound herself and then sat upright on the kitchen table.

"This isn't gonna happen, is it?"

Isaac said nothing. He stood there doe-eyed waiting for her to say what he wished he had the backbone to say himself. He had never really quit anything in his life, but he had been so terrible at many things that often people did the quitting on his behalf.

"Fine," she said, laying on her back and spreading her legs once more. "We'll do it your way."

"Really?" said Isaac.

At this point, he kind of hoped they would just watch some TV on the sofa.

"Fuck me," she said, opening her cunt again with both hands.

If anything, she sounded bothered but there was no doubting her commitment.

"Okie dokie," said Isaac, trying to sound a great deal more confident than he actually was. He hoped, at the very least, at the end of this they would cuddle. "Just a second," he said, as he fumbled over a condom.

The fear was evident on his face, though he did his best to pass it off as sex appeal. The whole R-word had apparently had an unfortunate and seemingly irreversible effect.

"What's taking so long?" she said.

"Just a sec," said Isaac. "Nearly there."

Maybe it was all the whiskey or maybe he was just the stress and trauma of role playing a rapist; whichever it was, he was flying at half-mast, almost crying as he struggled to pull the condom over the head of his penis, doing about as well as that time he tried to hang Christmas lights from the last rung of his balcony. By the time he did get the condom on, he looked like he was trying to please her with a wet sock.

"Ha!" said Alice, hopping off the table. "You'd make a terrible rapist."

It sounded like the type of insult that should have been a compliment.

“Come here,” she said, getting onto her knees and taking Isaac’s cock in her hand, masturbating him fast and firm as she sucked on his balls, staring him long in the eyes as she did. She didn’t judge his awkwardness or even acknowledge his failure. Instead, she calmly and assertively took control of the situation - pushing him back onto the floor and mounting him with all the zest of an action hero.

“I’m your dirty whore,” she said as she writhed on his cock. “Call me a dirty fucking whore.”

Isaac braced himself as best he could. She was intimidating, to say the least. Still, he had never been this excited. It bordered on sheer terror. Yet at the same time, as her supple breasts pressed against his face, and he lightly kissed and licked at her erect nipples, he had, he supposed, gone native.

“You’re a stupid whore,” he shouted.

And there was nothing sexy about it whatsoever. He sounded like he was yelling at a passed out hooker from the window of a speeding car. Alice laughed, though. She could see he was giving it his all in spite of being terrified for his life. If anything, it turned her on more.

Her eyes rolled in ardent celebration as she forced his cock deeper inside her sopping wet cunt. Her fingers curled and clenched and her nails dug into his chest, and she had to turn away so as not to bite off his nipples or chew at a piece of his tongue.

For Isaac, it was almost like being on that country road, now that he had adjusted to the way that she drove. He shut his eyes and imagined them both in the midst of that field of colour and perfume – nestled on a bed of soft petals. He imagined the sun setting and all the little birds and butterflies, fluttering overhead as they made their way back to their nests and homes for the night. He imagined Venus, almost visible in the sky as the night, and its chandelier of flickering lights, waiting to cover them like a soft and cool blanket. He imagined all the tender and sweet words he

longed to whisper in her ear.

“I love your fucking cock,” she said, almost growling.

“I love.....”

“Don’t say, you; don’t say, you,” he thought.

“Your pretty vagina.”

Alice laughed again.

“Put your hands on me,” she said, pulling at Isaac’s wrists.

Isaac placed his two hands on her magnificent breasts once more.

“Not there,” she said, lifting them up to her neck. “Strangle me.”

Isaac sat there limp unsure what to do. His hands clasped like a silk scarf.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” said Alice, clearly disappointed, but still writhing on Isaac’s cock. “I’m not asking you to rape me,” she said. “Just strangle me and slap me around a bit.”

“Yeah, you see, I don’t condone violence against women. That’s the thing.”

“It’s not violence. It’s sex.”

“I know but...”

They both argued back and forth for what seemed like forever. Their eyes were locked in sometimes heated and sometimes considerate debate. All the while, though, as if their organs had their own agreement, their hips thrust and their bodies slapped against one another; the sex continuing in spite of their semantic impasse.

“I don’t feel right about doing that to a girl.”

“What? Strangling?”

“Everything,” exclaimed Isaac. “Literally everything you’re asking me to do.”

Alice took his hands once more and placed them on her neck and she squeezed them tight. She moaned as she did, gaging for a second, before rolling her eyes back in some kind of orgasmic joy.

Isaac panicked and pulled his hands away.

This time Alice didn’t get mad. She rested one of her hands

gently on his right shoulder and cupped the other one between his legs as she writhed in long, deep succession. Her face was shaped like a prayer.

“Please,” she said, smiling.

Isaac was on the verge of orgasm; she had kept him there for the last twenty minutes. He would say yes to a root canal at this point and she knew this.

“Please?” she said, again, making it impossible to say no.

Everything seemed awesome and entirely worth the risk.

“This isn’t a trap, is it? I mean, how do I know you’re not gonna tell someone I strangled you and they match my fingers to your neck and I go to jail?”

“You think I would do that?”

Gone was her bullish demeanour. Instead, she softened her body and wrapped her arms around his neck limberly. Even her eyes looked as if they were made out of cotton candy.

“It’s trust that makes it work,” she said.

The look on Isaac’s face, though, said enough.

“Oh fuck you,” she said, pulling herself off him. “You’re fucked up, you know that? You’re weird,” she shouted. “You’re screwed up in the head.”

And she left.

Track 19 (Red)

It would be another few weeks before the trial was able to continue, what with all the formalities of law enforcements, grieving families, and worse still, the university's internal processes. The only pertinent question that kept rearing its head was, 'Will this get published?'

In that time, both Graham and Isaac pawned over the data they had accumulated and supposed on what any of it meant; if it meant anything at all. Their focus should have been on the study; on supposing what went wrong. Instead, voxel by voxel, both men found themselves continually distracted by the goings-on their lives.

"How did you know Mary was 'The One?'" said Isaac, his face as serious as one could get; as if he had just been pulled from beneath a mound of rubble and support beams.

"The One? There is no 'The One'," said Graham. "Nobody's that bloody flawless."

He sounded so sure, irrespective of any bias.

"Relationships take effort," he said. "From both sides. A lot of give and very little take. Each lifts or pushes with the other in mind and that's what creates momentum; it's what makes the whole thing move in one direction. Love isn't a thing, it's a verb. It's not something you have, it's something you do. I mean, you have to practice love every day. If you're busy thinking about how she feels and what she needs then all she has to think about is how you feel and what you need. You push against each other, you hold each other up. Opposing forces."

Even as he said it, he thought about all the times he had let Mary down – the hundreds of times she had asked him to hold her and he had rolled over and pretended he was asleep; or how, instead of admitting he was wrong – when almost always he knew that he was – he'd choose to start a fight and wind up calling her a

cunt or whore; or something far worse. He thought about all the times he had let go, assuming that tomorrow he'd make up for it and pick up the weight.

"Marriage is selfless," he said as if he were only waking up to it now. "It's about looking out for each other. You worry about her so she doesn't have to. And then she'll worry about you all the same. It's reciprocal."

When was the last time, though, he had actually worried about her? When was the last time he had assumed that she could do with some care? Time had been hard on them both; it had hardened them both. They hadn't had sex in months; they hadn't fought in years. In his head, were she an experiment, she would be one that required little to no peer review; were she a movie, she would be one that could write and direct itself.

"As for that 'The One' business, you don't get to know until it's over whether she was The One or not. For now, like I said, love is a verb. You have to practice it every day. It's like a garden. If you don't nurture it, it'll wither up and get full of snails and bull ants. Love," he said as if it were a type of complex algebra. "Is something different."

"What is it?"

Even as Graham spoke, he knew he had no idea how he was going to explain it. He wished the damn fool would be satisfied with the gist. Isaac, though, was like a child. His wonder never ceased. If only he applied even half of it to their experiment.

"It's not that."

"It's not what?"

"Magical," said Graham.

He hadn't wanted to say it, but at some point, the young man would find out for himself. It was something he needed to hear. Life was not a fairy-tale.

"Honestly, I just want to meet a normal girl," said Isaac.

"What's normal?"

"Like Mary."

"Nobody's normal Isaac, especially Mary. You'll meet the

right girl; you just have to give it time. You never find anything in life when you're looking for it. Trust me, when you least expect it, you'll stumble upon her. Until then, stop analysing things so much."

That was easier said than done. Lately, it seemed like that was all that Graham seemed to do. Whether it was family, his career or all the things he swore as a young man that he'd one day set out to do; the way he ruminated, you'd swear that nothing good had ever happened.

"You'll meet someone, you will. And when you do, you just gotta ask yourself, do I like myself when I'm around this person? And do I wanna keep doing things with her and for her every day for the rest of my life? If that answer's yes then get in there and do it. If the answer's no then either get out or..."

His silence perched on the edge of a godforsaken cliff.

"Or what?"

"Have another baby," said Graham.

"Really? That's brilliant," said Isaac. "That's amazing."

"No, it's not."

"Stop being so cynical. Of course, it is. Congratulations."

His enthusiasm could power a small Scandinavian fishing village.

"There's nothing to celebrate," said Graham. "Not yet at least."

"She's not pregnant."

"Christ, no."

"You don't want another one?"

"Are you kidding? Nathan has just started wiping his own arse. You really think I wanna go back to looking at shitty bums all day?"

"But what if she's pregnant?"

He sounded disappointed, as if, like Dorothy, the curtain were being pulled on the magic, wonder, and merriment of all his hopes and dreams.

"Well...then we carry on carrying on. It's not like we planned

to have the first.”

“What about your son, though?”

His words were marred with disbelief. It was like finding out all over again that Santa Claus was not real. He hoped, deep inside, that this was just some cruel trick – hazing for the hopelessly romantic.

“That’s where it gets a bit tricky,” said Graham as if he were debunking a fallacy like free will. “Marriage,” he said, looking for the right words. “It’s a marathon. There’s a lot of fanfare at the beginning and a fair amount at the end. The rest of it, though, is long and it’s tiring. You might pass a marker here or there and splash some water on your face but it dries up pretty quick. It’s not like dating. It’s not playing dress-ups and having to make a fantastic moment out of every moment. Marriage is...”

His face was shaped like a purple heart.

“I love my kids, I do. I don’t regret either one; not for a single second. If we had a third, I’d feel just the same. Sure I’d be telling you all this from a caravan park where hopefully I still had a bit leftover after buying school material and new shoes for at least tent with a zipper. Marriage isn’t easy. You see the same person day in day out for twenty odd years and you just get in a routine. You get in a rut. When my daughter turned three we had this very discussion.”

“Seems like a good split between ages.”

“It’s not that. It’s that for three years, we were focused on this little human. And she was so utterly dependant on both of us. Us, as a couple, was put on hold, and everything became about Isabel. Every conversation we had was about her. Everything we did was for her. At night, we’d collapse on the bed and fall asleep exhausted, because we’d spent the whole day doing everything for her. And for three years it was great. Then she turned three and she didn’t need us so much anymore. Then me and Mary kind of looked at each other and thought, ‘Who the fuck are you?’ She won’t ever admit that; no couple will, but it’s true. You spend so long feeding them, changing their diapers, playing with them, teaching them,

soothing them, putting them to sleep that for three years, the only time you spend together is sharing a beer and falling asleep to some shitty television show. Then, after three years when you finally have after eight pm to yourselves, you look at each other and you're total strangers. So you have another baby, and, though nobody admits it, you buy another three years."

"That sounds bleak."

"Yeah well, it's true, no matter what anyone spouts off. Marriage isn't easy. It sure as hell isn't the perfect picture folks make it out to be. Sure, when you dress it up. But naked and raw, it's fat in weird places, there's no symmetry whatsoever, and it stinks half the time – but you get used to it. You adapt. You have to. And that's Love."

"Would you want another?"

"Kid? I can't afford the two I have. I can't do a third. Not now."

"If not now, when?"

"Jesus you're worse than her. It's hard enough worrying whether or not we're gonna get published with this trial. At the end of all of this, maybe, when I have a bit more time, money, and some notoriety."

"You think we'll get published? Irrespective of how the trial goes."

"If you see half the junk coming out of social sciences you wouldn't worry."

"Yeah, but this is actual science. I was speaking to my old mentor the other day."

"Yeah? And what did he have to say?"

"He said we're wasting our time."

"Did he now?"

"More specifically, he said I'm wasting my time. He says we won't get published, not in anything reputable anyway, and that I should be focusing on neuroscience that matters instead of..."

His face was shaped like a Freudian slip.

"You can say it; I'm not a bloody child."

“The woo-woo of actual science. That was his words, not mine.”

“Is that what you think? You’d prefer to have your name on another paper?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I love what we’re doing here, I do. It’s just...”

“What?”

“Well, if we can’t get published, what’s the point? If no-one’s gonna read it, is it even worth writing?”

Track 20 (Blue)

“Do you mind?” said Stacey, taking pieces of Isaac’s salad and arranging them on a side plate that she’d specifically asked the waiter to bring. “This will just take a second,” she said. “Have to get the right angle.”

Stacey stood up and hopped around the table. It was only then that Isaac noticed that her leg was in a brightly coloured cast.

“You broke your leg?” asked Isaac.

“Oh that?” said Stacey non-challan, acting as if her injury were a perm or fake lashes. “Everybody’s doing it.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” she said kind of weirded out by Isaac’s illiteracy of style. “Casts are in now. They have been for like – forever.”

“Broken legs are fashion?”

“Not the broken leg, just the cast. What, you didn’t know that?”

It was only then that he looked around the room and noticed – not a large amount of a people, but a noticeable and significant few, all of them with extravagant looking casts on their legs.

“A good one can go for at least a couple of hundred grand. There’s this influencer I follow and hers is to die for. It’s a Dior.”

“A Dior?”

“Di-Or.”

“I don’t know what that is?”

“Believe me, it’s the best.”

“So your leg isn’t actually broken?”

“Of course not. It wouldn’t be fashion then.”

“But it is now? Fashionable, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“Because it’s not broken?”

“Yes.”

“But it looks like it is?”

“See? You do get it.”

Then she hopped around the table bending the phone at minute angles, looking for the best way to present a meal that wasn't even hers in the first place. And though her actions might have warranted some kind of psychiatric intervention, they were no different from what was going on at every other table around them.

Isaac stared around the room in a deranged and delusional wonder. Each and every person inside the bar and out on the street had their attention buried in their phones, looking at the world through their own requisite filter.

There were people climbing up on bars, lamp posts, and buses; and balancing like lotus flowers, precariously on the edges of dining tables and lighting fixtures, caught, as it would seem, in the midst of an innocent and Zen-like repose. Some fell to their deaths while others broke down and cried whenever they caught their often portlier and more honest and blotched complexions in the mirror.

“This is bound to get a reaction,” said Stacey, finally settling on one out of hundreds of shots. “I guess I'm just naturally built for photography,” she said as if the question had been asked. “I can't speak for other people but for me, it just comes naturally; you know, getting the right shot - kind of like how Michael Jordan didn't have to try as hard as anybody else. If you have to know...” – which she assumed he did – “...firstly, it's all in the right angle. Everything has the right way of looking at it. You find that angle then all you have to change is the backdrop. Whatever you're photographing will always look good as long as you know how to look at it right. I'm great at that. I mean I don't have the followers that I deserve for the quality of the photos I take but one day, you know? Not yet, anyway. But if you're consistently good, you'll get your chance; that's what they say. How do you get the right angle? Good question. Well, that's what really separates your average run-of-the-mill photographer from the real pros. Now, when I say pro I don't

mean someone who has a fancy diploma or who works for some mainstream fashion magazine. There are hundreds, probably billions, of real pros who are out there doing their own thing; in love with the craft and doing real art for no money at all. Art isn't about the money," she said, scraping the salad back on Isaac's plate. "Art is the process. It's visualising the photo. It's arranging the photo. It's taking the photo. After that, it's all marketing and sales. That's business. Anyone can do business. Just because something made a tonne of money or got a tonne of clicks.....that's not what made it art. It's not what defines it as art. One day though I'll be able to make a living off what I do. It's not to say I'm not grateful, though. The fact I can do what I do every day is a pure blessing. Namaste. But the key to finding the right angle, and this is something they don't teach you in textbooks or in university and if someone had taught me this earlier I would definitely have made my first million by now, but, take as many pictures as you can. Take a hundred. Take a thousand. It doesn't matter. The more the better. If you take enough photos," she said, "you'll eventually find the one."

Isaac knew straight away that she wasn't The One. He'd barely even touched his salad and already he was exhausted. He wondered if he asked enough questions, could he also see her in a more favourable light? Did she also have her perfect angle? Could she be The One? And if not her, then how many more of these dates would he have to endure before he too could settle?

"Do you have a profile?" she asked.

Isaac shook his head.

"You really should. I'm surprised you don't. I've had mine now for about six months. I had different ones before that but this new profile is really catching on. It's only a matter of time really."

"For what?"

"Well, what do you think? Until I trend. Until I'm famous of course."

"You want to be famous?"

"Everyone wants to be famous. Except now fame is accessible. It's not about who you know anymore. The door is opened

for everybody. You don't have to go to Hollywood anymore. Heck, you don't even need to really do anything. It's fairer now; more inclusive. Now anybody can be famous. I don't really want to be famous, though. I want to not want to be famous. Get it?"

"I think so," said Isaac. "No, I don't think I do."

"Most famous people just wish they could be normal. I want to be like that."

"You want to be normal?"

"No. I want to want to be normal – because I'm rich."

"But you don't actually want to be normal?"

"Of course not. Who wants to be normal? I want everyone to want to be me just like I used to want to be everyone else."

"So you don't want to be like everyone else."

"You don't listen. No, I don't want to be anyone. I want to want to be someone else. I want to be me, but rich and famous, and wanting to be like I used to be – just common and normal. Now, do you get it?"

"Kind of," he said.

"It's all state of mind. If it thinks like a duck..." she said, drawing out the suspense.

"It's a duck?" said Isaac, expecting horse's hooves.

"Exactly. It's not enough to look like a duck and act like a duck, you have to think like a duck too if you ever want to be a duck. It's all mindset. A rich person isn't thinking, 'how do I get rich?' That's how a poor person thinks. A nobody is thinking, 'what can I do to be famous?' What does a famous person think?"

Isaac literally had no idea.

"A famous person isn't thinking about becoming famous. They are famous. They're thinking, 'I wish I could get my taint waxed without ending up on the front page of a newspaper.' Quack quack," she said. "That's how the duck thinks. The Queen of England once said, 'Watch your thoughts for they become your words. Watch your words, they become your actions. Watch your...'"

"Your actions... So and so, your destiny. I don't think it was The Queen, though. I think you're referring to Margaret Thatcher."

“Like I said, The Queen.”

“She wasn’t The Queen. She was Prime Minister. And I’m pretty sure you’re quoting a movie. I don’t think she actually said that.”

“It was a biopic, actually. And if she didn’t say it then why was it put in the movie?”

“Because it’s a movie. Movies aren’t real.”

“Potato, po-tah-to,” said Stacey. “The point is, I create my world. I manifest it and I make it happen. And soon enough I will have a million followers.”

“Really?” said Isaac genuinely surprised. “How many do you have now?”

“It’s not about the number,” said Stacey, sounding irate. “You really don’t get the nuance of what I’m trying to say.”

“I’m trying,” said Isaac.

It’s true, though. The nuance could have been highlighted and spelled in capitols and sung in bold and prophetic voices by a Broadway chorus line and he still wouldn’t get it. It could have been a hand-delivered note and he still wouldn’t get it. And this alone said more about Isaac than anyone else.

“Don’t you want to be famous?” she asked.

“I’ve never thought about it. But no, I don’t think so.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a research scientist.”

“And so what do you do?”

“My colleague and I propose difficult questions and we do experiments to answer them, and then hopefully we are able to publish our findings.”

“And do you want people to read it?”

“Of course,” said Isaac. “That’s kind of the point.”

“And the more people who read the better?”

“Well yeah, obviously, but...”

“So you want to be famous too.”

“No, not famous. I want to be...”

He thought for a second about the lineage of success in the

world of academia and his place within it. He had already acquired his Ph.D. but in the world of academia, this was merely just his hazing. There was still a great long road ahead. He had yet to attain professorship, and even then, it would be many more decades ahead before he would even be in consideration for tenure. And that was what he longed for the most; it was what all academics longed for.

Recognition – Prestige – Acclaim

“It’s different,” he said.

“We all want to be visible,” said Stacey. “The internet has brought the whole world together – seven billion people all in one space. That’s a lot of people. Everyone wants their voice heard; everyone wants to be seen. Now, more than ever, there is an absolute need to be successful and to be famous. Technology brought us together but it also made us all invisible. But this is good, too.”

“Good? Sounds depressing. How can that be good?”

“Because it means you gotta not just be better, you have to be the best if you wanna get seen if you want to get recognised if you want your place on the stage if you really want to be famous.”

“Ok, so what’s your thing? How do you expect to stand out?”

“The classics always trend,” she said.

Then she knocked her knife and fork onto the floor.

“Oops,” she said as if it were a terrible mistake. “I’m gonna pick up that knife and fork and then I’m going to crawl under the table and I’m going to give you a blow job,” she said in a tone that suggested this was not about the pleasure at all. “And you’re going to film it.”

“What?”

“Sex tape,” she said emphatically. “The most powerful people in the world today got their starts this way. Tried and true method. You see how much they’re worth now, trust me, it’s worth it. You gotta be courageous if you wanna be a real someone.”

Panicked, Isaac spun around the room. The restaurant was packed. They were surrounded by tables filled with families celebrating birthdays, couples declaring intentions, and old folks drinking

to the passage of time; not to mention the waiters passing every couple of seconds. Was she insane?

“Oh my dear,” she said, holding her camera in front of her embarrassed and pouty face. “I seemed to have dropped my knife and fork. I had better get it before I get into trouble. I really don’t want to get into trouble. I don’t want to be a - bad girl.”

Her acting was horrific.

“I really hope there isn’t a whopping great cock down there,” she said, pointing the camera towards Isaac’s crotch. “Especially with all these people around,” she said, now turning the camera to film people stuffing their faces with stroganoff and soda. “I just don’t think I could help myself.”

Then she was gone; underneath the table, hidden, more or less, by the tablecloth that draped almost to the floor with only her ankles and heels giving her away in the end.

“What the fuck?” said Isaac, jumping in his seat and almost knocking over the table. “Are you nuts?”

Stacey looked up from between his legs.

“Just pretend they’re not there,” she said. “Imagine you’re on a boat somewhere or we’re alone on a desert island.”

“You’re not sucking my dick in a restaurant.”

They both struggled over his pants. It was battle he almost lost.

“Really?” said Stacey clearly offended. “What are you, a fucking faggot? Are you some fucking queer? You prefer if that fat hairy fuck was sucking your dick,” she screamed, pointing to the next table over. “Or what, you don’t think a woman should be successful, is that it? You don’t like empowered women?”

“Look if I have to be honest, I don’t think anyone should be successful just because they sucked a dick. And not in the middle of a restaurant. You don’t have to be famous to be someone.”

“What would you know about my life? What the fuck would you know? You don’t know who I am. I could fucking destroy you, you know that? I could ruin you. I could get you fired. I could end your career, just like that. That’s what you deserve. You racist. You

sexist pig. You fucking Nazi.”

At this point, the band had stopped playing, the waiters had stopped waiting, and the diners were all staring with their mouths agape, their half-chewed chunks of ribs and mashed potato almost falling back onto their plates. It was quite a scene, especially when she got up and left.

“You’re a nobody,” she screamed. “A fucking loser. You think like one; you speak like one; you act like one.”

She was filming the whole time, holding the camera high enough so that her face was centre of the tirade while at the bottom of the screen – small and insignificant – her attacker sat mute and demoralised.

“Quack, fucking, quack,” she screamed as she stormed out the door.

“Holy shit,” said Isaac to himself.

He took a second or two just to figure out what the hell had just happened. He felt like he had just escaped the jaws of a komodo dragon. For that second or two he sat there numb and euphoric, feeling outside of his body and outside of himself for that matter; and then about a second later his every limb started to shake.

“Sir,” said a waiter tapping him on the shoulder. “You’ll have to leave.”

“What?”

He was still terribly confused, his face shaped like a Jack in the Box.

“I think I was just molested,” he said.

The Waiter laughed.

“Very good, sir,” he said.

“I’m serious,” said Isaac sounding shocked and disbelieving.

“So am I,” said The Waiter. “Now take your inappropriate wit and leave before I call the police.”

Isaac left as quiet as his date had been loud, feeling a thousand disapproving eyes all judging him, no doubt calling him all sorts of unsavoury adjectives in their heads. The shame he felt was unlike any he had ever felt before.

Shaken somewhat, he turned and walked away from all the hustle and bustle; far enough until their banter dissolved beneath the sound of his own footsteps. He walked everywhere without really going anywhere, taking every right-hand corner he came upon as if he were patiently escaping a maze; one made out of strip clubs, laundromats, and evangelical churches.

“Success,” screamed a preacher. “Is merely mindset.”

Isaac stopped, almost instinctually, outside a small church that was set up in the garage of a neighbouring brothel where, standing on a platform made out of milk crates and balsa wood, a young man, dressed in an oversized suit, shouted at the top of his lungs about pestilence, AIDS, and positive goal setting.

“Success is everything,” he said. “And I would know.”

There were plastic chairs spread out and space for maybe twenty to thirty people. There were only two, though; The Preacher and his wife. And every time he spoke, she jumped up onto the stage and the two of them high-fived – the mood was electric.

“The most successful CEO of our time, and when I say our time I mean all-time, was none other than our lord and saviour, Jesus H Christ. H, for hard work,” he said. “H, for having the right attitude; and H, for hanging in there and never giving up. Cause that’s what a winner does; winners never quit.”

The Preacher didn’t have a fancy pulpit and he had none of the trimmings of the more well to do churches; he didn’t even have a microphone. What he did have, though, was spirit.

“Faith,” he declared. “Is a currency.”

And then he fell onto his knees and quietly wept into his hands while his wife hovered around him – almost like a halo – her hands outstretched so that her fingertips were close to but could never quite touch his. She didn’t weep, though. She felt no sadness at all. Her face was glowing and her skin tingled, and all of the hairs on her body were standing on end. For these were tears of revelation.

“You must invest in yourself,” he shouted, standing back on his feet – noble and proud.

He was staring right at Isaac.

“Before you invest in Jesus Christ you must take a stake in yourself for The Lord only helps those who help themselves.”

He was young, barely old enough to sign a check, but that didn’t discourage him. He paced back and forth between the rows of chairs, screaming at the top of his lungs, preaching to an empty garage as if he was preaching to the whole damn world.

“Better yourself,” he said, pumping his fists in the air. “Love yourself. Dare to dream. Dream big. Live the dream. Be inspired. Inspire others. You can do it!”

Isaac stared in strange delirium. It was as if he had stumbled upon two insects having sex, and for reasons unbeknownst, he couldn’t look away.

“What you need!” said The Preacher, his voice coarse and abusive, his face shaped like melted cheese. “What you have to acquire! What is absolutely imperative!”

“Tell him,” said The Preacher’s Wife. “Tell him what he needs.”

They both stood side by side holding hands.

“He needs direction,” he said, pointing a finger at Isaac.

“What else?”

“He needs motivation.”

“What else?”

“He needs dedication.”

“What else? What does he need?”

“He needs a life coach.”

And then he just stopped preaching. He and his wife stood there, holding hands, and saying nothing at all. Isaac wondered for a second whether if he was supposed to clap or give them a penny.

Pulled, though, by some invisible force, he stumbled onwards; be it curiosity or boredom, it was an urge that he could not resist. It was dark in this part of town, lit only by the flickering of matches and the glow of cigarettes. Danger, malice, and miscreation all lurked about, plotting and conspiring against him, watching his every move. But onwards he went as if none of that

mattered.

And then, when he could walk no more, he saw it.

“Holy crap,” he said. “It’s actually real.”

‘The Bend in the River’

He’d heard about this place; everyone had. It existed in folklore, rumours, and tall tales. It was the type of place that people often talked about but very few had actually seen. It was a place that was synonymous with sleaze and degradation just as much as it was as being the best damn karaoke bar this side of the Equator. It was a myth; merely a figment of a drunkard’s imagination.

Isaac stared at the door, startled, but drawn to wonder.

“What are you here for?” said The Bouncer, poking him in the chest.

He wasn’t a big man but he sure could poke. Isaac stumbled backward unsure, really, what to say. Never in his life would he have imagined coming to a place like this and yet here he was, wishing to go in.

“Well?”

He could see around The Bouncer’s gangly frame. The place was filthy. The walls were covered in graffiti and grime, and the carpets looked like the kind that squished when you walked on them. There was a smell coming from inside too. It wasn’t pleasant; not at all.

“Karaoke,” said Isaac nervously, having never said that word before in his life.

The Bouncer stared at him long and hard; it was an uncomfortable stare. His face was gaunt and frightening; he had bones sticking out everywhere. There was little that Isaac could do except hold his breath and wish for the best.

“We take our karaoke seriously here,” said The Bouncer.

“Yes, of course,” said Isaac nodding – nervously and excessively.

“We don’t take kindly to tourists.”

“I’m not a tourist,” said Isaac. “I’m from here.”

“You don’t listen very well, do you?”

It seemed like the kind of question that one shouldn't answer, so he didn't.

"You gonna sing or what?"

"Yes," he said, but he hoped he wouldn't have to.

"Alright then," said The Bouncer looking as if he knew, even before the fact, that he had made an error. "You'd better fucking sing," he said poking Isaac in the chest again with his skeletal finger. "Or else...."

His face was shaped like a manslaughter charge.

"No, of course," said Isaac nervously. "I'll sing, I'll sing."

Inside the bar, it was no better and no worse than how it had looked like at first glance. There were all kinds of people drinking, dancing, and bumping into one another - young and old, from all walks of life.

There were the rich and poor; the toothless and the privileged. There were old ladies in their best Sunday clothes, and there were even older ladies, dressed in whatever rag they could find; too drunk to stand, stumbling past the stage with their tits hanging out and their one cigarette constantly falling to the floor. There were gypsies and junkies and hippies too; and there were lovers and the lonely, toe to toe with the dealers and hookers that hung out by the bathroom door.

Every one of them drunk. Every one of them singing.

That was when he saw her - The Girl - up on the stage. She didn't look like anyone he had ever seen before. She was beautiful; spellbinding even. She had long black hair and glasses that were far too big for her face; her dancing was completely out of time to the music. Never in his life had Isaac ever wanted to get on a stage and dance with someone so much. And then she sang.

Her voice was out of key; she couldn't hit a single note. But that didn't matter. In fact, everything about her said that nothing at all mattered - nothing in the world, not even this - so just shut the fuck up and dance. She wasn't just beautiful; she was Charles Manson beautiful.

"First we take Manhattan," she screamed, her voice shrieking

like a set of worn breaks.

Then the whole bar sang along with her. "And then! We take! Berlin!"

The mood was electric. Isaac had never been in a place like this before. There were no windows and no clocks whatsoever. Rumour has it, in the last twenty years; the bar hadn't once closed. There was no prejudice. There was no greed or entitlement. There was no indifference or intolerance whatsoever. All of these people together in one filthy room for nothing more than cheap poison and endless karaoke.

What more could anyone want?

When the song was over, The Girl left the stage and headed for the front door. She hugged the lady on the register, gave The Bouncer a high five, and then as if she had somewhere more pressing to be, she was gone.

"Who the fuck was that?" said Isaac, staring at the empty microphone stand.

"She's always in and out. She aint no tourist. The real deal she is."

The man beside him sat cross-legged in a wheelchair; his tiny legs curled under his bent and contorted frame. Behind him, his carer kept one hand on the chair and another on the cup of spirits that she held in front of his face should he decide upon a drink.

"Will she come back?"

"Not tonight."

"Do you know her?"

"I know of her," said The Man in the Chair. "We all do."

"What's her name?"

"We don't ask names here. It's not permitted. And it's of no use really. A name won't do you much good."

Then he leaned onto the straw and took a sip of his poison.

"The right song, though. That'll make you a star. That lady sure can pick 'em."

"I have to see her again," said Isaac.

He had never been more clear or adamant about anything in

his life. Sure, it made no sense, but then again, fairy tales never did. He'd only see her sing a single song and already he was smitten. It was stupid, it was. It made no damn sense. But he couldn't shake the ill-fitting thought; 'She was The One.'

"Won't be doin nothing lest you sing," said The Man in the Chair.

"But I can't sing," said Isaac.

"You don't listen very well. Can is about will, who gives a fuck about ability. I can and will do whatever the fuck I want," he said. "Irrespective of what I am able to do in this piece of shit body. Are you a tourist or are you one of us?"

If he wanted to see her again, there was only one answer.

"Good," said The Man in the Chair. "Then get the fuck up there and have some fun; it's what we're all doing in spite of what the world outside thinks or has in mind for us. And pick the right song too; you'll make a name for yourself here."

"I thought no-one has names."

"So you do listen," said The Man in the Chair.

Then he nodded to a couple of hookers by the door; they knew just what he meant. His carer wheeled him out the back to the only toilet in the bar; one whose door hanged on busted hinges.

"I can do this," said Isaac, walking towards the stage. "I can do this."

Track 21 (Red)

“Don’t slouch, Felicity,” said The Mother, pulling on her daughter’s pony tail so that her head whipped backward. “People will think you’re common; you don’t want that, now do you?”

“No, mother,” said The Daughter.

“Did you know that Felicity means happiness?” said The Mother with a look of disdain. “I expect you wouldn’t. I imagine you wouldn’t travel much in your kind of job.”

The Nurse ignored her; she’d heard worse in her time.

“It’s Latin, from the word ‘felicitas’. Isn’t she the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?” she said, admiring her daughter’s posture and hairline.

“A rose by any other name...”

The fourth participant was a young girl with dreams and aspirations bestowed upon her by her mother; a bullish woman who knew all too well that a tree was known by its fruit. Dressed in a gown that glittered, almost as much as the pink crown upon her head, she waited, almost like a statue, as her mother filled out forms and berated a nurse.

“I’m going to be a star,” said The Daughter, pouting her lips. “Like Marilyn Munroe and Pamela Anderson.”

The Mother adored her daughter as much as she adored herself. It was as if she had given birth to her own potential, and now, free of her own wallowing insecurities, she could finally be the success she had always imagined herself being.

“You know the prerequisite for success?” she asked.

Not even waiting for an answer, she continued.

“Poise. Persistence. Perfection.”

She paused as if allowing for a round of applause.

“A star must always be shining,” she said. “Even if there is no-one to see it for the chance alone that somebody might lookup.

Stars are not born, they are discovered.”

She didn’t look at The Nurse as she spoke. It seemed as if it didn’t matter whether someone was there or not; as if she had practiced this speech in the privacy of her own home, imaging herself neath the glitter and bright lights of the pageant universe, being decorated with lavish applause on the most coveted stage of all. Just as the child paraded around as if the cameras were rolling, so too did her mother speak as if her words were the colour commentary; both of them constantly shining, not hoping, but expecting to be discovered.

“It’s time, Mother,” said The Daughter, holding her hand gracefully on her stomach.

“Excuse me,” said The Mother as if noticing The Nurse for the first time. “Do you have a bathroom nearby?”

“Down the end of the hall to the left,” said The Nurse. “Is she feeling sick?”

The Daughter didn’t look white or perturbed in any way.

“She’s fine,” said The Mother. “It’s just...”

Then she dipped her head, hinting as if it were some secret women’s business.

“She’s just had her lunch, so you know.... Is it close?”

“Sure,” said The Nurse, thinking that The Girl might have had a sensitive stomach or an irritable bowel. “Would you like me to take you?”

“No, that’s fine,” said The Mother.

The Daughter, though, looked untroubled; smiling as if she were on a stage. And they didn’t rush either. Both walked as if the ground were made of eggshells and below them, a chasm of infinite nothingness.

“Poise, persistence, perfection,” said The Mother before they both entered a toilet stall.

Then, without much ado, The Daughter and The Mother both stuck two fingers into their mouths – deep into their throats until they choked and gagged; long enough until their bodies shook and convulsed, bringing up the five hundred calories they had had

only half an hour before.

Both of them vomited quietly with poise, persistence, and perfection. And when they were done, they stood side by side in front of the mirror with even smaller mirrors in their hands, putting light touches to the foundation on their faces before redoing their lipstick, smacking their lips, and the gargling for several minutes with a mouth wash that The Mother always kept on hand.

Neither one spoke of or even thought about the vomiting, but instead imagined themselves, like mermaids, sitting upon their pageantry rock whilst waves of applause crashed around them. Much like plucking their brows and waxing her lips, this was just a minor discomfort for the sake of unmistakable beauty.

“Today we cement your place in history,” said The Mother straightening The Daughter glittering pink crown. “While those other little bitches are handing out cookies, you, my future pageant darling, are on the cuff of greatness.”

“Is it true that I’ll die?”

“It’s just an expression,” said The Mother admiring how her smile crept backward, almost to her ears. “A euphemism. You’ll be fine.”

“So I won’t actually die?”

For the first time, she sounded like a seven-year-old girl.

The Mother grabbed The Daughter and shook her like a carton of milk.

“What does it matter?” she said as the child’s head rocked back and forth. “As long as you win.”

“Yes, Mother,” said The Daughter, trying to sound stoic again.

She wouldn’t beat her; not here.

“That’s more like it,” she said, lovingly brushed the girl’s hair. “Now, do you have poise?” she said.

“Yes, Mother.”

“Are you persistent?”

“Yes, Mother, I am.”

“And do you want to be perfect?”

“Yes, Mother. I want nothing more and nothing less.”

“Then stop acting like a god damn runner up.”

The Mother pushed the little girl so that she tripped and landed on her bum. The Daughter, though, didn’t bat an eyelid, for poise was a language that one spoke with their eyes. If the stage should collapse and her legs were to fall from under her, not a judge would notice for they would all have been captive to the grace of the look in her eye. And as she had practiced a hundred times before, The Daughter merely stood back on her feet and smiled as if she had never fallen in the first place.

“Listen here,” said The Mother. “It doesn’t matter what they do to you, do you understand? As long as it improves your chance of success. If you want to put a shine on your shoes, what do you do?”

“Spit on them,” said The Daughter.

“Good,” said The Mother. “Then you understand. Success is the only thing that matters. Do you want to be famous? Do you want to be a celebrity?”

“Of course, Mother.”

“Then you do whatever you have to and you do it with poise, persistence, and perfection. Whatever!” she said, poking The Daughter in the chest. “You will not ruin this for me.”

“Yes, Mother,” said The Daughter, smearing her gums in Vaseline.

Then they both returned to smiling at themselves in the mirror until the muscles in their faces could bear no more.

“We’re ready for you,” said The Nurse, tapping on the restroom door.

“One second,” said The Mother.

Then she turned to The Daughter who once again looked like a shrink-wrapped version of herself. Her eyes swelled with pride, maybe more so than her heart which ached with happiness.

“Felicity,” she said her face as sheer as a granite wall. “Who you are is how I feel.”

The Daughter nodded. This was neither the time nor place for smiles.

“Do not let me down.”

Track 21 (Red)

Today was unlike any other day for the two scientists. Whereas their trials would normally be carried out with causal banter with only themselves and The Professor present; today they were joined by The Rector as well as the heads of various committees in the university; all of them whispering amongst themselves in patent conspiracy. The atmosphere, needless to say, was heavy and subversive.

“I understand this is not ideal,” said The Rector, himself conspiring with the two scientists. “But we have three deceased participants to date and your trial is gaining quite a reputation amongst faculty and academic circles – and not the good kind mind you.”

He had a way of speaking that disguised his disappointment as worry. He spoke like a mother with little to no control over her unmannered, unruly, and unreformable sons. He spoke as if he loved their endeavour as much as he feared their reprisal.

“Why are they even here?” said Graham. “Is it a legality issue? They’ve seen the consent forms.”

“The Ethics Committee is worried less about the legalities and more about your practices.”

“What would they know about scientific practices?”

“Now, Graham. You know all too well that the social sciences are as much a science as the natural and the formal. We’ve had this discussion before. It’s not nice to make fun of other people, especially when they are making a real go of it. We’re an inclusive university now. Every science gets a gold star.”

“It’s distracting. How is someone...?”

“A scientist,” said The Rector, correcting.

“An academic,” said Graham, being fair. “How is someone in one field of academia supposed to evaluate a practice they don’t understand? All they do is bitch and protest – at most, they conduct a half-arsed thought experiment. And that’s me being generous. You, yourself know. If it can’t be measured...”

“Graham, you have to meet me halfway. I’m on your side. It’s a different world now. You know more than I do; if I shut them out, they’ll jump to ridiculous conclusions and within a day this whole campus will be a clusterfuck of moral thuggery. You know that. I know that. And look at us. We’re three white males. We’d be shamed and homeless by the end of the day. It’s not about science when it borders on a morality issue, Graham.”

“Morality? There is no place in science for morality. Morality is a shifting paradigm; it’s entirely subjective.”

“I think it comes down to public perception.”

“It comes down to money, that’s what it comes down to.”

“And that’s public perception, Graham. And in the end, we depend on their endowments. If we tread on the wrong toes...”

“Everything’s business.”

“Yes, Graham, yes it is. Everything IS business. And a trial full of dead participants is very bad for business. So please, can we just do this just for this one day and I promise for the rest of your trial you’ll be free to your own devices.”

It’s not like he had a choice.

“Fine,” he said, making no effort to mask his disdain.

Relief swept over The Rector like a cool breeze on sun-burned skin. More than anything, he owed it to his positive thinking. A week ago his anxieties would have taken hold and, feeling hostage to his insecurities, he would have blurted out something he would have surely regretted and there would have been no resolution whatsoever. This, though, was proof that as long as he believed he was a winner, he would be a winner. What he wished for, the universe would give. The law of attraction.

“I’d like to thank everyone for being here this afternoon,” he said, taking everyone’s attention to a series of monitors. “The participant you see here in our fMRI machine today is...”

He was about to say her name.

“XT-419,” said Graham, reminding the room once again that this was not a dental exam.

“Yes,” said The Rector. “That is correct. Now, the premise

of this trial is to – correct me if I’m wrong, Graham – to make a physiological roadmap of the brain as it experiences a near-death experience.”

“And how does that happen?” said one of the committee heads, busily scratching notes on paper, already thinking out the title for their blog.

“We make it happen,” said Graham.

He had little patience for their line of questioning.

“It’s a tentative process,” said The Rector. “Not all people have this experience but it is ubiquitous enough to warrant research. If I’m not wrong, all of our participants in this study have, at one time, experienced or have had a family member go through a near-death experience.”

This was not the case, though. Each of the participants had lied to enter the trial. None had ever had or ever known anyone who had ever had an experience of this nature. Each had their own reason for partaking in the study with money and fame being amongst the most favoured.

“How do you know they had a near-death experience?”

“Aside from the data, we rely on the participant’s account when they are brought back to consciousness.”

“How do you know they aren’t lying?”

“Data doesn’t lie,” said Graham. “We know more or less what we are looking for. That, and obviously, we have a control.”

Even a first-year would refrain from such trite questioning. The committee heads, though, all of them in fact, had the same estranged look on their faces as if the instructions they should follow were transcribed in some otherworldly codec.

“The participant is asked a series of questions,” said The Rector. “And if I’m quite right, exposed to imagery that might associate with what one would associate with a near-death experience. They are asked questions about their family, their loves, their regrets, and what they think of any possible afterlife. As they answer, their neural activity is measured here through the fMRI and this works as a base or a control so that when the participant

undertakes the drug, Graham and Isaac here can see how the unwilling conscious experience compares with the control.”

“What is this drug? This is a double-blind trial?”

“Yes, of course,” said The Rector. “I’ll let one of our esteemed scientists take bat on this one.”

“There are two drugs, assigned randomly without I nor the participants knowing. One of which is a drug designed to put the heart in cardiac arrest. Most, if not all cases of NDE have been linked to cardiac failure. It is the easiest to replicate in the lab.”

“And the other drug?”

“N-Dimethyltryptamine,” said Graham. “There is a specific receptor in the brain – the Sigma-1 receptor – which responds to this drug, N-Dimethyltryptamine, and provides a hallucinogenic response that, in previous studies, has, unlike drugs that bind with 5-hydroxytryptamine receptors, been characterized as being akin to an ego death, and in its symptoms, remarkably similar to what have been described in countless recounts of near-death experiences.”

“So you think near-death experiences are just delusions?”

“It may very well be that in cardiac failure, the sigma-1 receptor activates and provides patients with this similar experience at the point of trauma until death.”

“Why would the brain do that?”

“Why is a redundant question,” said Graham. “We are scientists. We ask how.”

If the questioning continued any further, it was clear that Graham would say or do something that would put the university in disrepute; The Rector could feel this so he turned everyone’s focus to the screens that showed a young girl lying on a table, being spoken to – and maybe even comforted – by an odd looking man dressed in Victorian attire, with a host of strange brooches pinned to his lapel – all of them shaped like some kind of insect.

“Who here has seen an fMRI before?” he asked.

Graham sighed. They should have been well underway by now; instead they were playing tour guides to the emotion police – who, like canaries in a coal mine, called themselves men and

women of science but were merely advocates for the hypersensitive; thrusting themselves into the work of others, measuring its merit by the extent of their moral offence.

The Rector talked for another ten minutes about the machine and explained all its ins and outs; to the best of his ability anyway. All the while, in the other room, The Professor explained to The Daughter what she should expect and what he expected of her.

“So in a second,” said The Rector, pointing to The Professor. “Our other esteemed colleague here will go into a separate booth and communicate directly with participant XT-419, asking her a series of questions as I mentioned before, to help the scientists here map out the control neural framework. I said that right?” he said in a doubt riddled whisper to Graham.

“Let’s just get this underway,” the scientist responded.

This was not how anyone should have to go about their science. The stress was already overwhelming. They were halfway through the trial and already they had no data to work with. As it was, even vanity publishing seemed like a long shot. He didn’t need this extra burden. What choice did he have, though?

“This is so exciting,” said The Rector, his enthusiasm, just a tad inappropriate.

In the other room, The Professor adjusted The Daughter on the table and placed a set of goggles over her eyes and earphone buds in her ears. Her mother sat in the waiting room that was six floors above, reading a fashion magazine and chewing on mint gum.

When The Daughter was ready, he quietly exited the room and positioned himself in the dark booth with nothing but a microphone and a series of questions

“OK, let’s start with imagery,” said Graham.

The machine was started and all those disastrous sounds clinked and clanked and clunk with such deafening volume that The Daughter was shaken out of her well-rehearsed bravado and charisma, and instead was reduced to a typical seven-year-old girl – frightened at the thought of being left alone.

The first images were of nature; little waves lapping on the

shore; seagulls swooping on morsels of bread and leftover fish; a kitten playing with twine; dogs chasing their tails; owls perched in trees; and rainbows, spread across cloudy but sunlit skies. The two scientists watched on the many screens as different regions of The Daughter's brain lit up in reds and oranges, pulsing as if there were something living inside her head, scampering from one place to another. But when it came to the images of her family, there was only one part of her brain the lit up.

"You see that?" said Graham.

The image the girl was seeing was of her father sitting in his favourite chair.

"Her amygdala is running a damn marathon."

The same was true for her brother. The photos of her mother, though, produced the most damning evidence of all.

"Poor kid," said Isaac, as if the swarming colours were purple bruises.

"Alright," said Graham. "We have enough. Let's go to stage two."

In the small booth, The Professor prepared his questions.

"Hello little girl," he said. "This is your good friend. There is nothing to fear."

Only The Daughter could hear what was being said. In their room, the two scientists – and their uninvited guests – had nothing but the images on the screen to work with.

"Hello," said The Daughter. "You've gone. Where did you go?"

"I'm right here beside you," said The Professor. "Very close. Not very far. Could I ask you a few tiny questions?"

"Ok."

She sounded relieved by The Professor's voice. He spoke in an accent that was a mix of every country he had ever lived in and, as a result, though quite articulate, to The Daughter, he sounded like what she thought a French teddy bear would sound like if it came to life.

"What is it like to be on a stage?"

The question he was supposed to ask was about candy canes and puppy dogs.

“What do you feel? Are you frightened? Are you scared? Are you enthused? Are you thrilled? What is it? What do you think? What do you feel?”

“I don’t know,” said The Daughter.

There were so many questions; she didn’t know which one to answer first.

“If you would be so kind as to close your eyes. I want you to picture yourself on that stage. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” said The Daughter.

She’d been doing this her whole life. For as long as he could remember, her mother had her closing her eyes, imagining all the most important people in the world, watching her, judging her.

“Where are you now?”

“I’m at my mark. Downstage centre.”

“What do you see?”

“The floodlight. And I can see the knees of the people in the front row. Mainly I can just see all the lights. There’s so many. Mother is stage left. She’s always stage left. She’s saying something to the director. She can’t see my dance at all.”

“Imagine you’re dancing. Forget your mother. Forget the lights. Go where you go when you dance. Go to that special place in your mind. Pretend you are on the stage now and go through your routine just as you would in your performance. The audience is cheering for you. They are throwing roses and chanting your name. They love you. You are a star.”

The scientists watched the screens in the other room as the images of The Daughter’s brain lit up in an explosion of colour. The more she spoke, the more vibrant were the shapes and colours that, like wildflowers, erupted, seemingly out of nowhere in her brain.

“It’s like New Year’s Eve,” said The Rector.

It was, though, nothing like how her brain had responded to the images of her mother, and especially her father. Every neuron

in her brain was firing one after the other. This was nothing like the past controls; nothing at all like the two scientists had expected. At the end of stage one, they had, without knowing, mapped a performer's brain.

“Ok,” said Graham. “Stage two.”

Both scientists held the sealed envelope in their hands. Now was when The Daughter would receive the drug. Now was when the real science would begin.

Track 23 (Red)

The Girl lay in the machine, fearful yes, but recounting her mother's words over and over in her head – Poise, Persistence, Perfection. Any other child her age would have been begging for a hand to hold. Not this girl, though. She didn't hold hands, she held it together. She held people's attention. She held their expectations, their breaths, and their stares. She held their captivation, and she provoked their round of applause. She wasn't any old common girl, she was a superstar.

She was a pageant queen.

Still, alone as she was, inside a giant whirring machine and with a cocktail of drugs coursing through her veins, this stoic young girl quickly became weak and brittle; her stony resolve eroding until every muscle in her body twitched in nervous succession.

“Poise, persistence, perfection,” she said, over and over.

But fear had taken hold. It was like a hurricane in her mind and those words – her mantra – were castles made of sand. They did little to make her feel safe.

“Anything to be famous,” she thought. “Anything for mother.”

And this, if anything, was the only thread strong enough to cling to.

In the other room, the two scientists, The Rector, The Professor, and all the committee heads stared at the host of screens with an unflinching and almost psychotic resolve. Truth be told, there was only one psychopath in the room but by the looks on the faces of all and sundry, it would be almost impossible to single out the lunatic from the sane.

The first thing The Daughter felt was an overwhelming feeling that everything was OK. A smile occurred on her face – occurred because it happened as naturally as the sun rising behind the backs of shadowy ranges. She played no part in the smile. It

was not forced and it was not the kind of smile that one could practice in front of a mirror. This was entirely how she felt.

Though she had no real concept of the actual size of the universe – being seven years old of course – she was immediately struck with the apparent realisation that everything, no matter how big or small, was interconnected; and that the only truth she knew outright was that there was nothing to fear – nothing at all.

Her next realisation was that blind people sometimes dreamt in colour.

“What are we seeing here?” said one of the committee heads.

They were staring at the smile on the young girl’s face and it disturbed them.

“What’s happening to this poor girl?”

“N-Dimethyltryptamine,” said Isaac, relieved somewhat that, apart from finally being able to collect some publishable data, at least for today – and especially with all these damn committee heads present – nobody was going to die.

“Is that safe?” said the same committee head.

He spoke as if he knew that it wasn’t. In fact, he spoke that way about anything that didn’t concur with the ideals and their exact definitions set out by his tribe. His doubts were insinuations dressed as such. So, when he asked, ‘Is it safe?’ what he really meant was, ‘I don’t know what you’re doing but it seems wrong, and I know more than you’.

The Daughter had her eyes closed and still. With a smile that ran like a river from one side of her face to the other, she chased tiny explosions of colour in her mind; all of them like soapy bubbles. Her thoughts didn’t sneak up on her; she snuck up on them.

“Such pretty shapes,” she said. “Such pretty colours.”

It was the first time she had said anything that hadn’t been coached and rehearsed to the point of tedium. It might have been the first time, in a very long time, that her voice was actually her own.

And though her math was limited to the two times table, her next realisation was that beneath everything – at the heart of it all -

everything was made of geometric doodles; that for all its complexity, just as it was savage and misunderstood, the universe was quite simple and that life occurred inside of a kaleidoscope.

Two of the committee heads left; estranged by what they were seeing. That left only one who, instead of focusing on the science, in his frantic scribbles, had made this trial an issue of privilege and discrimination.

The Daughter, though, thought different. She didn't so much think different as much as she observed a different kind of thought and, like a campfire, she sat herself down and was warmed by its radiant glow.

It was a thought that might have been innocuous to anyone else; someone who, swept away by the merry delusion of their own ego, might assume that not only was the thought their own but that they were that thought and the rest of the world was its definition and counterweight. It was a thought that when thought of by this type of person, it would be less of a realisation and more of a rebuttal – a point of leverage in a moral debate.

It was a thought that - with the love she had swimming in her veins and with the enormous smile on her face as proof – took all the worry out of being alive.

“There is no young or old. There is no black or white. There is no man or woman. There is no boy or girl. Everything is one. Everything is light. Everything is love.”

Until that point, the colours and shapes and all those stupendously strange extra dimensions were trapped behind the lids of her eyes; visible only when they were shut. But as the drug really took hold, the magic that was happening inside her head spilled out onto the world around her so that, though she was lying flat on her back inside the bore of a machine, for reasons that no ophthalmologist could ever explain, she could see, not only the inside of the machine, but also above it, behind it, and under it too. And she could see all of those spaces at once as if the fourth dimension were a fish lens that warped her three-dimensional world into one flat two-dimensional image. She could even see herself inside the

machine.

Her first thought was to tickle her own feet.

“It’s like there’s a trillion fireflies in her head,” said Isaac, staring at the image of The Daughter’s brain. “Neuros are all firing randomly – everywhere.”

“Nothing is entirely random,” said The Rector. “Even the occurrence of random events is a pattern on its own.”

The Rector had been a math scholar but this was not a gem of probability he had been saving for a moment such as this; it was something his online crochet teacher had once said about slip stitches – an idea that had stuck.

There was a pattern, it’s just nobody was looking at it the right way.

“She looks so happy,” said Isaac. “Have you ever been that happy? I don’t think happy is even the right word.”

“Nirvana,” said The Rector.

To be fair, he may have been talking as much about the band as he was the esoteric state. Everyone in the room agreed, though. There was something majestic about the look on The Daughter’s face. Staring at her felt as blissful as seeing one’s reflection in a creek or watching a wild animal, step out into a meadow. She made the whole room feel, in some manner, benevolent.

The next realisation The Girl had was life-changing.

“Nobody is judging me,” she said; almost crying in joy as she did.

The Girl breathed a massive sigh of relief. In her mind, she was standing on a stage in front of thousands of people as every girl except her was crowned a queen.

This was a dream that had kept her awake for most of her life. It was a dream that was not confined to her sleep. It was a dream that haunted her whether she was sleeping, eating, or trying to pay attention in class. It was a dream that had become a habit of hers to have and one that caused her a great deal of and panic and dread.

Now, though, for the first time ever, she was experiencing

that very same dream except this time with that rapturous smile on her face and the light of pure love glowing in her heart.

Different from every other time she had had that dream, this time, instead of being strapped to a table and surrounded by machine made out giant magnets and scary sounds, she was on that very stage.

Not only was she on it, but she could walk around it. She could see all the other contestants – all the other girls like herself, dressed like their mothers, and all of them vying to be crowned a princess or a queen. Normally, when she kept such company, she would look at the others girls with disgust. And though she would be awfully polite, beneath her pleasantry was a scourge of vitriol that was measured in the size of the compliment or praise that she gave to her competitors.

This time, though, their faces were somewhat blurred; covered in swirling geometric shapes that were present on everything, as if the universe were a giant jigsaw and she was seeing, through these special eyes, how and where all of the pieces clicked together.

The judges, too, had blurred faces. They were no longer coarse or abrasive. And for that reason, they were no longer scary or mean. They were just people sitting in chairs. They didn't care how straight her teeth were or whether she had too much fat on her thighs. They didn't strike her with fear or intimidation. They were just people, like her, and just as she wasn't judging them, it became abundantly clear that they – and everyone in the whole world in fact – were not judging her.

It was a massive weight off her shoulders. For as long as she could remember all she had ever heard was that the world is a stage. That alone was exhausting knowing that her whole life was a performance and she was constantly being judged. Now, though, it was clear that none of this was true.

Her smile somehow grew wider. And then she had her last realisation.

“I don't wanna be a queen of anything.”

The Daughter didn't die, not in any traditional sense. But

who she was before she had been given the drug was almost alien to who she was when she was pulled from the machine.

For the next ten to fifteen minutes, she vomited profusely. And when she felt that she was done, she wiped her mouth and walked with The Nurse back out to find her mother.

“Don’t forget your crown,” said The Nurse, though The Girl didn’t put it on.

She walked with that same stupendous smile; and she walked with a newfound understanding of the ego and self, along with all the intricate peculiarities that the universe had to offer. She walked with her heart, like a reservoir, over-flowing with self-love; and all she wanted was to fill the cups of every person on this planet with care, consideration, and compassion – especially her mother.

“Did you do it?” said The Mother, cold to her daughter’s open arms. “Did you die?”

All that mattered in the world was a crown and sash.

“Yes, mummy,” said The Daughter, though her voice sounded just as her hug would feel. “I died and now I’m back.”

Her face was shaped like a totem pole.

The Mother smiled. Hers wasn’t stupendous. Like a crack in a house’s foundation or a fissure on a busy street, it looked calamitous. It had a wet and slippery sound about it too, clearly from all the Vaseline on her teeth and gums.

“None of those little bitches will get anywhere near us now. As soon as those judges hear about this, that crown is ours,” she said. “We have a lot to do still. As soon as we get home we’re going to go over your monologue and....”

“There’s something I want to say,” said The Daughter, knowing it would not be what her mother would want to hear. It would not be what anyone would want to hear. But feeling as she did, there was no way she could keep it to herself.

“It can wait till we get home,” said The Mother.

“I don’t want to be a pageant queen anymore, mummy,”

Then she handed her mother the crown.

“What?”

The Mother's eyes swelled with shock, then panic, and finally rage.

"Don't be upset, mummy."

"What did they do to you?" she wailed.

"Nothing, mummy."

"What did you do to my girl?"

"It's alright, mummy," said The Girl smiling and hugging her dear mother tight. "Everything is ok now."

Later that night she would be strangled to death and her body dumped in the bushes behind the tennis court in the condominium where she lived.

Track 24 (Blue)

That night, there was only thing on Isaac's mind – karaoke. It wasn't so much the singing as it was The Girl. Her face haunted him day and night; it was all he could think about. He didn't eat and he barely slept. When he did, though, he dreamt of her.

By the time he got there, the place was packed; or at least the street was. Scores of small tribes – of different social and moral trends - argued their way to the front of the line; screaming over the top of another about rights and privilege. It was clear that none of them had any notion whatsoever of what it meant to have fun.

“Go on, let us in,” shouted one young man, and assuming the tentative role of negotiator. He staggered about, swimming against the currents of equilibrium, pointing a scholarly finger into the chest of The Bouncer; his face shaped like an I.E.D. “We just wanna get drunk,” he said. “Sing some songs, have a dance, have a laugh, and have a bit of fun. What's the harm in that?”

Behind him, his tribe had already broken out into a sloppy rendition of some radio-friendly rock song, swaying back and forth and chanting, as if their team had just scored a goal - all the wrong words.

“It's not gonna happen, guys,” said The Bouncer, polite but articulate in his body language. “This is not that kind of club.”

“No need to be like that,” said The Young Man.

He took a dollar out of his jeans pocket and pushed it into The Bouncer's face. “We just wanna spend some money,” he said, his good nature turning sour. He made it clear too that this was not a negotiation. “Look how many of us there are,” he said. “You gonna pass that up?”

He was less than subtle in his threat.

It was true, of them there were many. And they all looked as if they spent just as much time lifting heavy objects as they did standing in front of mirrors. The girls were handsome and the boys

were pretty and all their muscles were on show.

“Now be a smart lad,” said The Young Man, pushing that finger in The Bouncer’s face. “Let. Us. In.”

And without any warning whatsoever, The Young Man found himself being lifted off the ground by his friends having just lost his dignity and two front teeth.

“You fucking fascist,” screamed his girlfriend.

“Nazi,” screamed another.

The Young Man, though, said nothing; surprise had caught him well enough unaware. It wasn’t until they were around the corner that he managed to spit out enough blood to raise his own voice, but by that time another tribe had pushed its way to the front of the line and their demeanour was just as brash.

Men and women, boys and girls stewed on coke and booze, all of them with the confidence of a barking dog – cheering and smiling one minute, and then cursing and spitting the next.

Isaac stayed in the dark beneath a tree looking on. He didn’t like confrontation. He deplored violence of any kind. All that shouting and posturing - it made him feel eight years old again. And while his stomach and his head both made their case for him to turn around and go home, his heart waned, like some crowning sonata, as if it knew that on the other side of that danger waited the greatest treasure of all; Love.

Were this a movie, the sound of that violence would be lost to that of his beating heart. It, like a drum, would pound the fear and indecision out of his senses until all that was left was compassion and courage. Were it a movie, the song that she sang would be blaring through the cinema speakers as her spectacled face, like a hummingbird, fluttered before his eyes. Were it a movie, the cinemagoers would all be shouting, “Run after her, you stupid son of a bitch.” And they would all be holding hands, hoping to dear God that he did. Were this a movie, it would be now or never.

And so he took a deep breath and, he ignored the fact that he was on his own and most probably looking strange and awkward. Once he was inside, none of that would matter. And so he made

his way through the swarming tribes, ignoring their mocking and hateful derision – his heart bursting with force fields and laser beams all in the name of love.

“You,” said The Bouncer, gesturing with his finger.

A group of young men and women pushed forwards; of which the men were dressed in Viking furs with magnificently groomed beards, manicured fingernails, fantastic complexion, and ponytailed hair.

“Not you,” said The Bouncer. “Him.”

They all turned to Isaac who, unlike everyone else, looked as if he were dressed to snatch the Sunday paper from his neighbour’s verge.

“Him? What’s so special about him?”

The young Viking men twisted their moustaches while the women hitched up their linen shifts, mocking Isaac as he pushed his way through their malleable tribe.

“Ewww,” said one of the women; the one with the prettiest anklets. “Who’s gonna wanna get with a guy like that?”

“Alright then,” said The Bouncer, proposing a thought experiment. “If I let you in, what song would you sing?”

The three women in the tribe didn’t need any time to consider.

“Girls just wanna have fun!” they shouted, while behind them, like gorillas beating against their scarred and bloody chests, the Viking men continued to whisk their beards into tight and pretty little points; their threat doused in sheer elegance.

“Name that song,” said The Bouncer. “And I’ll let you in.”

In the background, it sounded as if a dolphin was giving birth.

“Song?”

They all laughed and scoffed at the sound they were hearing.

“Put her out of her misery.”

That was all The Bouncer needed to hear.

“Listen, I’m sure you’re all wonderful people when you’re sober, responsible, and have your shit together. But this here is not

your kind of club.”

He was ever so polite.

“That’s Yoko Ono,” said Isaac, finally pushing to the front. “We’re all Water, from the album *Some Time in New York City*. And that’s her vocal solo,” he said, in reference to the shrieks and wailing.

“Welcome back,” said The Bouncer, opening the front door.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” screamed a Viking Woman. “Look at him. I wouldn’t let him fuck me if his cum was liquid gold. And you’re gonna choose him over us? Did you even look at my boyfriend’s beard?”

“We take our karaoke seriously,” said The Bouncer.

“Fuck you,” screamed The Viking Woman. “Fuck you both. You fucking norms. Fucking fucks. Who do you think you are? Huh? Do you even know who I am?”

Obviously, she felt as if he should.

“Do you know who he was in his past life?” she said, pointing to her boyfriend – the one with the pointiest beard. “You have no idea who you’re talking to. Have you even heard of Ragnar? Huh? You ignorant cunt. Fucking Nazi.”

The men, meanwhile, merely twisted their beards.

“You’re not getting in,” said The Bouncer. “Do yourselves a favour; go home, have some water, and get some sleep.”

He didn’t need to punch anyone, everybody knew what he was capable of.

“Count yourself lucky,” said The Viking Woman. “If this was circa 786, you’d be dead by bow. This whole place would be fucking rubble. You’re a nobody – a fucking nothing,” she screamed, sickened by The Bouncer’s sheer cultural and historical ignorance. “Measly thrall!”

Her face was shaped like outrage.

“You think you’re cool? You don’t even know what cool is. I bet you can’t even grow a beard, can you? You don’t know cool. How could you? Cool is right here in front of you and you can’t even see it. You suck. You fucking suck.”

The more she screamed, the more fragile her voice became. Soon enough it got to the point where her boyfriend started to cry. Once he did, the whole tribe was in tears; shouting and weeping and consoling each other, in-between vile and often xenophobic taunts.

The Bend in the River, as it was called, was like a doorway to another dimension. Like a drawer full of odd socks, it was not for the faint of heart; neither was it a place for the cool or the fashionable.

Though he was by himself, in no way did Isaac feel alone. Everywhere he looked, he was greeted with smiles and salutes of one form or the other. Finally, Isaac had found his place; finally, he felt like he belonged.

“You, sir, have quite a set of pipes.”

It was The Man in the Chair, once again accompanied by his carer.

“I can’t say much about your dance moves but ah....then again,” he said, hinting to his twisted tiny limbs. “I can’t say much about dancing in general. But you gave it your all, and your people, they loved you.”

“My people?”

“This is your family now. This is home. And yes, we are your people and you are ours.”

“Hopefully tonight I can do better.”

“You’re here,” said The Man in the Chair. “That’s all that counts.”

There were at least a hundred people in the club, all of them darting like particles from one place to another, diffusing to the sound of the music until it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. Isaac strained to see through the smoke and strobes for one person in particular.

“Is she here?” he asked.

The Man in the Chair knew just who he meant.

“I have to see a fisherman about some crabs,” he said.

And then his carer wheeled him out the back.

Isaac rushed after him but two legs were no match for four wheels, a downward slope, and a sturdy push. When he caught up, he found himself in another world altogether.

Outside, the club took on a different vibe. It was less about music and more about sex, cocaine, and gambling with every square inch of space taken by a checkers board and a couple of plastic crates.

The lights were different too; they were dark and murky, making it look like they were at the bottom of a swimming pool; perfect for all the hugger-mugger.

“Hey, you can’t be here.”

Isaac was stopped by a lady sitting on one of the crates. She spread her legs and pushed one of her long red heels into his chest.

“I’m sorry,” said Isaac. “I was looking for someone.”

His nerves rattled about as he spoke. It might have been the stony look in her eyes or the fact that she wasn’t wearing any panties. Whatever it was, it left Isaac sounding as scared and out of place as he looked.

“Nothing personal,” she said. “It’s just your abled so....”

“Sorry?”

The Woman nodded her head backward, hinting to the table of disabled men, taking shots of tequila, doing lines of coke, and arguing over whether to place the pieces on the white or black squares. There was not an abled body about.

“I’m sorry to bother,” said Isaac.

He was awfully apologetic. His apologies were awful.

“It’s no bother,” said The Woman, her heel still firm in his chest. “You’re new here.”

“It’s my second night,” said Isaac.

“I thought so. You act new. You should try not to do that.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“There are no rules here, but there’s a flow. You come here often enough, you’ll get that flow. For now, you act new, and it kinds of weirds people out.”

“I’ll try to come more often,” said Isaac.

"You should. I heard you singing the other night."

"Yeah," said Isaac, a little shy.

"Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge," she rapped.
"You were good."

Isaac went red. This was different than the adulation he sought and seldom received from the academic world. This was a world all on its own; one that he was starting to make more and more sense the further he embedded himself. Adulation here was not about anyone discipline; choosing what to sing and when to sing it was just as important, if not more so than how he sang it.

"You're kind of weird," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Isaac.

"Stop apologising. That's a good thing."

Isaac smiled. As odd as this all was, he was starting to unwind. Normally he would feel strange, obtuse, and perpendicular in a place like this. Whenever he was in public, he always felt like a pointy tack in a room full of pretty balloons. For the first time, though, he felt as if his awkward demeanour was a ubiquitous trait; as common as standing upright - and nothing at all to get worked up or be all self-conscious about.

"You're cute," she said.

Bashfully, Isaac looked away from her eyes, only to fall between her open legs. It was then that he noticed the tattoo above her vagina; a symbol he hadn't seen since tenth-grade geometry class. She didn't find it rude that he was looking but she did think it was best to explain.

"I don't know if anyone told you or not, but I'm a superhero. And that," she said, turning her attention to the polygon above her vagina. "It's my bat symbol. Do you like it?"

She moved her hips so he could see better.

"Heptadecagon," she said.

She didn't give him time to count all the sides.

"I can see," said Isaac. "A little different to butterflies and rainbows."

"Like I said - superhero."

“Why a polygon?”

“Math,” she said. “I love it. It’s in everything. Take the Fibonacci sequence. All those beautiful patterns repeating in nature. Math is nature, nature is math. One point six one eight. Amazing,” she said. “Math.”

They both stared at the seventeen sided shape above her vagina.

“And yet all anyone will tell you is that math is stupid. It’s a waste of time. What’s it good for? You don’t use algebra or calculus in the real world. Fuck that,” she said. “And fuck them too.”

Isaac was well equipped but ill-prepared for this manner of discourse.

“I’m uh, I’m a scientist,” he said – sounding anything but.

She didn’t care; this wasn’t about him.

“In our culture,” she said, barely breaking her stride. “We build muscles and bodies. We know without a doubt that no pain means, no gain. It’s so god damn ingrained in us that every time we’re lifting heavy crap over our heads and it starts to pinch, tear, and hurt – we smile. We smile because pain means progress. Yet you teach some kid about flow dynamics and he’ll tell you his brain hurts and he’ll go study something that makes him feel good. Fucking pussy,” she said, taking a long drag of her cigarette.

“I think the argument is that rarely in life will you ever have to find the variant of ‘y’.”

“And how often will you have to squat your way out of a bank loan? It’s not about the exercise,” she said. “But what effect it has on the body and math – or algebra for that sake – is no different to a lunge or a squat. It’s not about whether you’ll use it or not in real life; it’s about how studying it moulds your brain.”

Isaac didn’t work out but he understood the analogy.

“What math teaches you,” she continued, “is that no matter how big a problem is, you can break it down into smaller pieces and write it out, just like a sentence - and you can solve that shit.”

The music was thumping in the background, what sounded like a dozen chainsaws and jackhammers being sung over the top

by just as many growling dogs. The constant cheering was almost a distraction.

“You don’t need to be emotional. You don’t need to have a panic attack. Just calm the fuck down, take a breath, and look for your constant. Hell, sometimes when I’m depressed I’ll do some calculus just to stop being such a Debbie Downer. Works like a charm. That’s what they should be handing out at pharmacies instead of Zoloft and Vicodin. Give em a problem instead of stupefying em with a solution.”

“Makes sense,” said Isaac. “I hadn’t thought of math that... practically.”

“And that’s what math teaches you – logic. It teaches you that every problem has a solution, and if it doesn’t, then count your lucky stars because you just stumbled on a paradox, and if that’s the case then folks are gonna be mentioning your name for the next hundred years.”

“That’s so true,” said Isaac, laughing. “I’m a scientist, I told you that right?”

She smiled like she didn’t care.

“I’m a superhero,” she said, spreading her legs as wide as she could. “And my pussy is a god damn abacus.”

They both laughed.

“Why a superhero?” he asked.

He wasn’t being rude, or at least he wasn’t trying to be. He looked in her eyes whenever she spoke and he stared praisingly at her vagina when it was clear that she wanted him too.

“I only fuck the retarded,” she said. “I use my pussy for good.”

The way she spoke, it was as if she donated marrow in her spare time.

“I’m pretty sure you can’t call them that anymore?”

“What?”

“Retards.”

“I didn’t call them retards,” she said. “That would be mean. I called them retarded; it’s different.”

“Pretty sure that’s the same thing.”

It wasn’t that he had any moral objection. It was more of a learned remonstrance; as if he were correcting her for conjecturing that Pluto was still a planet.

“Semantics has nuance,” she said. “It’s subtle. And political correctness is not. The adjective describes the state; the noun states. They are retarded, yes, that is the state of their minds and bodies and how they experience the world. And they are also wonderful human beings. One can be retarded and still be whoever the fuck they wanna be.”

“Just sounds wrong, is all.”

“What? Retarded? You think changing the name of a condition is gonna change the condition? Euphemisms make you feel better, not them. If anything, it sounds like you’ve been spending too much time talking about the retarded and not enough time talking to the retarded.”

“I suppose I’d never really looked at it that way.”

“How often have you ever looked at a retarded person except out of pity or some condescending pride? ‘Way to go champ!’ That type of patronizing bullshit. When was the last time you argued about misspent taxes or gun control in a bread queue with a retarded person? When was the last time you called a retarded person an idiot because his opinion was contrary to yours? When was the last time you spoke to a retarded person like you did to your neighbour? When was the last time you treated them like they were actually normal? Never? Of course never! The retarded are people too, you know? We don’t get to choose what body we’re born into or how fast our brains tick. It’s just genetics and pot fucking luck. Most people look at these fellas like they’re freaks; as if because they’re deformed or slow that they don’t have desires – the same fucking vices as everybody else. But that’s total bullshit. They’re no different to you or I. They love to get their balls cupped. They love to get their dicks sucked and their clits licked. They’re just like us. They love to cum. We all love to cum. Cumming is where happiness is kept when you’re an adult. Did you know that? Our lives are

so full of worry and misery that the only way to survive is to become a cynical piece of shit and bury that happiness deep down inside. And the only way you get it back, men and women, is when we cum; one brief explosion of pure happiness. Now you don't think they want to be happy? You don't think cumming feels good for them too? Of course, it does. Hey, Sugar Nuts," she said.

The man beside her – Sugar Nuts – had, aside from tumours and cysts, an enormous smile on his face, the kind reserved for dogs at the end of an evening run.

"Yeah?" he said, putting down his cards and taking a puff on his cigar.

He had all the swagger of a man four times his height.

"Do you enjoy your dick being sucked?"

Sugar Nuts gave two thumbs up.

"Sure do," he said with a snake-like lisp.

"And what about eating pussy? Do you like eating pussy?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "That's the best. Well. Everything's the best really. I also like billy carts and Raptors are my favourite dinosaur but T-Rex would kill them all."

"If you had to choose only one?"

"Oh, well that's a hard question."

"That's ok," she said. "I know which you prefer."

Sugar Nuts went red.

"You think this world is ever gonna give him a chance to be happy? Of course not. It's just the abled fucking the abled; the handsome jizzing on the pretty. Well, fuck that. Everyone deserves a bit of happiness, and they bloody well shouldn't have to pay for it from some back alley toothless whore whose pussy looks and tastes like a dirty old sock. Look at my mine," she said, this time really extending her hips. "Isn't that a wonderful looking pussy?"

Isaac didn't want to look, even though she wasn't presenting herself in any rude or inappropriate manner. At least that's not how it came across. She presented her vagina with the same showmanship as a magician might, his most compelling trick, one he had been mastering in privacy for years.

“Wow,” said Isaac – clearly marvelled. “It really is.”

She wasn’t wrong. If her vagina were a flower then all other flowers would come to be known as weeds. If it were a celestial object, it would be the centre of the universe.

“It’s the symmetry,” she said. “There’s none other like it. It’s the most amazing pussy in the world. I’m serious; I’m not just saying that. I have a document to prove it; signed by The Pope himself.”

She was right. Isaac could find no fault.

“I didn’t make this body,” she said. “I didn’t choose to be in it. But it’s a good one and I look after it. I could fuck anyone I want.”

“I’m sure you could.”

“Sex is about giving. Real sex anyway; the sex that gives me pleasure. I cum when they cum,” she said. “Every fucking time.”

“That’s damn right,” said Sugar Nuts, still with his two thumbs up.

“Listen,” said Isaac. “I’m looking for someone. You might know her. A girl. Late twenties maybe. Long black hair. Big goofy glasses. Real pretty face. She sang here the other night. The whole place went crazy. Then she just left. She’s supposed to be a regular or something – comes and goes all the time. Do you know her?”

“I’ve seen that face before. You’ve fallen hard for her, haven’t you?”

Isaac blushed.

“I know her. Relax. Everyone does. She puts a gypsy spell on people – not just the fellas either. There’s something about her. I can’t quite pin it.”

“Do you know her name?”

“We don’t ask each other that. There’s no need for names here.”

“What about Sugar Nuts?”

“Who, him?” she said, tugging on the man’s lapel. “That’s not so much a name as it is his most endearing quality.”

“I don’t get ya.”

Part of him didn't want to know; the other part of him really wanted to know.

"Hey Sugar Nuts," she shouted.

This time the whole courtyard turned.

"Show our new friend here why we call you that."

Sugar Nuts – the man in question – again put down his cards, this time face up, showing that not only had he left the game, but he had also won the pot. Then he put out his cigar and pulled down his pants."

"Holy shit," said Isaac.

"Impressive, right?"

His testicles were enormous - proportionately unfathomable. They didn't look deformed or grotesque in any way; quite the contrary, in fact. They were like two perfect spheres. They looked noble, reverent, and stoic. Isaac felt as if he were staring at some fifty-foot statue, carved into a mountainside in homage to some ancient Greek warrior. They looked bold and courageous; grandiose and majestic. And also, they were covered in flour.

"He sweats profusely," she said.

"Like a swimming pool," said Sugar Nuts. "And sometimes I gets dizzy and I fall over."

"Among other things, he has a symptom called Syncope. Unless he powders up those fantastic nuts, he'll sweat until his blood pressure drops and then he passes right out. Technically it's not sugar. Sounds better, though, than Flour Nuts or Doughnuts."

"I prefer Sugar Nuts," said Sugar Nuts.

"Of course you do," she said. "You can pull up your pants now if you like."

"I prefer them like this."

"Of course you do. You gonna sing us a song?"

"Hundred percent yeah, I am."

"What are you gonna sing?"

"Lemmy!" he shouted, racing around the courtyard as if we were riding a motorcycle out on some desert plain.

"Sugar Nuts here loves two things more than anything in

the world – more than eating pussy I reckon.”

Sugar Nuts blushed.

“What’s that?” asked Isaac.

“Playing poker and singing Ace of Spades”

“Is he any good?”

“What does that matter? It’s not about sounding good or playing a good hand.”

“What is it about?”

“Having a fucking good time.”

Then she closed her legs, lit a cigarette, blew a plume of smoke in Isaac’s face, and when it cleared, she was gone. Isaac stood there both aghast and amazed. One thing was certain; he would never think about a vagina or a retarded person that same way again.

Eventually went back into the club and bought himself a drink. He stood in the back of the room staring out over the tops of people’s heads, scanning left and right with his mouth agape like a damn carnival game. There were so many people though. The place was a tragedy waiting to burn to the ground; there was no way he would find her – not unless she found him.

“Hi,” she said.

It was her – The Girl.

Instantly, Isaac turned into a sack of panic. Excitement rippled through his body and quickly swelled into a tidal wave of fear and apprehension. He had a smile, yes, but it was a nervous smile as if she had just pulled a gun on him and he still hadn’t processed that he was going to die.

“Hi,” said Isaac, though it didn’t sound like a vowel either one of them had ever heard. He waved, too, which was odd, considering how close they were.

“Do you wanna be my partner?” she said.

All he heard was, “Do you want to marry me, and move in together, and fill our house with pot plants and potpourri, and buy a puppy and a kitten, and never get out of bed on Sundays, and have favourite TV shows, and give each other nicknames, and

always be holding hands, and then eventually have a baby – but better to have two, so they can be best friends and then we can live happily ever after.”

His head heard all that and his heart exploded.

“I do,” he said, staring into her big goofy glasses.

“It’s a duet,” said The Girl. “I figure it’ll be a tonne of fun. Whattaya say?”

He had already agreed to anything she could ever possibly want.

“Yeah, cool,” he said, sounding anything but.

“Finish your drink then,” said The Girl. “We’re up next.”

Then she dragged him towards the stage. The crowd was already cheering before they had even gotten on their feet. And by the time they had their microphones in hand, it was rapturous. But when the title of the song came up on the big screens, it was pure bedlam.

“You know it?” shouted The Girl.

“I don’t know,” said Isaac.

“It’s The Pogues,” she said. “You sing Shane’s parts and I sing Kirsty’s.”

“Ok,” said Isaac, feeling like a puppy that had just been picked.

Her smile was magnificent. It stripped him of his worry and shone far too bright for him to notice any of his insecurities. And when she took him by the hand, he almost died. Were this a movie, there would not be a dry eye in the house.

“Just have fun,” she said.

“Ok.”

And then the piano started playing and the whole crowd sang along.

Track 25 (Yellow)

“You want me to come in with you?”

Sitting in the car, Graham fought to muster the courage to go inside. They’d been parked there for half an hour already and the whole time he’d been wearing his sulky face. Sitting across from him, Mary shook her head in disbelief.

“I don’t need you to hold my hand,” he said. “I’m not a bloody child.”

Were he in a high chair, he would have hit his sippy cup to the floor by now.

“So what’s the hold-up then?” said Mary.

“Just give me a damn second.”

“Don’t get all snooty at me. I’m not the one moping around the house all the time complaining about their bum.”

“I’m going. I’m going. It’s just....”

For a grown man, he looked all of five years old.

“Are you scared?”

“What? Huh? What? Pfft. No, I’m not scared,” he said, trying to sound like an action hero.

“You do realize half the shit I have to do as a woman, right?”

There was no pretending in her voice.

“Fine,” said Graham, accepting his fate.

“You want me to come in?”

“No, it’s fine. You wait here. It won’t be long.”

“Just remember we have to be at the school at eleven-thirty.”

“I know, I know.”

It was a large clinic, full of all kinds of doctors solving all kinds of ailments. And the place was packed too. There were cars stacked up from here to Timbuctoo. To say it was playing on Graham’s mind would be an understatement. There were a few things in life he would have preferred to do without a few dozen nosy pokes peeking over his shoulder, and checking into a proctologist

was one of them.

“Hi, I have an appointment,” he said.

He looked around the room nervously, spying each person – it was an instinct he couldn’t control. He didn’t want to be here; not in the slightest. Who in their right mind would?

“Name?”

“Graham?”

“No, the doctor.”

There were only four doctors sharing the space. Their names were on giant bronze plaques on the wall. Two were nutritionists, one was a homeopath, and the last – his doctor – a proctologist. And he was the only man on the list. Graham did his best to whisper.

“Doctor Boyle,” he said.

“I’m sorry you’ll have to speak up,” said The Receptionist. She didn’t even try to read his lips.

“It’s...uh...”

All of a sudden it felt like he was buying pornography from a newsstand.

“Which doctor, sir?”

She said it in a tone that raised everyone’s attention.

“Doctor Boyle,” said Graham, again barely audible.

“Was that Doctor Boyle?” said The Receptionist.

Her voice could warn ships of rocky shores.

“That’s right,” said Graham.

“Just take a seat,” she said, smiling. “The doctor is going to be a few minutes late.”

“That’s fine,” said Graham, acting cool, as if he were here for a financial consult as opposed to a rectal examination.

The waiting room was full. There were kids running around unattended while their mothers flipped through a small forest’s worth of magazines. Though he loved his own, he had little patience for the offspring of others. He thought about tripping them as they ran past and then just settled on hoping that they would fall on their own which, in the end, was just the case.

No amount of chipped teeth and grazed knees, though, could distract him long enough from his own gigantic burden. He wished he was young enough to be able to bawl in tears and then be taken home and tucked into bed with his favourite teddy and a goodnight kiss.

“Excuse me,” he said, sounding calm but with a look of sheer terror on his face. “Will the doctor be long?”

He already had it set in his head; if it was more than three minutes, he’d leave. He’d make it sound like he was angry and that is was more of a burden for him to go but that the doctor had given him no option – on account of his lack of professionalism.

“It shouldn’t be long,” said The Receptionist.

She sounded so kind, it almost hurt to ask.

“Could you just ring and check? I really have a lot to do today and I can’t afford to be late. It’s not really fair on my clients if I’m passing on the effect of someone else’s tardiness.”

He hadn’t intended to sound mean, it’s just how it came out. It was true nonetheless, but what fault was that of the poor girl who was being nothing but kind?

“I’ll call now,” she said, still smiling, though in some ways it looked coerced.

Graham’s whole expression had changed. His face looked constrained as if he’d been holding onto a bowel movement to the point where had had barely a second to spare.

“I really am very busy,” he said.

That was when he saw the photo.

“Is that the doctor?” he asked in a whisper.

The Receptionist, still on the line, looked over her shoulder and nodded.

“Jesus Christ,” he thought. “Look at his hands.”

It was true. The Doctor’s hands were frightening. They were oil rigger’s hands. His fingers were long and thick and covered in burly knuckles. He could dig a swimming pool with his pinkie alone.

“I have to go,” said Graham, distraught.

He couldn’t even look at The Receptionist.

“But the doctor will be here in two minutes.”

He tried to stick to the plan. He tried to sound mean and hard done by.

“I have a thing,” he said, already half out the door. “My kid’s school. I can’t be waiting around all bloody day.”

And then he left, racing out the front door, past someone who may have been The Doctor, and he didn’t stop until he was strapped in his car seat with the engine running. He felt as though he had just stayed his own execution.

“That was quick.”

“Yeah?” said Graham, still huffing and puffing. “I guess it was.”

“So how was it?”

“Fine,” said Graham.

He didn’t mention anything and she didn’t ask. It was a respectful quiet on the way to the kids’ school; shameful on the part of Graham and loving for Mary.

“I’m proud of you,” she said.

“Thanks,” said Graham.

He knew if he said more, he’d give the truth away.

“Just eat more fibre,” he thought.

When they arrived at the school, they could hear all the kids on the other side of the wall screaming and carrying on. It could have just as easily been the scene of a terrorist attack or a slumber party massacre; such was the plight of their pointy little shrieks. They were having the time of their lives.

Every now and then one of them would fall or lose their shoe and then burst out into tears. But just as quickly they’d get distracted and would break out into a fit of demented laughter once more. And this continued over and over like some maniacal fractal with thousands of tears merging in and out of a kaleidoscope of taunts, jeers, and laughter.

It was then that they heard a laugh that sounded like his son, but in a way, they had never heard him laugh before. It was hard to explain. But it was as if they had turned around and caught their

shadows unaware - acting like totally somebody else.

"I'm gonna get you, Nathan," screamed one boy.

"You'll never get me," screamed the boy he was chasing.
"I've got invisible mode."

"Holy shit," said Graham. "It's him."

They stepped closer to the giant wall that separated the playground from the busy street. The whole school was like a fortress – kept shut by two giant iron gates.

Graham wedged his face into the small gap between the gate and the wall trying to peek into the playground so that he could see his son in his natural environment, unspoiled by the presence of his mother and father.

"Can you see him?" said Mary, pushing her way to the crack in the gate.

Graham wrenched his face this way and that but he couldn't make out a thing. The urge though was overwhelming. Hearing his son laughing the way he was, he just had to know: who was his son when he wasn't around?

"Can't see a thing," he said.

"Move," said Mary, pushing him out of the way. "You don't know how to do it right."

Were she any animal at all, it would definitely be an owl, what with the way that she twisted and spun about her head. The boy was laughing like they'd never heard him laugh before. He was speaking as if he were an entirely different child. All she wanted was just to see, if only for one second.

"Come on," said Graham. "We'll be late."

Nathan's teacher was already waiting by the time they got inside. She smiled the same way to adults as she did to children; it was hard to take her seriously – or honestly for that matter.

"Nathan is such a wonderful boy," she said.

They could both tell where this was going.

"He's so polite and sweet, and...."

Obviously, she was going somewhere dark.

"So here's the thing," said Miss Stevens. "I don't know what

to do with him.”

It was now that her face turned into its proper shape; a mix between an old kitchen sponge and a cancerous mole. Her posture, too, was different, as if she was squaring up to punch one of them in the jaw.

“So what’s the problem?” said Graham.

He had little patience for teachers, even though he was one.

“It’s several things actually. Since the start of the year, I have to say that Nathan has been quite unruly in class.”

“Unruly how?” said Mary.

She didn’t need to square up. She could break a jaw in her sleep.

“Well...”

Miss Stevens seemed unprepared.

“For starters,” she said. “He doesn’t sit still in class. His focus is terrible. This year we are focusing more on reading and activities instead of playing and Nathan is one of the only children who hasn’t made that transition. Hasn’t or is unwilling to. It’s making my job intolerable and it’s a distraction for the other students who are all putting in the effort to act more accordingly.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it?” said Miss Stevens shocked and perturbed.

“How old is Nathan?” said Mary.

“He’s seven.”

“Ok, so he’s a seven-year-old boy,” she said.

“Yes? And?”

“A seven-year-old....Boy.”

“Yes?”

“Of course he doesn’t sit still, he’s seven, and he’s a boy.”

“Well, some of the other children have...”

“Good for them,” said Mary. “Listen, I had to leave work early for this – we both did. So....”

“You know there are drugs he can take that will help him.”

“Drugs? Are you insane? He doesn’t need help.”

“Actually you’d be surprised,” said Miss Stevens. “They do

really well for the children's concentration. They stop their fidgeting and completely lose their interest in playing altogether. A lot of the other boys in class are already taking them. The difference is massive. And it makes my job so much easier."

"You're job? You're a first-grade teacher," said Mary, poking her with every word. "You're an overqualified baby sitter; that's it. They're children; they're not supposed to have focus. Stop trying to make seven-year-olds act forty and then bloody complain when a forty-year-old is acting seven. If the kids can't focus, maybe you should give more interesting classes. Don't blame their lack of attention on the fact that you can't teach."

"How dare you?"

"How dare I? You're trying to push drugs on my child."

"Mental support supplements."

"Jesus Christ. Graham, can you step in here?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we're not putting our kids on Ritalin. Don't be retarded."

As he spoke, Isabel was already racing down the hallway with her bag dragging behind her like a mangled twin. The smile on her face could have lit up a dozen cities for just as many years. Her eyes, too, were as wide as a hurricane; and she kicked up just as much dust as she ran towards her father beaming.

"What an awesome surprise," she said. "Did you know you were picking us up all along? Did you keep it a secret? Is today a secret day? Are there more surprises? Did you get us more toys?"

She ignored the wall of ice between her parents and The Teacher, instead bouncing around as if the air was made of trampolines and marshmallows. She could have said anything at this point. She could have described the innards of a sea slug or talked about how much her toes itched and it would still be as if he were seeing the ocean or the sun for the first time. The smile on Graham's face wasn't the kind that one could will on their own. It wasn't the kind one saw in photographs or when unwrapping unwanted gifts. This wasn't the kind of smile that one could practice; and even if they did, it wasn't the kind of smile that one would ever

get right. He was happy – that’s all.

“Missed you, darlin’,” he said.

“Missed you too, dad. Oh, guess what?”

Her face was shaped like an exclamation point.

“What?”

“Tomorrow I have my first ever test.”

“Wow,” said Graham. “Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“What kind of test is it?”

“It’s a history test”

“A history test?”

“Yep.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yep.”

“But shouldn’t that be a future test?”

Then they both burst out laughing.

“You’re the funniest, dad,” she said. “I love your jokes.”

“Thanks, darlin’,” he said. “Love you too. Now give us a second here to talk to your brother’s teacher. We’ll be done in a jiffy.”

Then he turned back to Miss Stevens, whose face shaped like a nightstick.

“There is the other matter,” she said.

“Oh yeah?” said Graham, half paying attention.

“Yes. It seems Nathan has been telling the other children that God doesn’t exist and that grown-ups made him up because they’re scared of the dark.”

Mary and Graham both sniggered.

“Yeah, I wanted to talk about that. I was going through one of Nathan’s books the other day and something stuck out.”

“Oh yeah?”

She had her arms pinned back like a rooster, ready to fight to the death.

“His book mentioned two points for the emergence of the universe. The first is fine – The Big Bang – though all signs point to the universe predating this event. That’s not the issue, though.”

“Oh, you have an issue?”

Again, her defences kicked in.

“This second point,” he said, handing her the paper that he had ripped out of the book and kept folded in his back pocket this whole week. “This bit here,” he said.

“Another theory is that God created the universe,” said Miss Stevens, reading it out loud. “Yes? And?”

Her defences dropped again as if this couldn’t possibly be an issue.

“That’s the issue,” said Graham. “This is a school, right?”

“Well yes,” said Miss Stevens.

“Good, well, God doesn’t belong in school.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Look, I’m not here to step on anyone’s toes. I’m a teacher too. It’s just... How do I explain this... Creationism is not a theory. Just because someone thought it and everyone is going along with it doesn’t make it a theory. Now, I’m not saying religion is bad.”

“Well, what are you saying?”

Her face was shaped like a crystal tear.

“Well...”

His pauses only made things worse.

“A school is no place for it. Don’t get me wrong. People can believe whatever they want. But a school, and especially a science class, is a place for facts – things we can measure, test, and prove right or wrong. Concepts of gods or lotus flowers are for churches and sweaty rec centres.”

“We’re not teaching the children religion; we are merely presenting a well-held belief that the universe was created by God.”

“Well, you see, there. Even here you wrote God with a capital ‘G’. As if you had one god specifically in mind. What about the other gods? What about all the other well-held beliefs of how the universe came into creation? Do you even know who Pangu is? Now if you had written, ‘a god’ it would be less specific, still not science, but at least generalising. But you wrote God with a capital ‘G’ which means you’re talking about the Christian God; am I

right?”

“But that’s what that means.”

“This is a school, not a church. If you can’t give me the math and physics, you shouldn’t be leading the conversation.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand you.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“You’re looking way too much into this. It’s just a line in a book. It’s doesn’t matter. You’re getting worked up over nothing.”

“It matters because he’s my son.”

“Fine then,” she said.

Her offence was as obvious as his.

“Thanks for taking the time to come in.”

She said it with a cold shit-eating grin. Then she stormed off, mouthing something about helicopter parents. When she returned, though, with her class, one would have been hard put to find a spot of bother on her face. She kissed the kids on the tops of their heads and waved to all the parents as if nothing could get under her skin.

“Mum, dad, yay!” shouted Nathan, grabbing them both by one leg each.

On the drive home, both kids fought over each other to describe their days. Isabel went first, confessing about a boy she liked and then about how a spider had fallen from the roof onto her best friend’s diary, and then about how loud everybody screamed. Nathan told the exact same story.

“What’s religion, dad?” asked Isabel.

Her face was shaped like a question mark.

“I heard you talking to Miss Stevens.”

“Remember that time we went to the cinema,” said Graham. “And that guy kept shouting out who did it all the way through the movie?”

“Yeah, he was annoying. He ruined the whole movie. And in the end, he was wrong about everything.”

“Yeah well, that’s religion.”

“Is that what you were talking to Miss Stevens about? About

annoying people?”

“Sort of. They were teaching things that kids don’t need to know about. And it has nothing to do with how the universe was made.”

“The Big Bang made the universe,” said Isabel.

“Well yes and no. For all, we know the universe may have existed before The Big Bang. “

“So how was the universe created then?”

“We don’t know. We haven’t discovered that yet. And that’s ok. It’s ok not to know what happened first the same way it’s ok not to know what’s gonna happen next. It takes a lot more courage to admit you don’t know something than it does to pretend you do. Plus, finding out is the best part.”

“Dad?”

“What’s up darlin’?”

“If I die, does that mean my life has no meaning?”

Graham stopped the car. He turned to his daughter. His heart swelled with pride. He’d never heard a nine-year-old ask such a question. It was as if he had caught his shadow acting like a different person.

“No, darlin’,” he said. “The fact that you die gives your life meaning.”

“Oh cool,” she said, sounding nine again.

Then Nathan screamed.

“I don’t wanna die!”

His face was shaped like a red and green wire.

“You’re not gonna die,” said Graham, consoling his son. “Never. You’re never gonna die. Your sister will – definitely.”

The girl smiled.

“But you; you’re gonna live forever!”

“Ok,” said Nathan, and that was that.

When they got home, all the kids wanted was cartoons and computer games, and all Mary wanted was to sit down in the shower and just soak for a few hours under hot water.

“Can’t believe they’re teaching them religion,” said Graham

while Mary hurriedly undressed.

“And?”

“What do you mean and? Isn’t that worrying enough?”

Mary stared down at her blouse; one side stuck out more than the other.

“I love that you get passionate about this sort of thing,” she said. “But does it really matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“But what about your son? Now her dad has gone and made a spectacle, how do you think she’s gonna feel at school? And her teacher? There’s still a whole semester to go. Imagine if some mother or father came storming into your office like that.”

“That’s different.”

“Of course. Because you’re bloody stubborn. You think you’re right about everything.”

“But I am right.”

“According to you. How do you know there isn’t a god? I mean, if every single generation of humans has thought it, don’t you think it could warrant some merit?”

“So you’re saying God created the universe.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Well, what are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is...”

Her right nipple was stinging, her head was pounding, and her legs felt like they were about to drop off at any second. Worse than that was the ache in her belly that wasn’t clear if it needed food or water.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I need a shower.”

She took a deep breath and exhaled – that alone said more than words ever could - then she took off her blouse and threw it at his feet. Her face was shaped like a Rubik’s Cube. She still had a twirling octopus attached to her left nipple. The right was red and swollen as if it had suffered enough for them both. They both stared at the octopus as its little arms swished back and forth.

“Don’t you fucking laugh,” said Mary.

She herself sounded as if she were on the verge of either laughter or tears.

“So what’s the deal? They couldn’t budge it?”

“No, Graham, they couldn’t.”

“But why? They got the other one-off.”

“Because I told them to stop.”

“But why?”

“Because it hurt, Graham. It hurts tearing an octopus from your tits.”

Graham fought back his laughter. He bit his cheeks and tried to be as serious as possible, thinking about the swishing octopus stuck on her nipple as a flesh wound or a benign tumour. The more he fought it, though, the worse of an actor he became.

“This was supposed to be for you, you know,” said Mary, the little octopus arms swishing as she stormed angrily into the shower.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m an ass. It’s just....”

“Just what?”

The angrier she got, the more the octopus swished.

“You have to admit it’s kind of funny.”

”Prick.”

Graham sat down on the toilet and Mary on the floor of the shower. Sweat dripped off his brow while steaming hot water poured off hers. They both stared listlessly – she at a crack in the door and he at a stain on the tiles on the floor. They stayed that way for some time.

Track 26 (Blue)

Isaac stood on the verge of a house in the middle of suburbia. For a second, he forgot who he was and instead imagined who he'd rather be. He imagined that this was just the end of another day and that he was coming home to the house that he built with the woman that he loved. He imagined for a second that he knew all of his neighbours' names and even nodded his head at the house across the street as if there was someone there to nod back. He admired the grass as if he himself had mown it and took a second to smell the roses as if it were the one thing he had never found the time to do.

"Hi."

The woman at the door caught him off guard.

"Isaac, right?"

She was beautiful. That his first thought. It was the kind of beauty, though, that garnered a regard instead of a wanton stare. He almost tripped as he tried to right himself, so unprepared, was he. Hers was the kind of beauty that made a man clumsy and fall head over heels.

"I..uh..."

He wished he was funny. He wished he was cool.

"Yeah," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Isaac."

Was he supposed to kiss her? Was he supposed to shake her hand?

"I'm Beth."

They both stood there awkwardly staring at one another; neither one knowing what to say next. Not even a polar bear could break this ice.

"I'm still not ready," she said.

You wouldn't think it, though. You'd be hard-pressed to find a single fault.

“Give me two minutes. You can come in if you like.”

Then she turned and darted up the stairs leaving the front door wide open. Isaac crept in, like a cat, overcome by curious wonder and at the same time, skittish about what might jump out.

“Wow,” he said, as he stepped into her living room.

It was enormous, and the warmth that spilled from it was enough to put all his nerves at ease. From the pictures and niknaks on the mantle to the ferns in the corners and the artwork gingerly spread across the walls, there wasn’t a single thing that hadn’t been placed without a considerable amount of care and purpose.

It looked like an actual home as opposed to where he lived which felt more like overnight accommodation. Nothing looked out of place. Not even her.

“One second,” shouted Beth from somewhere up the stairs.

Her profile said that she loved dogs and was captivated by smiles.

He wondered if she was a painter herself if most of this work was her own. Wouldn’t that be lovely, the two of them spending their Sunday afternoons painting sunsets and snow-capped mountains? The thought alone made him giddy inside.

And then his eyes fell on the handful of pictures that decorated the mantle.

“Oh shit,” he said to himself. “She’s a mum.”

She had a boy, maybe ten years old, and he was a spitting image of her. There wasn’t a single photo where the two of them weren’t smiling; both of them with adorable matching dimples.

“I’m coming,” she said, her voice faint and triste.

Her face, too, as she walked down the stairs said that she herself had not smiled in years. Her sadness wasn’t obvious, not at first anyway, but it wafted here or there, following her in the soft and quiet footsteps and from the tips of her fingers as she lightly brushed the banister. It lingered in the tips of her hair too; you could see it when she turned away from the light.

“I know you probably had plans,” she said. “But would you mind if we just stayed in instead? We can watch a movie and get a

pizza. I have some good wine if you like wine. I don't really drink myself but it's ok if you do."

She stood at the bottom of the stairs already dressed in a long knitted cardigan.

"That's ok," said Graham. "Bars are too noisy anyway."

"Would you like a drink?"

"Um, sure."

"It's ok," said Beth. "You can relax. You don't need to impress anyone."

She had a way about her, as if nothing at all mattered, but not in a destructive way – she looked and sounded how Vicodin felt. Any nerves that Isaac had, quickly receded.

"Your house is beautiful," he said.

He hoped she knew he was talking about her.

"Thank you," she said.

Because she did.

Though her house was beautiful, her kitchen sink was a godawful mess. Cups and plates were stacked on all sorts of angles, wedged into place and stopped from sliding off onto the floor by enough silverware to serve a small banquet; all of them filthy. The dirt and grime stuck out like boils and cysts on dried bumpy skin.

"There'll be a glass here somewhere," she said.

She rummaged around for some minutes opening and closing the same cupboard doors dozens of times before finally shoving her hand into a small crevice in the sink. Even if there was a glass beneath all that mess, there was no way it was coming out.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's not usually like this."

Her face was shaped like a faux pas.

"It's fine," said Isaac, trying his best to sound reassuring.

He wanted to hug her right then and there. He wanted to hold her until whatever sadness was boarded up inside of her was forced to let go. He wanted to whisk her up in his arms and, like the hero in his favourite stories, tell her that it would all be ok.

"We'll order something," she said, closing the fridge. "It's easier."

The rest of the house was immaculate. It looked and smelt as if a handful of maids had spent just as many days preparing it just for today; whereas the kitchen – with its blocked drains, grease-stained walls, and odour of spoiled milk, spoke, if anything, of a person who had long since given up.

“Sounds good,” said Isaac.

He didn’t look at her bloated sink in disgust – well not entirely anyway. More so, he was amazed at how much cutlery she had amassed. Were they dining at his apartment, they would have just as much struggle to find a cup or a plate quite simply for lack thereof.

“Do you smoke?” she asked.

She was already rolling a joint as she sat down on the sofa, carefully licking the paper as she curled her legs under her body and leaned over the armrest in a way that felt as if they’d known each other for years. It didn’t feel like a date at all.

“So what’s your story?” she asked.

Her eyes changed for a second as if she were breathing, like a diver trapped in a cave, from a pocket of air that belonged to a universe that she could not easily return to. She stayed there for a second in what looked like sheer bliss before opening her eyes and returning to his world.

“I dunno,” he said.

“So who are you?” she said.

She studied him as if he was a work of art, blowing thick plumes of smoke into the air as he squirmed in his seat, feigning casual and cool.

“I’m just a guy,” said Isaac, unsure how to answer the question. “I do research, I teach a bit. That’s kind of it. Oh yeah, that and I just started learning how to paint.”

“Do you like it?”

“The painting? I’m terrible. A baby could do better.”

“I didn’t ask if you were good at it. I asked if you liked it. Well? Do you?”

“I don’t know to tell you the truth.”

“You don’t know if you like it?”

“It stops me from thinking about things.”

“So it’s peaceful?”

“Hell no. It drives me crazy. I freak out about every little detail I get wrong. It looks so bloody simple when someone else is doing it then you try it yourself and Jesus.... Suppose it’d better to be all worked up over some silly painting than work or the future or....”

“Things that are out of your hands – out of your control.”

“You get that too?”

“Everybody’s a little fucked up,” she said, through a blanket of white smoke.

She passed the joint to Isaac who studied it as if it were some alien codec.

“Nobody ever died smoking weed,” she said. “Trust me. It’s ok.”

She was so comfortable, curled up as she was, on her corner of the sofa, slowly lighting her cigarette. Isaac didn’t smoke. He found the smell nauseating and the act absurd. Yet in her company, he felt almost compelled to light one up himself.

“Are you married?” she asked.

Even her questions were absurd.

“What? No. Why?”

“Just a question,” she said. “It’s just some people are. So what do you do then?”

Isaac was still tethered to the first question.

“For a living,” she reiterated. “You know? A job?”

“Yeah, sorry,” said Isaac.

He’d never smoked weed before. He wondered, obsessively, if he should tell her or if this was something that he should best keep to himself. He also wondered if she could tell. He wondered then if he looked and sounded silly, and then he wondered if he should sit upright or whether it would be better if he slouched. He wondered too if she loved LOVE as much as he did.

“Well?” she said, teasing him for an answer.

“I uh. I’m a research scientist. A scientist,” he said. “Neuro-

-scientist.”

He was struggling not only in forming sentences but in maintaining any consistent shape and structure to his thoughts. His mind felt like it was performing in microgravity. His thoughts swirled about in his head like specks of dust; the harder he tried to gather them, the more furious and disorderly they became. Beth, on the other hand, looked as if she was enjoying every second of his dizzying whirl.

“What about you?” he said.

“What are you researching?” asked Beth.

He had no idea how, to sum up, the extent of his work. He had, after all, only become aware that he had feet. And he could, for the first time in his life, feel what it was like to move nothing but his little toe.

“NDE,” he said, hoping that was enough to suffice.

His lungs felt like they were made out of collapsing sand. Every breath he took was heavy and laboured and seemed as if it might very well be his last.

“Do you have a girlfriend? You just broken up?”

“A girlfriend? No.”

He wondered in that second if he had emphasized the no too much. Did he make it sound like he didn’t want a girl? Did he make it sound like a girl could never possible want him? He wanted to be in a relationship more than anything else in the world. In fact, that was all he wanted. But he didn’t want her to know that. At least, he didn’t want it to be so obvious that she could easily tell. Then again, maybe she didn’t notice a thing.

“So why are you here?” she asked.

The answer to that question was LOVE yet for the life of him, he couldn’t string the words together. The truth was, hopefully, they would kiss and spend some time cuddling and then maybe fall asleep together in the middle of a movie, and then eventually live together and get married and have children and then sleep in on Sunday mornings. He wanted to tell her all that and that he loved her right then and there. “You have to have a story. Everyone

has a story. What are you looking for?”

“Oh you know,” he said, trying to sound as if nothing at all was much of a thrill. “Just meet some new people and ah...”

Halfway through, he could tell that he sounded like a novice. Worse still, though, he could tell that she could tell just by how she was staring at him. And so half way through, he just stopped talking altogether.

“So what’s NDE?” she said.

It was as if the drugs had no effect on her whatsoever. She swung the conversation back in the other direction without any bother or sign of discomfort. She hadn’t, not for one second, broken her Zen-like veneer. She didn’t look peaceful as much as she looked at peace; even at the height of Isaac’s discomfort. She took the awkward out of the silence and made it seem as if they had known each other for years. Such was her demeanour – in how she leaned over the edge of the sofa; in how she never broke eye contact, not even when the smoke from her cigarette clouded her eyes; and in how it seemed by the tone of her voice that she hadn’t judged him once this entire time and by all likelihood, she never would.

“Near-death experience,” he said. “But ah... We refer to it as NDE. It’s the phenomena of ethereal or otherworldly experiences in life-threatening scenarios.”

“I know what a near-death experience is. Just not the acronym.”

“Officially NDE is an initialism, not an acronym. But that’s a common mistake,” he said – followed by silence. “Sorry, that’s not important. My head gets like that sometimes. I say dumb shit and I...”

“Shhhh.”

She said it with a smile.

“You think too much.”

Isaac smiled. Her words were like a valve that undid all the pressure that built up inside his head. She didn’t even have to say anything. He could just look at her – in the way she looked at him -

and all his neurotic stupidity diffused into high entropic quiet and bliss.

“What do you think happens when we die?” she said.

For the first time, though, her voice sounded unsettled and unsure, and her stare was deeper and more profound as if she were looking through Isaac, at something on the other side of the room or just as easily, at something on the other side of the universe.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m an atheist, so...”

“You don’t believe in God?”

“Not really, no. I mean it kind of goes hand in hand with what I do.”

He could feel the ice cracking beneath his feet.

“But I understand why people do,” he said.

“And why is that?”

She didn’t at all make it clear which side she was on.

“Because death is frickin scary. And we’re aware of it so it’s comforting to believe that there’s somewhere to go or something to go to. It takes the edge off. It takes away the fear of something you can do nothing about.”

“Of things that are out of your control.”

“Exactly.”

“Like painting?”

“No that’s different.”

“Is it?”

“Of course. They’re two totally different things.”

“You paint to stop your anxiety, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“What are you anxious about?”

There were hundreds of reasons; the most prominent being – getting published, getting a girlfriend, one-day getting tenure, and most importantly, not having to die alone.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “And the day after that, and the day after that.”

“So if the painting helps, how is it any different to praying? Tomorrow is the little-death you have every day you’re alive. There

is no tomorrow. There is only ever today. And there is no death too.”

“That’s presumptuous. I don’t know I can be that certain about anything.”

“Do you think cats believe in God or is it just people?”

“I believe cats are conscious, just like plants and trees, but not conscious like we are. They may be as conscious and self-aware as a two-year-old.”

“Does a cat know it’s going to die?”

“I believe a cat knows that things can kill it, like a wolf or a semi-trailer. But I don’t think that a cat knows it will die, irrespective of however many threats it avoids. Children for that matter are no different. God is a grownup vice.”

“Well if that cat doesn’t know it’s gonna die because its consciousness is too small, what don’t WE know about that is just as serious as that? Is our consciousness small compared to something else out there? Is there an awareness or an understanding that we’re too infantile and unevolved to perceive?”

“That’s a good question. And that’s why we have science; to ask questions and to harshly prove every answer we think we’ve come across – with more questions.”

“What if the next serious thing is in fact, God?”

“Well, then it will have been science that brought us there.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Faith asks why whereas science asks how. If there was a god, it would be more interested in seeing a mathematical proof than grazed and bloody knees.”

“So that’s the point of your research, to prove that God doesn’t exist?”

“You’re missing the point,” said Isaac, barely holding onto his own point.

“Do you have faith?” she asked.

“I told you, I don’t believe in God.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“In your experiments, do you believe, outside of reason that you will get the result you are looking for?”

“We try not to look for results. As a scientist, you get whatever results are given. You ask a question, but you don’t ask a question hoping you will get a specific answer.”

“Surely you’ve crossed your fingers for something.”

“For getting published I suppose. But I don’t think that God is going to intervene divinely and have my submission accepted.”

“That’s not what I said. I asked if you had faith; if you believed, beyond all reason, that there was a chance you could get published even if you had no proof, and that, like a child, you hoped.”

His mind was befuddled by the listless sway of the drugs.

“I submit my article to the best of my ability and whether it does or does not get accepted is not weighed in any way by me ruminating over it.”

“Do you like movies?” she asked.

She could flip the discussion a thousand ways and still, she’d never be as dizzy as him. She hadn’t raised her voice once. And she hadn’t seemed disturbed, perturbed, or upset in any way by any of the answers he had given which gave Isaac no insight whatsoever into what she herself believed.

“Of course,” he said.

“When you watch a movie, do you criticize it because it would never happen like that in real life? Or do you forget the laws of physics and give yourself to the story, believe in the protagonist, and even take from it, a lesson for your own life? Isn’t that a kind of faith? To believe in something that may not be true for the sake of a better experience?”

“Movies are escaping reality, God is subjectifying it. There is nothing about a movie that is real. There are no endings in life. Nothing ever has a plot or a reason. Nothing is ever wrapped up or resolved. People die. Relationships end. And everything just goes on. That’s life. You watch a movie accepting that it has no bearings on life whatsoever because life is meaningless and inconsequential.

And sometimes bad things happen.”

“Life has no meaning at all?”

“If you pick one pillar from your youth, one defining moment where you’re moored to as a way of measuring who you are and how far you’ve come; I guarantee that every five years or so you change and because you change, so does your explanation of that life-changing event. The meaning of that event – the why – changes because you change. You’ll always see it in a light that contrasts against the person you think you are now. That meaning will change a hundred times in your lifetime; maybe even tenfold more. For that reason alone, if there are so many meanings to one event then the event itself is meaningless. Life is fantastic, but it has no meaning. That’s not a bad thing. It’s just what is. One day you’ll die and you’ll never know. That’s life. Unresolved.”

“Should I order the pizza? Are you hungry?”

He was famished.

“Let me just go upstairs for a second. I’ll call you up when I’m done.”

Then she got up and left. Isaac had absolutely no idea what she meant. He hoped it meant they were going to cuddle. On the other hand, what if she was in fact, only talking about ordering a pizza? Women, to him, were like a Russian novel; they were impossible to read. He wished she had a tail; at least with cats and dogs, he could tell if they were hungry, playful or mad.

“You can come up,” she said, her voice almost lifeless. “I’m ready.”

Still, he had no idea what she meant. As he walked towards the stairs he caught one more glance at the kitchen sink and his attention hanged there, much like the cups and plates, suspended by a feeling that something was wrong.

Hers was the first bedroom at the top of the stairs and she lay on her bed naked with the dim light only barely catching her prosaic expression. Either she had already ordered the pizza or there was never going to be any in the first place.

“Did you bring a condom?” she said. “If not it’s ok, just

don't cum inside."

She spoke as if she were ordering that pizza, making compromises here or there for what toppings and borders she wanted compared to what they had in the store. She didn't at all seem bothered or upset. In fact, she sounded as if she felt nothing at all. There was no joy in her whatsoever.

Isaac stood in the doorway looking at the room down the hall. The door was closed but it was covered from top to bottom in stickers and pictures of Transformers and dinosaurs that had been cut out of comic books and magazines – and the light was on inside.

Beside him, through the doorway, Beth lay lifeless, like a patient on an operating table, with the bedsheet barely covering the tips of her ankles.

"What are you waiting for?" she said. "Take your clothes off."

Isaac started to undress but he did so slowly. The way she lay on the bed and in how she spoke, it worried him. She didn't at all look like she wanted any of this to happen. She didn't smile. She didn't leer. She didn't play with herself or look like she was having any fun at all. She didn't look bored; she looked disconnected – disassociated from where they were, what they were about to do, and from her own self.

Isaac stood there naked unable to be aroused. It wasn't her body that was the problem. She was magnificent. Just as she was when she had first came down the stairs, she was stunning, beautiful, and without fault. It wasn't her naked body. Not so much as how her naked body lay – flat, inanimate, almost corpse-like.

"Hurry up," she said, for the first time showing unsteady nerve.

Still, Isaac stood there naked and flaccid, unsure what to say.

"Come here," she said. "I'll suck you off."

Her eyes looked impatient – full of glare.

Isaac walked slowly over to her side of the bed. The second he was about to Isaac walked slowly over to her side of the bed.

The second he was about to speak – and maybe even protest – she took him in her mouth, shutting her eyes as she did, masturbating him roughly in a bid to make him hard. And the whole time, her face was without any expression at all.

“Ok,” she said, lying back on the bed. “You can start.”

Again Isaac stared at her. She looked as if someone had placed her there and asked her not to move. She was lying on her stomach, her waist was hoisted into the air, and worst of all; her eyes were still clasped shut.

“I should go,” he said, already reaching for his clothes on the floor.

“What do you mean?”

She turned, her face shaped like an eviction notice.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t,” said Isaac. “I’m sorry. You’re beautiful, you are. It’s just...”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know. You don’t look like you’re into it.”

“What the hell am I supposed to look like? What do you even care?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t. I mean, your son...”

“My son?”

“The photos. I don’t know. I saw the table is set for two. There’s a kid’s plate and SpongeBob cup.”

Beth sat upright, her eyes lit up with scorching offense.

“What does that have to do with this?”

“I don’t know. It’s just weird.”

“What? I’m a mother so I can’t be a woman? Is that it?”

“No, it’s not that it’s just...”

“What?”

“Well, what if he comes home?”

“Oh fuck you,” she said, covering her body in the bedsheet.

“I’m sorry, it’s just I get neurotic. I saw the table and thought, what if he comes home?”

“He’s not coming home,” said Beth, her voice breaking for

the first time.

“I know but...”

“Shut up. For the love of God just stop speaking. Stop thinking. Stop being you for a second.”

“You’re right,” he said.

“Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Can we just do this then?”

And then she turned onto her belly again, shut her eyes, and hoisted her hips. Her face, though, was no longer ambivalent; it was scrunched up like a piece of paper. She looked mean and intolerant.

“What’s taking so long,” she said.

Isaac didn’t reply. He was frozen, separate from his body and incapable of moving a single muscle; he couldn’t even think. He didn’t have the words; not for her, not even for himself.

“You’re ruining this,” she said, her voice sounding strained and impatient yet at the same time, were he to snap out of it and start fucking her now, entirely forgiving.

Maybe a couple of seconds passed where nobody said a thing. Isaac was silently hoping some giant claw would come down out of the roof, sweep him up, and carry him off. And he could have been his own Deus Ex-Machina were he to have the fortitude and backbone to actually say that he wanted to leave.

Those couple of seconds felt like a couple of weeks.

“Ok, what is it now?” she said, standing up.

Isaac turned to the bedroom across the hall; and so did Beth.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” she said.

Isaac’s face was shaped like a wet paper bag.

“He won’t come home.”

“I know but...”

“You’re really gonna make me go there. Holy shit. You’re a fucking nightmare.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just...”

“He’s dead, ok? Dead. D.E.A-fucking-D. Dead. He’s not

coming home. There. Are you happy? Does that please your stupid neurotic head? Now, can we do this or what?"

"Jesus. Oh fuck me, I'm sorry."

Instantly the air spoiled, the mood turned bad. They both stood there naked but neither of them felt aroused nor even capable of arousal. They looked weird and uncomfortable.

"It's not your problem," said Beth.

"Do you wanna talk about it? I mean, are you ok?"

Were this a movie, he would sweep her into his arms as an orchestra built to a tear-jerking crescendo, and they would ride off into the sunset together on his horse with a thousand butterflies and hummingbirds fluttering around them.

"Am I ok? Do I look ok? Do I sound ok? No, I don't want to talk about it," she said. "I want to fuck. I want you to shut up and fuck me. I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to kiss you. I don't want to even look at you. I just want you to fuck me, ok? Can you do that? Huh? Can you fuck me?"

"What? You still want to have sex?"

"Jesus Christ, you're insufferable. I'm naked. I just sucked your dick. What do you think?"

"Yeah but, isn't it weird now?"

"Weird? Yes. You went and made it weird. But I'm ok with that. Are you ok with that?"

"I don't know?"

"Are you asking me?"

"I uh..."

"Listen, I thought you were up for this. I thought you were cool. Are you cool?"

Isaac was definitely not cool.

"Yeah," he said as he nervously shrugged his shoulders.

"Then what's your problem?"

Her face was shaped like a differential equation.

"Do you like sex?"

"Of course," said Isaac.

Though this was not the discussion he had ever imagined

having, were he to ever look back at his life, it probably made a great deal of sense that he was having it.

“And me?”

“Do you like sex?” he asked, a little unsure.

“No! Jesus. Me. Me. Do you like me? Do I turn you on?”

“Oh...”

And then, in that second, he forgot about the needling in his head and instead realised he was standing in front of a ridiculously beautiful woman who, like him, was naked and her body, in that second, he came to conclude was a wonder of dimension and geometry.

“Ok good,” she said, watching him becoming aroused.

And then just as she started to masturbate him – her eyes shut like before – that stupid feeling that he just couldn’t shake started working its way into the back of his head until it was the only thing he could think about was how wrong this was. And then just as quickly as he had become aroused, he went soft and flaccid in her hands.

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

“I’m sorry,” said Isaac. “I’m just thinking about your son.”

“Why?”

“I just think maybe you should talk to someone. You could talk to me.”

“I don’t wanna talk. I wanna fuck. This is my therapy.”

“But this isn’t healthy.”

“And this is? Making someone bring up shit that they’d rather forget? This is healthy? Who the fuck are you to judge?”

“I’m not judging.”

“That is literally what you’re doing. You’re making me feel like a piece of shit and you like some virtuous, noble, asshole.”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s not what I intended.”

“Yeah, but it’s what you did. Now, do you wanna fuck or not?”

“Yeah but...”

“Well then fuck me.”

“Not like this.”

“Like what?”

“Sex is supposed to be about passion and love and...”

“What the fuck are you on about?”

“It’s supposed to mean something.”

“Mean something? What are you sixteen? Who gives a fuck?”

“I do. You should too. Don’t you?”

“Who cares what it means to me? That’s my business. I sure as hell don’t care what it means to you. It’s sex. You said it yourself, the why doesn’t matter. It’s meaningless.”

“Like I said, it seemed like you weren’t into it. And that’s what made it feel...I don’t know...weird.”

“Not into it? I blew you for ten minutes. How is that not into it?”

“It felt wrong,” he said.

“Wrong how?”

“I don’t know. It’s just... It felt like I was taking advantage of you. I mean, you had your eyes shut. You just put your...you know...”

“My cunt?”

“Your vagina,” he corrected.

“Say it, Isaac.”

“Say what?”

“Cunt. Say it.”

“No.”

“Say it. Say cunt. Say it.”

“No. It’s vulgar.”

“My wet delicious cunt. Go on, say it. Tell me you wanna fuck my cunt. Tell me you wanna cum on my face. Say it. Fucking say it.”

Her face was shaped like a prized fighter.

“Look this is not what I had in mind.”

“What did you have in mind, Isaac? Huh? Tell me, what the fuck did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t know. So then you make me feel like a piece of shit because I do? Is that it? It’s sex, Isaac. It’s dirty and it’s fun. It’s not a Get Well card; it doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“I know that.”

“Do you? Do you really? Well, then why is neither of us having any fun?”

“It’s just...”

“It’s just what, Isaac?”

“Your vagina...in the air. It didn’t feel like I was about to have sex with someone who cared. It felt like....”

“Say it.”

He couldn’t.

“You think I’m a whore, right? So what; a guy can fuck for whatever reason but a woman can’t? Is that it? She can only fuck for love or she’s what? A slut? A whore? Easy? Dirty? Which is it?”

“That’s not what I said. You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“So what? You can put your cock in mine but I can’t put words in yours? You’re so full of shit, Isaac. You have no right to judge me. You’re here for the exact same reason except you want to fuck a Disney princess whereas I wanna get fucked by a real man.”

Her face was shaped like hazard lights.

“You have no idea what it’s like,” she said. “You haven’t the slightest idea of what I’ve gone through – of what I have to go through every single fucking day.”

“Then tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“What happened?”

“What happened? I don’t know what happened. That’s what fucking happened.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Yeah? Well, now you know how I feel. I don’t get it. I don’t get anything.”

“What happened to your boy?”

“I don’t fucking know. Nobody does. He went to school and he didn’t come home. That’s all I know. That’s all anyone can

fucking tell me. But have faith and pray. Have faith? What does that even mean?"

"Like you said; when you watch a movie, you need faith."

"Life is not a fucking movie, Isaac. There is no plot. Here's what life is. One day your son doesn't come home and nobody knows why or where he is or what happened. I have to live with that every day."

"I'm sorry," said Isaac.

"That's all anyone says. I'm sorry. That and, let go and you have to move on. There is no moving on. Do you know what it's like to not have an end to a story? Constantly obsessing over what could have happened and whether or not he's alive or dead or if he's hurt somewhere, crying and alone. It's fucking hell. My mind is hell. I'm stuck here. I can't move on."

They stood there for another minute, staring each other in the eyes. They both looked exhausted and defeated. Neither had another syllable left in them. They just stood there staring at each other, their naked bodies looking and feeling like soiled and tattered garments. It was a quiet minute.

"Look, we've all got our demons," said Beth. "And we all deal with those demons the best way we see fit. We all need something to distract us. You have your painting, right? It stops you thinking about the things that scare the shit out of you. It stops you thinking about the future. Yeah, well I have this. It stops me from thinking about the past. It stops me from thinking full stop. I need that."

Neither had ever been as naked as they were now. The tone, though, had changed. It was neither sexual nor awkward. If their naked bodies were a colour, it would be burnt umber; if they were a sound, it would be the silence that followed a landslide.

"You should go," said Beth.

There was no arguing that point.

"I'm sorry," said Isaac.

"Stop it."

"No, I mean it. I'm sorry things are the way they are. Life can be cruel and unfair."

“Is that it?”

“I’m sorry I made it worse,” said Isaac.

His face was shaped like a mirror.

“What is wrong with you?”

“I don’t know,” said Isaac.

“This was the only peace I had,” she said. “Now I don’t even have that. You’ve ruined this for me; you realise that?”

“I’m sorry,” said Isaac.

It was all he could say.

Track 27 (Yellow)

“Dad.”

The little boy was standing in the doorway quietly calling for help.

“Dad,” he said again, his face already turning a greyish blue.

He didn’t scream or shout or make any kind of fuss whatsoever. If he knew how serious it was he might have, but he didn’t, and so when he woke up choking for air, he calmly pulled himself out of bed and shuffled through the dark hallway to his daddy’s room and with the best of his efforts, he asked for help – he even forgot that he was afraid of the dark.

“Dad,” he said once more.

On the third Graham jumped out of bed, hearing his son wheezing and fighting for breath. It sounded like he was siphoning air through a pinhole. The young boy didn’t panic, though, and neither did his father.

“You’re ok, son,” he said as if the problem were a splinter or a knot in a shoelace that wouldn’t come undone. “Let’s go to the kitchen, shall we?”

His every instinct was to sprint as fast as he could, running with the boy in his arms or dragging him behind him. He knew, though, if he showed any sign of panic or worry, the boy would panic himself and quickly, the situation would spiral out of their capable hands. He had to pretend everything was fine even though it most certainly wasn’t.

“Grab a seat, buddy,” he said, his back to the boy, rummaging through the medicine cabinet for small vials of adrenaline.

He tried not to curse as his fingers stumbled about, eventually knocking over the box with the vials inside, letting two roll off the shelf and smash on the kitchen floor. Instead, he took slow and steady breaths - the opposite of his son - focusing only on what he had to do: crack the vial, extract the adrenaline, assemble the

nebuliser, and then rush to the dying boy.

“Breathe,” he shouted, finally his worry allowed be ordained.

He pushed the mask over the boy’s face and he cradled him in his arms. The young boy heaved as much as he could, gripping his father’s thumb with the entire of his hand and staring into his beaming eyes, like a sailor, clinging to his shipwrecked vessel as its battered and beaten and washed up on the shore.

“You’re fine, son,” said Graham, again sounding as if there had been a reason to worry.

The adrenaline worked quickly and in only a few sharp breaths, the boy’s throat started to open once more. Each breath was less dire and less severe until within a minute or so, still, with the mask over his face, peace returned to his eyes and the young boy quietly and quickly drifted back off to sleep.

“For fuck’s sake,” said Graham, looking at the clock. “Three eighteen again.”

He sat there for an hour with the boy in his arms, watching him as he slept. He hardly looked like he had been in a battle for his life. His little eyelids flickered and his little hand still gripped around his father’s thumb. His breathing, though, was normal and the colour had returned to his face.

“Hey,” said Mary, rubbing her eyes and yawning as she shuffled into the kitchen. “What are you doing up?”

It was then that she saw Nathan.

“I didn’t hear a fucking thing,” she said, rushing to the boy’s side, her eyes wide awake now, gently stroking her son’s long and messy hair. “I’m so sorry bubs,” she said, kissing the top of his head. “Was it bad?”

“No worse than the others,” said Graham.

“This is fucked,” she said. “I didn’t hear a thing. I only woke up cause of the light. I feel horrible.”

“It’s fine. He’s good now. It’s ok.”

“How long have you been here?”

“About an hour or so.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Jesus, Graham.”

“The worst of it was over in a minute.”

“How was he?”

“How is he ever? A bloody trooper.”

“He’s so strong. It’s not fair that he should have to go through this.”

“I know. It’s that thing, you know. There’s nobody you can punch. You just feel so bloody useless. A father is supposed to be able to protect his kids. And instead, all you can do is bloody pray.”

“I know what you mean,” said Mary. “I feel so guilty when he’s like this. I gave him this; my shitty DNA.”

“Our shitty DNA,” said Graham.

Track 28 (Red)

At nine o'clock both scientists were outside the administration building waiting for the commotion to die down before their meeting with The Rector. The fire burning in the payroll office was sending plumes of black smoke out the main entrance where the two men stood.

"So you think this is serious?" asked Isaac.

"Honestly, I have no idea anymore."

"I'm not in the right headspace for a lecture."

There were lots of little protests being staged all over the campus; classrooms being gutted, cars being turned upside down, and debates being met with scathing abuse. The worst protest of all, though, was happening in both of their heads.

"Late night?"

The last image Isaac had of Beth was of her face as he dressed and then slipped away – uncomfortably – out of the room. It was shaped like a broken vase, and his, though he could only imagine, like a cowardly white flag.

It didn't take much to see past his poorly finished façade. Were he a dog, his ears would be folded backward and his tail squared firmly between his legs. He wore shame like a feathered hat.

"Not really," he said.

That was a lie. He'd spent the whole night crying and painting; managing to fall asleep only just before sun up, and that alone was because he had run out of paint.

"I need to get away," said Graham.

"Sabbatical?"

"Whatever; paid, unpaid, I don't care. I just need to be somewhere else – not here."

"Where would you go? Mountains? The ocean? The snow?"

“Home,” said Graham. “I need to be home.”

“I know what you mean.”

“No, it’s not that,” said Graham. “I’m old.”

“You’re not old.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I am.”

“Ah, you’re only as old as you feel.”

Poor lad had no idea how close he was to a punch in the face.

“I feel older than I am,” said Graham.

“Really?”

“I’m halfway through a life,” he said. “And I’ve done fuck all with it.”

“Half-way, no. There’s folks no living into their late nineties and beyond. Hell, by the time you’re in your sixties and seventies, you’ll be able to update your cells with a pill.”

“I let myself go,” he said. “We all did. It’s what we do. Then, before you know it, you’re old, and it’s too late to change anything.”

“It’s never too late to change.”

“Look at me.”

He wobbled as he spoke – like poorly made jelly.

“You’re not too bad.”

“You know I remembered something the other day; from when Isabelle was a pup. Thing is, it wasn’t a memory of Isabelle crawling, it was what I was thinking when I should have been just watching her. I remembered a thought and the experience of having that thought, and not the experience of watching my girl discover life.”

“I don’t get ya.”

“How much of my life has been wasted thinking? How much did I miss out on because I was stupidly worrying about all the wrong things? That, you can’t change,” he said. “That, you can’t get back.”

The door behind them opened. A dozen clerical staff burst through the front doors screaming and crying.

“Hey fellas.”

Coming out of the building, too, was Ewen, a professor

of Microbiology. He carried a smile on his face that was as bright as the flames that crackled behind him and was just as smug as the tennis racket he held in one hand and the folder full of photocopied journal articles he held in the other.

“Did you hear?” he said as if everything he was about to say was bound to be gossip by the time he got round to saying it.

“Yeah I saw it,” said Graham.

The Girl’s murder had been on the front page of every newspaper and on the tips of every tongue. A veritable whodunit. Was it the mother whose star was about to fade? Was it the father whose abuse, in turn, would come into light? Or was it the older brother who had always longed to be in her shoes?

“Published again,” said Ewen.

He was already waving the article in the air.

“That’s six for the year,” he said. “But who’s counting?”

He carried that file everywhere he went; the file and the damn racket. He’d probably never seen a tennis ball before in his life. There was proper etiquette for putting up with professors like this; one that neither Isaac nor Graham had neither the will nor the patience to follow.

“Morning, Ewen,” said Graham, his words as vacuous as he could make them without being so obvious as to how he actually felt.

Some folks, though, were impervious to the truth.

“So how is the trial going?” he said, knowing damn well that all the rumours were true.

“It’s fine,” said Graham, when clearly it wasn’t.

“You know if you ever need help.”

“We’re fine.”

“Doesn’t have to be in the lab,” said Ewen, illiterate to hints. “Not sure if the word has gotten around yet, it probably has, but I’ve had my hands in a fair few posters. I’ve a real knack for positioning.”

That he did. He was an artist, one could say, at positioning himself near enough to the work of others to warrant – more often

out of pity – his name added onto a long list of others that had contributed in one way or another to scores of scientific papers. In neither, though, was his name worth any more than the ink it took to spell it.

“Or I can review your abstract if you like; you know, for grammar and whatnot.”

One of the windows above smashed open and glass rained down beside them.

“Good morning, lads.”

Both scientists looked up. Through the swirl of smoke, they could just make out The Rector’s sunny expression as his head hung out of his office window, suspended by a set of gloved hands.

“Come on up,” he said. “Watch your step on the second floor.”

As the two scientists walked inside, Ewen made one more grasp.

“Just give it some thought,” he said. “I’m the most published professor on campus – maybe even the state.”

Whatever Graham said next was lost under a calamitous bang that may or may not have been military-grade explosives. His face, though, was shaped like an expletive.

The building was a war zone, but then again, what university wasn’t.

“At least The Rector sounds chirpy,” he said as they reached the second floor. “Watch your feet.”

Two of the steps had been removed so that the two scientists had to hold onto the already wobbling railing and heave themselves upwards. This was no easy feat for a man of Graham stature despite his martial arts training.

“Just the men I wanted to see,” said The Rector.

His face was shaped like a birthday cake.

“Please, come in and take a seat...if you can find one.”

His office was, like the rest of the building, somewhat out of order. Most, if not all, of his academic memorabilia and plaques, had been thrown out the window along with close to all the

furniture. As for The Rector, he was hunched up in a corner with his wrists and ankles bound in electrical tape and a gag hanging loosely around his neck; for now at least.

“So,” he said. “Good news and bad news.”

Graham hated this game. Nowhere near as much thought ever went into the good news as went into the bad news. He pulled this card on his children all the time.

“Funding’s been cut?” he said.

“Aren’t you the negative Nelly?” said The Rector.

Beside him stood a group of masked youths, their faces covered in coloured scarves. Neither one moved a muscle while The Rector spoke.

“So the good news is, amongst other things, the university will be changing its admittance policies.”

“Ok?” said Graham.

One of the youths thumped The Rector as if to say, “Carry on.”

“It’s a changing world,” said The Rector. “One for the better I’d say.”

He looked around the room for validation but it wasn’t coming.

“That’s ok,” he said to himself. “Well, in these wonderful progressive times it has come to light that higher education, in general, has, for too long, adopted an unfair and exclusive practice – one articulated and inaugurated by rich white men.”

One of the youths coughed.

“Straight, rich white cisgender men” said The Rector correcting. “I thought I said that?”

He was reading from a script that was being held by one of the youths.

“So, to continue... The university has adopted an inclusive only stance and as such, we are looking to distance ourselves from a growing trend amongst other institutions - cognitive privilege.”

“Cognitive what?”

“Privilege,” said one of the masked youths.

"I.Q, like skin colour, like sex..."

"Like bone density," shouted one masked youth.

"Like bone density," said The Rector, correcting himself. "Is something one is born into and cannot correct through merit alone."

"Merit is abuse," shouted a masked youth.

"Excuse me," said The Rector, genuinely apologetic. "You see how important words are? Did I tell you I did an online course in neuro-linguistic program...?"

"Stick to the script."

"Yes, mam," he said. "I mean, sir. I mean..."

The Rector meant well, but he could never get to the point. There probably was no good or bad news; more than likely it was a bait and switch to talk about a new goldfish he had bought or some song lyric he had learned that he had thought was something else.

"Call zer ze," declared one masked youth.

"What?" said everyone else.

"Zes gender neutral pronoun is ze. Call zer ze."

"Who is zer?"

"Ze."

"Ze is zer or is zer ze? This is quite confusing," said The Rector. "Like learning how to knit. Which one is the object pronoun?"

"Zer is the oblique pronoun," said one of the masked youths, stupefied and enraged that he or she or ze should even have to explain. "As in, Ze is speaking with Zer. And that's oblique pronoun, not object."

"Yes, I remember," said The Rector. "People are not objects."

The masked youth stood staunch.

"Now I don't want to be a stick in the mud," said The Rector. "But what about adjectives then? I wouldn't often say my wife is a handsome looking gal. So are there gender-neutral adjectives too or should we avoid being gender descriptive altogether?"

The masked youth whipped his forehead.

"Read the script."

“Could I quickly use the bathroom?”

“No!”

“Okie dokie,” said The Rector. “So, uh, not to favour those not born with higher cognition, the university is adopting a new evaluation principle starting immediately.”

“Which is?” said Graham.

His face was shaped like the end of a rope.

“Well, instead of marking on comprehension, you will mark on effort. The same goes for university admissions.”

“So what does this mean?” asked Graham. “No grades?”

“Well....” said The Rector, tentatively.

“Everyone gets a diploma,” said the whole gang of masked youths.

The Rector smiled. It was an unsettling kind of smile. It looked forced. It looked rehearsed. It looked as if he were passing a kidney stone.

“It really is a great time for academia,” he said.

“What’s the good news?”

“Haha. Very funny.”

None of the masked youths agreed.

“Funding, right?”

“How long have I known you, Graham?”

“Is it the funding or not?”

“The Ethics Committee,” said The Rector.

“The kid was fine. Nobody got hurt. You were there. You all bloody-well saw.”

“It’s more than what happened to that poor girl, Graham.”

“Well, what then?”

“Diversity,” said one of the masked youths.

“What?”

“All your participants were white,” said The Rector.

“They were volunteers!”

“I know. I’m on your side.”

Again, The Rector was thumped.

“I can understand your side,” he corrected. “It’s just the

committee sees that not enough effort was done to promote the trial, per se, to black trans non-binary women – for example.”

“Fine,” said Graham. “Fuck it, whatever.”

“Don’t be like that, Graham. Positive words make positive change.”

“Fuck them and fuck this university.

“Graham!”

“No, fuck you too. Fuck these sensitive bitches and their brittle fucking spirits.”

Enraged, the masked youths broke out into song.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones,” they chanted. “But names demoralize me.”

“Listen to them,” shouted Graham, as if waking in the middle of a drunken bender. “How the hell did we let this happen?”

“I’ve been offended,” shouted a masked youth, falling backward onto the floor.

“I’m out,” said Graham. “I’ve had enough. This is not education.”

“Feelings matter,” said The Rector.

“They do,” said Graham. “But how I feel is my damn responsibility, no-one else’s. If you’re sad,” he said, pointing his finger at the gang of children. “Pick yourself up. If you’re uninspired, read a fucking book. Stop looking for offence and then choosing to be damn offended. It’s on you how you feel. You’re a grown-up, bloody well act like it. Nobody owes you a damn thing. Universities aren’t about safe spaces and inclusion; they’re about being courageous in the face of doubt and criticism. They’re about rigour and backbone, and standing up to peer review, not against it. Diversity is more than skin colour and how you fuck; it’s about cultivating a rich collective of diverging and opposing ideas for the sake of furthering knowledge; not some stand-alone virtuous ideal. What good is diversity if everyone thinks the bloody same?”

Their chanting continued; “Sticks and stones may break my bones but...”

But this time their faces were saturated in tears and most, if

not all, looked as if what they needed most of all were their mummies.

“I quit,” said Graham. “I’m done.”

And he stormed out.

Isaac followed him, unsure really if it meant that he had quit himself.

“What are you gonna do?” he said, barely keeping up.

For a man of generous girth, Graham moved like a gymnast.

“I’m going home,” he said. “I’m going home.”

Isaac watched Graham as cleared out his desk, looking at years of research despondingly as if they were all the wrong thoughts he had spent all his best years worrying about. What he could, he tore to shreds, and the rest he just piled up in bags to throw in the trash.

“So this is it?” said Isaac.

He sounded young, hopeless, and scared.

“I guess so,” said Graham.

Whereas he sounded as if he had no idea.

Carrying what mattered – which was very little – Graham stopped at The Professor’s office and lightly tapped on his door. The Professor was sitting in his chair, lost in thought it would seem, admiring his favourite colour.

“Funding’s been cut,” said Graham.

“I heard,” said The Professor. “Quite unfortunate.”

“Yep,” said Graham. “That pretty much sums it up alright – unfortunate.”

“So is this a farewell?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“It was excellent to do science with you.”

“Just wish it had worked out better. But yeah, thanks for your help.”

“It was all my pleasure,” said The Professor, turning a small glittering pink crown – a pageant crown - round and round in his bony little hands. “Do not go quietly into that good night,” he exalted, in his boisterous yet venerate way as the two men shuffled

woefully out of the building.

Track 29 (Yellow)

“So why again are we doing this?” asked Mary.

They were a world away from suburbia, driving in circles through an industrial estate where, on one side of the road, a pack of dogs cavorted, driven mad by the smell of a bitch in heat, while on the other, a chorus line of prostitutes, all of them with neon faces, lifted their skirts and dazzled the drunks on the sidewalk and the taxis and trucks that drove by.

“We’re creating memories,” said Graham.

“And what sort of memories, exactly, are we trying to create? You do see the guy shitting in a bucket, right?”

They had been stopped at a red light for maybe a minute or so but with all that was going on around them, it felt indecently longer. The afternoon sun and the broken air conditioner only made things worse.

“That’s gross,” shouted Isabel, leaning over her brother to see a little better.

“Hey, stop stepping on me.”

“I’m not stepping on you.”

“Yes, you are. You just stepped on my hand.”

“Did not.”

“Did too. Dad, Isabel’s hurting me.”

“Isabel, don’t hurt your brother.”

“I didn’t.”

“Ok, well, Nathan, don’t lie.”

“I didn’t. She did.”

“I did not.”

“Well, one of you did.”

“I did nothing,” shouted Isabel.

“You stepped on my hand.”

“Ugh! I was just trying to see; gawd.”

“See? No, kids, don’t look,” shouted Mary desperately. “Shut

your eyes.”

She, herself, was aghast at the site; so much so that she couldn't look anywhere else – no-one could for that matter. There, on the grassy knoll neath the overpass, squatted an uncouth bearded vagabond, defecating into a yellow plastic bucket.

“He's waving,” said Nathan.

“Well don't wave back!”

“Too late,” said Isabel.

The two kids were glued to their window, waving to the man who, as if ignoring the laws of physics, hovered over the little bucket and, with both hands waved back; the smile on his face honest and endearing despite all the missing teeth.

“This is not what I thought you had in mind when you said to go on a little drive.”

“How was I supposed to know? It's not like they mark out whores on the bloody map. We're nearly there anyway.”

“Jesus, Graham. Where is there?”

“It's a surprise.”

“I can see. And we're all quite surprised.”

“You'll see when we get there. Trust me.”

“All I see are carpet stores and warehouses. That and well... you know.”

“Trust me,” said Graham.

“Yep, you said that already. Anything worth saying need only be said once.”

“And what does that mean?”

“Nothing. It's just an expression.”

“Did I do something?” asked Graham.

He half felt that he had so he was only partly enraged.

“Why do you say that?” said Mary. “Are you feeling guilty about something?”

“What? No.”

“You always respond with ‘what’ when you don't have an answer. And you don't have an answer because you're guilty of something and you've just been found out, and you haven't had

time to think up a lie or an excuse.”

“What?”

“See?”

“You’re insane,” shouted Graham. “I haven’t done anything. I’ve got nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Well good then.”

“What do you mean good?”

“I mean just that – good.”

“Well do you believe me?”

“Should I?”

“Of course you should,” he said before looking lost and confused. “Do you?”

“Graham.”

“What?”

His face was shaped like a baby turtle.

“I love you,” she said. “I was just playing with you. Of course, I trust you. I’m still here aren’t I?”

“You suck.”

“I know,” she said, smiling subversively. “Now, for the love of God, can you please tell me where we’re going because if I have to see one more...”

“There,” said Graham, pointing to a giant lot of storage sheds. “We’re here.”

Then he pulled into the first parking spot he could find. His fingers jittered with felicitous nerves whereas Mary’s were constrained, gripped by fear and apprehension.

“What is it?” she said.

There were fifteen or so garage doors, all of them graffitied and kicked in except one; its door was bent and twisted sure, but unlike the others, it was open and though light poured in, it did little to illuminate whatever was inside.

“Video library,” said Graham.

“A video library? That’s it? That’s what we’ve been driving around for all morning? A video library? I didn’t even know they were a thing anymore.”

“They’re not,” said Graham. “That’s what makes this place so special. It’s the only one.”

“I’m bored,” said Isabel.

“Me too,” said Nathan.

“There isn’t anything to do here. Can we go home?”

“What are you on about?” said Graham, pleading – already knowing he had lost. “We haven’t even gone in yet.”

“I know, but this place is boring.”

“I wanna go home too,” said Nathan. “I wanna play computer games.”

“Oh come on guys. You haven’t even given it a chance.”

“Just did,” said Isabel. “It’s boring. I’m bored. Let’s go.”

They were barely a foot outside the car and already both children were entrenched in their positions and unlikely and unwilling to be swayed either way.

“I don’t care if you want to go in or not,” said Graham, asserting himself. “We’re going in and you’re going to enjoy it.”

“If they don’t want to go in, Graham....”

It was clear he had no authority.

“Alright fuck it,” he said. “We’ll get ice-cream on the way back.”

“Yay,” said Isabel. “Actually I always wanted to know what a video library looked like inside and now we get to go inside one – it’s like a paradox.”

Then she ran in with her brother, disappearing in the darkness. Graham and Mary followed but with a great deal more hesitation.

“What’s that smell?” said Mary.

There was a funk. It was hard to pin down. It was as musky as it was sweet; as if a leaky sewage pipe had been blocked up with a clump of potpourri.

“That’s the nineties,” said Graham, strolling through the store.

The shed was packed with racks that were stacked from floor to roof. There were DVDs on one side, VHS on the other; and

crate loads of CDs and vinyls piled up in the corners. There was even a towering glass cabinet, like some holy monument, in the middle of the way and stacked from top to bottom and on all sides with small rectangular cassettes.

Graham stopped at every rack and ran his hand along every cover, mumbling the names out loud with a sense of urgency, as if he only had minutes to find a title before it was time to go home.

“We used to go to the video library every Friday, just before then news came on.”

His face was shaped like a gramophone.

“We’d always be in a rush,” he said. “Dad would always be tapping at his watch or just blatantly yelling at us to hurry up and choose. But the video library on a Friday was better than any other day. Dad would always choose two new releases and he left us to pick out the weeklies.”

“You know all these movies are online, right?”

“It’s not about the movies,” said Graham.

He held the cassettes in his hands as if they were scripture.

“Ohhh-k.”

“No, it’s more than that,” he said. “It’s the experience. It’s entering this world where you’re surrounded by adventure and action, and suspense and horror and....”

“I get it,” said Mary.

“You do?”

“Yeah. You’re turning forty-five. You’re feeling old. You want to reminisce on your youth. This and the karate. It makes sense...”

“What, you think I’m having a midlife crisis?”

“It’s fine, Graham. Everyone does. At the very least I should be thankful you didn’t buy a motorcycle.”

“It’s not that. I’m not having a bloody midlife crisis.”

“It’s ok if you are. Just promise me you’re not gonna try and pick up a twenty-year-old student.”

“Really? You think I’d cheat on you?”

“I didn’t say you’d be successful.”

“You’re fucked. I’m trying to be serious here and you’re

being a jerk as usual.”

“That’s the thing, Graham; you’re always being so damn serious. You need to lighten up more. It’s only life. Not to mention you’re already halfway through so...you know...be a glass half full guy.”

“You know when dad was my age he’d already paid off his mortgage, he had his boat, and – I don’t know – he knew what he was doing.”

“And you don’t?”

“No, I don’t. I’m renting a house I can barely afford, I don’t have a penny saved – let alone anything set aside for retirement. Don’t even get me started on the kids. I can’t afford medical or dentist, let alone school material and trips and new shoes, and what the hell are we gonna do when it comes time for university? Hell, I can barely keep the fridge filled. I’m scared to death about everything all the time. I think about them having accidents and I freak out. Then I think, ‘What if I have an accident?’ What if I die in a plane crash? What will they do without a father?”

“When are you ever in a plane?”

“That’s not the point,” he said, almost crying in frustration. “I can’t get any sleep at night. I’ve been having these panic attacks constantly.”

“About the kids?”

“About everything. Then I wonder if I’m being too strict with the kids or not strict enough and whether I should be giving them more or less attention.”

“Why would anyone want to give their children less attention?”

“Well, that’s the thing. Validation is everything, right? It’s what pushes us to strive to do more than we are capable of. It’s what makes humans do great things. Trying to get their father’s attention. And by all accounts, he should never give it.”

“That seems cold.”

“I’m not saying I’m gonna stop giving the kids attention. What I’m saying is, if every time the kids do something average I

give them high fives and cartwheels, they'll never strive to be better, so they'll never get anywhere near their potential."

"Ok. But they will be happy."

"Anyone can be happy, Mary. I want our kids to be great. They have to be better than us. They have to be smarter, more emotionally centred, more courageous, and bolder. They need to take more risk and be better than us. They need to be better people to be a part of a better world."

"It's ok to be average too, Graham. I'd rather be average and happy than pushing a rock up a hill all day to prove some stupid philosophical point."

"Aren't you scared of dying?"

"No, Graham, I'm not."

"It's all I've been thinking about. I mean, you said it. The race is halfway over. I haven't even tied my bloody shoelaces. It's like I just blinked and all of a sudden I'm old. Our youth is gone, you realize that?"

"Yes, Graham. I realize."

"We're never gonna get it back. Everything is slipping through our hands. And none of it we can get back. The kids are getting older. I can't remember what either of them was like when they were babies."

"That's normal."

"I can't remember what they were like a week ago. They're constantly changing, becoming new versions of themselves. We should be grieving more."

"Grieving? That's a little melodramatic don't you think?"

"One day I'm not going to exist."

"Yes, Graham, it's called death, it happens to everyone."

"One day you're not going to exist."

"Jesus, can we talk about something else?"

"Think of all the people who have ever lived and died. All of them had a sense of meaning and importance. All of them existed. But now none of them are thought of. Not one of them matter. And you don't even have to go back far. Just two generations

and you slip into the void.”

“Should I be calling someone, Graham?”

“I have to get published,” he said. “I have to do something that matters.”

“Being a great father is not enough?”

“Pedro’s dad arrests bad guys.”

“Who the fuck is Pedro?”

“Some kid in Nathan’s class.”

“And?”

“The kids don’t want to be scientists; they want to be cops and pilots. They wanna be cool like the other dads. All the other dads are heroes while theirs is just....”

“Their father. And yes, their hero too. I’m glad you’re not out there trying to catch bad guys. I don’t want to be getting a phone call in the dead of night. Fuck Pedro’s dad. You’re a good father. No, you’re a great father. And that’s all that matters. Sure, one day we will be dead and nobody will have ever known that we existed. That, if anything, is why we should just have the time of our lives every day, right now, together. Everything that matters is right here, right in front of us.”

“You’re right.”

“Of course I’m bloody right. I’m always right. That’s why you love me.”

“Let’s go?”

“Go? We’re here; we may as well get a few movies. Besides, you’re right, it’s kind of neat. It’s like being in a time machine.”

That was when she saw it.

“Holy crappers,” she said, grabbing the video. “Video-drome.”

“Haven’t seen that in donkey’s years. I told you this place was good.”

“Alright, as long as we’re getting all nostalgic here,” said Mary. “How about we get some tequila, some Type O Negative, and make a night of it like the old days?”

Her face was shaped like cotton candy.

“Done,” said Graham. “I’ll stop by the bottle shop after Wu-Shin.”

“You’re doing karate tonight?”

“I have to. I can’t miss it.”

“I don’t want you to – just to know. You remember the last time we drank tequila?”

“Yeah,” said Graham.

Both of them stared at their son.

“You really want another baby?”

“I don’t know,” said Mary. “I don’t know what I want anymore. I mean, look at him.”

Nathan was pretending he could fly, flapping his imaginary wings, which to him were the span of a dozen jumbo jets, and practicing flybys on racks of cassette tapes, pretending they were air traffic control towers; but unlike in the movies, he crashed into everyone.

“Pretty soon he’ll be in a car doing the same thing.”

“God help his passenger.”

“But that’s the thing; he won’t be a passenger in ours anymore. And I miss that.”

“But he hasn’t grown up yet.”

“I know,” said Mary. “But he is and he will, and I already miss him. I already miss me.”

“You’re you. Nothing’s changed and nothing will.”

“They grew inside me, Graham. I gave birth to them. Now every day they need me a little less and every day I need them a little more. I have no idea how to be me anymore – without them. I don’t remember who I was before them and it scares me thinking who I’ll be without them.”

“So you want another baby?”

“No,” she said. “Are you not listening?”

“So you don’t want another baby?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you want a baby?”

“Forget it,” she said.

“No, I’m serious. I wanna have this discussion.”

“There’s nothing to discuss. It’s just a stupid feeling.”

“No feelings are stupid,” said Graham, ignoring the danger.

“Ha!” shouted Mary almost falling back into a shelf herself.

“Oh you were serious?” she said. “Yeah, of course, all feelings matter. I didn’t know you had gone new age, that’s all.”

“Fine, fuck it,” said Graham.

“Oh, I’m sorry, bubbly.”

“No, it’s fine,” sounding as if it was most certainly not fine.

“I don’t care. I was just trying to be supportive. To be an open ear.”

Mary had to hold herself back from laughing again. Some jokes were not meant to be funny. She could see on his face that his sincerity was cut from a fairly fine cloth and were she to edge this any further, in a second he would either hit something or cry.

“I prefer you how you are, Graham. I don’t want someone who understands me. Where would be the fun in that?”

Then, from the darkness came Isabel, walking on her hands and looking, as if at any second, she might go tumbling into the giant racks.

“I know what I want for my birthday,” she said, her upside-down smile still looking like a smile.

“Your birthday is not for another eight months,” said Graham.

“I know, but I know what I want.”

The girl righted herself, collapsing on the ground as she did, and laughing as she struggled to pick herself up off the floor. Graham offered a hand but she wouldn’t hear of it. Instead, she used this as a chance to show a trick she learned at school – getting off the ground with no hands.

“Hold on,” she said, after the seventeenth attempt. “This one will definitely be the one.”

“Ok, what is it?” said Graham. “What do you want for your birthday? A cell phone? A unicorn?”

“Nope. That was last year. I don’t want those anymore. Besides, Pegasus is better than a unicorn.”

“Ok, so what do you want now?”

“I want to be on America’s Got Talent.”

She danced manically as she spoke.

“I saw this girl yesterday, and she could tell a whole story, and she did it all in sand.”

“What do you mean? Like a ‘once upon a time’ story?”

“Yep. And she did it in the sand. It was awesome,” she said, still swinging her arms with enough vigour to light up a small city.

“I can write my name in the sand,” said Graham.

“You’re not funny, dad,” she said, still dancing.

“So what would you do, then? What would be your talent?”

“Probably handstands. I’d have to practice a lot though. Or I could do The Floss. I’m not the best at my school, but I’m pretty good. I bet if I was on TV I’d be better, though.”

“That you would. I can help you if you like. I can try to do them with you.”

“No way; dad. You’re too fat. You’ll hurt yourself. You’re too old to do handstands. That’s kids’ stuff. But you can watch me to make sure my legs don’t touch the wall. You can be like my coach.”

“Deal,” said Graham.

Isabel was ecstatic. Her face was shaped like a wildfire.

“Seriously though,” she said. “Imagine if I was on that show. I’m kind of nervous just thinking about it.”

“You’re doing fine,” said Mary, patting Graham’s back and whispering in his ear.

“And when I’m older I want a pet horse. We don’t have to keep him in our house. That would be silly,” said Isabel, laughing at the obvious absurdity. “We wouldn’t have the room. But we can keep it in a stable. My friend at school. Well, she’s not my friend friend. But she’s like my friend. She’s two years older and she waved to me once. She has a horse and she keeps it in a stable and its name is Cinnamon but if I had a horse I’d call it Kitty, cause I think it’d be funny having a horse that’s named after a cat and we could ride it to the....”

“Crashing plane coming through,” screamed Nathan. “Ahhh.

Everyone on board is gonna die. Engine's on fire. We're all gonna die. We're all gonna die."

And for a second there, all of Graham's fears and insecurities fell by the wayside. So too did the calamitous howling that normally accompanied them. He felt unhinged; not in a volatile manner, but divorced from the things that made him feel that way - so much so that he even managed a smile. He no longer felt as if tomorrow and the day after were urgencies that had to be thought about and resolved today.

"You were right," he said.

"I know," said Mary. "About what?"

"Everything."

"Ok, so....."

"Let's get some ice cream and go home."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I mean, how would we even watch them?"

And for that second, as he looked in her eyes, he felt like a kid ditching school to spend the afternoon with the girl he loved.

"Best day ever," screamed Isabel as she ran out of the shed and into the car.

"At least someone enjoyed themselves."

"I love ya," said Mary. "You just need to stop trying too hard."

"I know," said Graham.

He held her hand as they walked towards the door and it reminded him of how they used to hold hands when they were young - walking through the mall, on the way to the cinema, and back and forth in parks and on the beach. They were just as much in love now as they had been then it just took a bit of an effort for either of them to remember. Even their smile was shy and nervous as if one of them had been conspiring to kiss the other this whole time - and the other hoped it would happen.

"Best day ever," said Graham.

"Yep."

"We didn't really accomplish much but..."

“Who cares? Not everything has to be something to mean something.”

“I know. You’re right.”

“Of course I am,” said Mary.

She seemed proud of herself, and why shouldn’t she? Neither of them had felt this calm in years. Life, in all its complexity, had never felt so simple.

“I love you,” he said.

“I know,” said Mary as if there was nothing to prove.

“No, I mean it. I know I’ve been all over the place of late.”

“Neurotic? Whiney? Annoying?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I could go on if you like.”

“Look...Fuck...What I’m tryna say is....”

She found it adorable when he got frustrated, if only because it showed how much he cared. The words he used, no matter how gallant and impassioned, would never mean as much as the effort it took him to string them together. Behind every umm and ahhh, and neath all the frustrated stuttering was the vulnerability that he was courageous enough to let her see.

“I know,” she said as if a single stutter could paint a thousand words. “And the kids know too. We love you.”

Graham smiled and both kids wrapped themselves around his legs and squeezed as tight as they could – shutting their eyes too so that they could squeeze tighter. He stood there for a second, dumb with glee, as he was knocked over by a man running from behind the sheds. He fell backward almost taking Mary and the kids with him.

“What the fuck?” he said, picking himself up off the ground.

The Man, who had been sprinting, stopped and turned.

“Let it go, Graham,” whispered Mary.

His first instinct was to look for the children who had been clinging to his legs. Both of them, though, were fine; a little shaken – the fear was tantamount in their eyes – but neither had a bruise or a scratch.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” shouted Graham.

“Graham, don’t.”

“It’s fine,” he said, in a tone that left no cause to argue. “I’ve got this.”

He sounded as if he did, too. He hadn’t sounded so sure of anything in his life.

The Man, though, looked unfit for negotiation. His face was pale and gaunt with sickly hollow eyes as if he hadn’t slept in weeks. His clothes were filthy and ragged, just like his teeth, and they hanged loosely off his emaciated body. There were open sores all over his arms and his neck; his fingers were stained with all sorts of unnameable filth.

“Apologise,” said Graham.

He already had his feet in fighting position; he wasn’t gonna back down now. His heart was beating fast but his calm and steady breaths slowed it down.

“Say you’re sorry,” he said.

Then he turned quickly to his kids and gave them a wink.

“Fuck you, man.”

The Man’s voice sounded as decrepit as he looked.

“Excuse me?”

Then he looked once more at his children and he must have been made of out shiny gold or rocket propelled grenades because both Isabel and Nathan smiled back as if there was nothing at all to fear – as if there was no danger whatsoever. They looked like any child would in the presence of a bona fide superhero.

“Look at you,” said Graham. “You’re a bloody disgrace.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Hey, watch your mouth.”

His words shot out like cannonballs.

“There are children present,” he said.

He sounded as if he were mouthing off to one of his students; he felt that same untenable power. Something had awoken inside him - an ancestral spirit.

“A hero chooses to be a hero,” he thought. “In spite of his

fear.”

Then he stepped forward and puffed out his chest.

“You will apologise,” he said.

Mary pulled the children close, quietly hoping that Graham would be man enough to just walk away. Graham, though, wasn’t about to let his children down, not again. This wasn’t just about a damn junky; it was about every time he had ever conceded, every time he had ever let people walk all over him, and every time he had ever been too afraid to stand his ground. This wasn’t just about right now; this was about everything that ever was and everything that would ever be. This wasn’t just about redemption. This was about heroism.

“I’ll give you two seconds,” he said.

He didn’t even see the punch. It landed square on his chin.

“Graham,” shouted Mary.

But she couldn’t have caught him even if she wanted to. There was a dull thud as the back of his head hit the pavement and then everything went deathly quiet.

“Oh fuck,” said The Man leaning over. “He’s alright, isn’t he?”

Mary collapsed on the ground holding Graham in her arms. She didn’t scream for help; not at first. None of it seemed real. He looked perfectly fine to be honest, not a scratch on him. It made no sense at all that he wouldn’t wake up.

“You saw, lady. He started it. That was self-defense.”

The Man was already backing away. And then at one point he just turned and ran. Nobody saw which direction he went and even if they did, it wouldn’t have mattered. He was invisible; just a grain of sand in a desert of vagrants and prostitutes.

“Help,” screamed Mary, her face shaped like a crooked letter.

The last time she screamed like that was when her children were born.

“Help me, please! Someone call an ambulance!”

Were this a movie, there would be blood all over the place. Sirens would be sounding and helicopters would be hovering

overhead; they might even be on the way to the hospital by now. But this wasn't a movie; there was no blood and it took an awful long time for help to come.

"Don't worry," said Isabel, holding Nathan's hand. "Dad will be ok."

She didn't know if that was true or not, she hoped it was; it was just something that bigger sisters said. In spite of that, it was hard to tell which of the two was more scared.

Track 30 (Blue)

“So here’s something I don’t get.”

“Holy shit,” said Isaac with the look on his face alone. “It’s her. I mean, it’s you,” he said.

The Girl put her hand on top of his as if it was nothing at all and leaned in close and intimate as if they were about to kiss. He had never been so happy in his life, and at the same time, he’d never felt so damn scared.

“In Black Dog,” she said, her voice so soft and cool it could put out a fire. “When Robert Plant sings, ‘Ah ah child way ya shake that thing; gonna make you burn, gonna make you sting,’ is that a threat?”

Her face was shaped like a Christmas tree.

“I feel like he’s saying, ‘Hey girl, you’re so pretty I wanna give you gonorrhea.’”

Then she had a shot of grape juice and skipped off towards the stage, not even bothering to look back because she knew she didn’t have to. Isaac followed her every step as she ducked and dove and weaved through the crowd, bouncing around like a tiny atom with giant spectacles and long frizzy hair. And only now, as she was being lifted onto the stage, did his heart finally start beating and he felt himself capable of saying hello.

“This one goes out to Captain Happy Pants over there,” she said.

And the whole crowd turned; their faces like magnets, drawn to the man at the back of the club whose face was shaped like a head-on collision.

Her eyes locked with his and without any music whatsoever she sang.

“Close your eyes and forget your name, step outside yourself and let your thoughts drain.”

And then the whole club sang with her.

“As you go insane, go insane!”

And then, as the song started, she jumped into the crowd, microphone and all. The dance floor instantly came alive, sweeping her up like a leaf on the crest of a wave before carrying her around the club as she sang along, her voice wailing like diver bomber. The whole time, her eyes locked on Isaac’s as if he were some escaping warship, smiling with maddened delight as the wave of hands swelled and gently pushed her towards him.

The Girl threw the microphone into the air and grabbed both of Isaac’s hands, dragging him into the middle of the club.

“Let’s dance,” she shouted.

Her energy was unstoppable.

“I don’t know-how,” shouted Isaac.

“Who cares?”

Then she swung his arms so that he had no choice but to swing his hips just as she swung hers and, whether he wanted to or not, within seconds he was dancing. And he had no idea what he looked like – if he was cool or if he looked ridiculous. He had no idea whatsoever and he didn’t care in the slightest. He felt like a balloon, free of a young child’s grasp, floating off towards the clouds. Free from the heavy burden of his awkward self-consciousness, he jumped around the dancefloor – sometimes with The Girl in hand and sometimes terrifically alone – gyrating his body this way and that, and the whole time, wearing the most stupendous smile as if it were his favourite accessory.

If the entire of his fears were nestled within a single grain of sand, then she was the ocean, dissolving them as she pulled him into her current and she didn’t dare let him go; that’s not to say that he wanted to. What he wanted to do was say, ‘I love you’, and he did, shouting it as loud as he could as the crowd swarmed around them; his voice mute beneath a wall of blast beats and roaring applause.

They danced for maybe an hour – maybe a minute, it was hard to tell. It didn’t really matter anyway. She was somewhere

outside of time altogether. When she held his hand, Isaac felt like he had known her for his whole life; he felt like they had been dancing like this for days. Yet the second she let go, he felt as if their time had only just begun and he ached for one second more.

"I have to pee," she shouted. "Will you be here when I get back?"

Isaac nodded manically as if she'd just proposed.

"You're cute," she said. "Totally my favourite human at the moment. Don't go anywhere."

"I'll come with you," shouted Isaac.

"Pretty sure I got this."

"No, I mean I'll wait for you – outside."

"That's kinda creepier. Do you often hang out outside doors while girls pee?"

Isaac's face was shaped like a squashed tomato.

"I uh..."

The Girl laughed, pulling him out with her.

"I'm kinda creepy too," she said. "I like creepy – but not in a creepy way."

"I'm a nice guy," said Isaac. "I promise."

"Hmmm," said The Girl studying him as if he were a fly in her soup. "That's exactly what I would expect a creep would say."

Then she winked and walked away.

Isaac followed her out through the backdoor into the garden area where the cold was sharp and, instead of music, hundreds of conversations and arguments competed with one another. And every second the sound surged in a capricious crescendo of turbulence and trouble, hinting towards a fistfight or a glassing at a moment's whim, before instead erupting into an orgy of laughter and drunken prose. It seemed as if anything could go wrong at any second and for that reason alone, nothing ever did.

"I'll wait here," said Isaac, a stone's throw from the only toilet, its door nary hanging onto the last of its hinges.

"My creepy cavalier," she said, smiling. "It's cute, but you think too much. Not every dark corner leads to a scary monster,

you know. Most of the time it's just another boring old street."

"I know," said Isaac. "But still..."

"You really are persistent."

"At least let me stand at the door to make sure nobody can see in."

"Who's gonna wanna watch me pee?"

Isaac pointed to at least a half dozen men who looked as if watching women urinate in public bathrooms was the first thing they thought about when they woke up each morning.

"Alright," said The Girl, conceding. "To suffice your childhood traumas, I'll let you hold up the door for me. But this doesn't mean you're gettin' some later on."

Isaac turned red again.

"It's not what I was thinking," said Isaac. "I didn't want to..."

"You don't want to have sex with me?"

Isaac's heart stopped.

"No," he said. "I mean, not like that."

If his words were stones, he tripped over each one.

"Don't get me wrong, you're beautiful," he said, his cheeks almost exploding with ripe nerves and shame. "And I..."

If his words were keys, he'd be spending the night out in the cold.

"I'm just messing," said The Girl. "Besides, I don't have a vagina."

"What?"

"Strange, I know. Imagine how I felt then when I tried on my human suit for the first time. I'm an alien," she said. "Do you believe in aliens?"

This was not the conversation he'd imagined having.

"I don't know," he said. "It's entirely possible, yes, but at the same point..."

"Well, you're talking to one right now. I'd tell you where I'm from but even if these human vocal cords could pronounce it, your human ears wouldn't be able to understand it. When I'm finished peeing I can point out my home planet for you in the sky."

Were it anyone else, he would have already walked away. He wouldn't have wasted a morsel of his logical mind trying to read between the lines. For whatever lack of reason, he neither believed nor disbelieved her and instead listened with honest attention, as if she believed.

"You see this is where science got it wrong," she said. "In the movies, they are always looking into the far off galaxies for the oldest stardust thinking that intelligent life – more intelligent than your own – would exist in the farthest and oldest regions of space. It's not true," she said, as she wiped, flushed, and buttoned up her jeans. "Why you ask? Good question."

Then she zipped past him, grabbing his hands as she did and brought him with her, forcing him to skip as she too skipped along.

"Oh this is my favourite song," she said as she jumped around,

"What song?" said Isaac. "There's no music out here."

"This," she said. "Humans talking. Humans having fun. There's no sweeter sound. I freaking love it."

This wasn't an act. It wasn't some attempt to seem eclectic or strange. The look on her face as she danced around was as genuine as it was mesmerizing. And her smile, as she spun around with her eyes closed, it wasn't the kind that one could easily fake.

"Your scientists have been looking in the wrong part of the universe," she said, bouncing around as if gravity were a choice.

"I'm a scientist," said Isaac.

"Oh yeah? Well, you've been looking in the wrong place."

The whole while, she didn't once open her eyes or miss a beat.

"Where should we have been looking then?" said Isaac without a hint of irony or fickle skepticism in his voice.

"You don't look for evolution in your grandfather," she said as she did *The Twist*. "You find it in your son. Evolution is always being born, it is never getting old. All your telescopes point to the edge of space looking for intelligent life, hoping to find ancient ancestors with superior technology and unfathomable wisdom. You

don't even assume for a second that you are the aliens; you are the ancestors. You have all the answers. You have the divine wisdom. You know the meaning of life. You came first."

"And what does that make you?"

"Evolution," she said, stopping to hug anybody who walked by and telling each of them, 'I am so glad that you exist'. "A curious alien," she said. "In a human suit having an amazing time. Is this your first time with an alien?" she asked.

"Yes," said Isaac, now wondering if she was or was not wearing a human suit.

"Science always proposes the first encounter as the end of humanity where aliens come to reap the seed they sowed."

"What do you propose?"

"I'll tell you what I know is true if you like."

"Ok then. What is true?"

"I come from a very new galaxy where many planets are habitable. Oh, I love this bit," she shouted, getting as close as she could to a young couple who were just one or two words into a splendid heartfelt apology; arriving just as their forgiving tears wetted their impassioned lips. "Like you, we questioned our place in the universe and went searching of divine wisdom and advanced technology; and more than anything, a meaning to all of this," she said, speaking as if every word were the absolute truth – as if this truth alone were absolution.

"You don't want to destroy us?"

"Why would I?"

"Humanity is terrible," said Isaac.

"Sure, if you focus on the terrible. Any painting up-close looks messy and its edges jagged and coarse. From a distance, though, humanity is a harmony of colour and sound shaped by centuries of conflict and resolution. Sure there are bombs and guns, but there are also middle-aged accountants dressed as clowns making fools of themselves in cancer wards for the sake of making sick children smile. There are psychopaths, yes, but there are also lovers on awkward first dates, kids in candy stores, dogs peeing

on trees; don't even get me started on all the art. And then there's dancing – dancing and singing have to be the two most fun things to do in a human suit. If the only fish you've observed is a piranha, it would a little presumptuous to assume that every fish has teeth and that every fish with teeth bites."

"Do you really believe you're an alien?"

"Do you really believe you're not? I have a friend," she continued, taking Isaac in a waltz. "He is quite intelligent and handsome too and comes from quite humble beginnings. His past, though, is a bit of a cliché, you see. His father left when he was older enough to remember little to nothing about him –except say for his musky scent – a mixture of sweat and homemade liquor as rumour had it. So this young boy grows into a young man, directionless, if not for the insatiable curiosity for knowledge and understanding. And it is this thirst that has him scour a thousand books from cover to cover on a quest for meaning, and in that time, he carves an honourable path through the halls of academia, eventually earning his doctorate in humanities. Still, though, science brought him no closer to the questions he had been asking since he was a boy; he found no greater meaning. Like mankind, pointing their telescopes out into the farthest regions of space, this young man sought to find solace in his ancestry."

"Did he find him?"

"He did," said The Girl, coaxing Isaac into every turn of their bodies – so lightly that to even a keen observer, it would hardly appear that she had taken the lead.

"And?"

"What does one expect to find on the frontiers? Cities made of love and its citizens drinking happiness? A world without war, tyranny, and anxiety? A place where people laugh, dance, and make love with no ulterior motive?"

"What did he expect to find?"

"What do you expect to find with Voyager or SETI?"

"Intelligent life," said Isaac.

"And so what do they look like, this intelligent life?"

"I don't know."

"You, but improved, right? Stronger, more handsome, telekinetic, am I getting close?"

Surprisingly, Isaac hadn't once stepped on her feet.

"So what did he find?"

"He found a toothless middle aged man, still drunk and in his underwear, covered in scabs and sores, and sprawled out on the floor of a one-room shack with no power and no running water."

"How did he know it was him?"

"The smell. Even before he got inside he knew. That dank, musky scent."

"So you don't think there's intelligent life in deep space?"

"Not as intelligent as you hope it to be – not that far out. A hair changes colour at its root."

"So you think humans are the intelligent life?"

"Oh no. There is much more intelligent life - much, much more," she said, accentuating far more than she needed to. "No, humans are the toothless man in his underwear. Ancestry."

"And if aliens do visit us they feel..."

"Pity more than anything."

"So what did your friend do?"

"Well, he didn't set fire to the cabin if that's what you mean."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"No, but it's what you expect from a first encounter; an alien invasion, doomsday, Armageddon."

"What did he do?"

"He took his pants off and he got drunk with his old man."

"Huh," said Isaac as he was swept around in The Girl's arms.

"Sometimes you just have to forget you ever had a question to start with."

"Well what about you?" said Isaac.

"Me? Oh no, I came to destroy the Earth. But only after I'm finished dancing and singing."

Then she leaned into his ear and whispered her name.

"That's where you're from?"

“It’s my name, you goof.”

“So you’re not an alien?”

“Of course I am. And so are you. Don’t tell anyone I told you my real name.”

“I won’t. I’m Isaac by the way.”

“Nice to meet you Isaac By The Way. So you’re a scientist? What kind of science do you do?”

“Neuroscience,” he said. “I’m doing research into near-death experiences; trying to recreate them in the lab and explain, at least neurologically, what’s happening.”

“And what have you found?”

“Well, nothing yet. So far all our experiments have failed.”

“Oh, well that doesn’t sound nice. You know what they say about failure?”

He stood there baited on her every word.

“It sucks,” she said. “Failing sucks balls.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“I’m more intrigued in you,” said The Girl. “Tell me, where or when does your curiosity border on pure skepticism?”

“You’re asking if I believe in an afterlife?”

“Seems strange to digging for gold all day if you don’t believe in gold.”

“But I’m a scientist. My job is to dig holes – everywhere.”

“I had a near-death experience once,” said The Girl.

“Really?”

“I was in a car crash and we nearly died; so in a sense, it was near death. It wasn’t otherworldly. I didn’t see my grandma or my first dog. What I can say is that it was the calmest I’ve ever felt in my life. The second my sister let go of the wheel I just thought instantly, ‘This is it, I’m gonna die’. Then everything went slow and quiet, and I remember I had never felt that amount of peace before in my life; just waiting for a truck to swipe into the side of us. No amount of meditating can make you feel that at ease, I tell ya.”

“Were you hurt?”

“You mean is this how I lost my vagina?”

Isaac almost swallowed his tongue.

“Jesus, no. That’s not what I meant.”

And now the thought really entered his mind.

“Do you really not have a vagina?” he asked, carefully.

The Girl laughed.

“What do you think?” she said. “I’m an alien, Isaac. I have no use for one. My human suit didn’t come with one. Just this specific pair of jeans.”

Every muscle in Isaac’s face stretched, twisted, and turned.

“You know why I love this place?” asked The Girl, letting go of Isaac’s hands and bouncing around on her own again, twisting and gyrating her body, and flinging her arms around like long fleshy streamers.

“Why?” said Isaac, following her back into the club.

“Because you can be whoever or whatever you want to be. That there is my planet,” she said, pointing to the stage before diving backward into the crowd with a gigantic smile on her face. “This is my home.”

By the end of the night it was just the two of them, still dancing and still singing – their voices hoarse but their spirit just as potent as when the night started. When she jumped, he jumped. And when he sang, her voice was always right there beside his. Neither of them looked like tiring.

“This is awesome,” shouted The Girl, bouncing around.

“You’re awesome,” shouted Isaac in return.

Instantly he turned bright red. His smile became oddly shaped and if he had a shell, he would retreat into it without a moment’s notice. The Girl, though, bounced towards him completely unfazed by his bout of awkwardness and hugged him as tight as she could; and as if something like that were no big deal, she bounced off again, swinging her arms in circles and inviting him to join her.

Isaac stood there shell-shocked and stupid. The redness on his face waned as if she had shot him point-blank, and his awkwardness was bleeding from the wound.

“You wanna go somewhere?” he said, not wanting this night

to ever end. "Get a drink somewhere else; somewhere quieter."

"I don't drink," said The Girl.

She was trying to walk on her hands from one side of the stage to the other.

"Me neither," said Isaac, though that was only partly true. "We could just talk or something."

His every instinct told him that if he let this moment slip away, he would never live it again. He felt like a fish in water or a monkey swinging from a tree. But he knew, the second he left here, if they weren't together, he would end up back in his cage. And he would never be as free as felt now. He would never have a life that mattered.

"We're not supposed to," said The Girl. "The rules of this place. No names, no promises, no problems."

"I know," said Isaac.

At the same, in the back of his head, he was telling himself, "Don't sound desperate."

"It's just...."

'Be cool' he said to himself, louder than he spoke.

"We're having such a good time so..."

"So you thought you'd go and make it weird."

She was back on her feet now and looking serious.

"I like you," he said, almost throwing the words at her.

"I like you too," said The Girl.

"No, I like you like you. I mean, I like being with you."

"I like being with you too," she said as if all of this were patently obvious.

Isaac looked spent. He wished he could just say exactly what he felt.

"I like me," he said, in a clear voice. "When I'm with you. I like being me. Don't get me wrong," he said in backward defense. "I'm not depressed. At least, I don't think I am. It's just; I've never felt how I felt when I'm with you. Oh, that sounds intense," he said.

"It did," said The Girl laughing, but with a hint of nervous worry. "You're not going to propose to me are you?"

“That didn’t come outright. None of this is coming outright. I don’t know.”

“Don’t think, just speak.”

Isaac took a deep mind wiping breath.

“Tonight was the most fun I’ve ever had,” he said, the truth spilling out of him like a belly full of flatulence. “And I don’t know why, maybe because people are so uptight or always talking about boring things, but I’ve never gotten on with anyone as well as I have with you. I’ve never felt as comfortable. I’ve never felt as happy or free. I don’t feel anxious with you. I don’t feel scared. I feel like I can literally do anything, anything in the whole world. And I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Ok.”

“Plus it’s late and there’s no taxis in this part of the city. It can be dangerous.”

“You speaking for me or yourself?” she said, laughing. “I can handle my own. I’m a big girl. I’m not scared of anything. But if you need me to walk you home....”

His manliness was totally in question but somehow she didn’t make it seem so.

“Haha,” said Isaac, his humour sounding unrehearsed and forced. “I can defend myself.”

If words were bullets, his would be the kind that tickled more than they stung.

“I’m not saying we have to date or anything. No. Just, maybe, if tonight is all there is then maybe it doesn’t have to end. You’re special,” he said, finally, as if they were the only two words he had been pining over all along. “And I feel special when I’m hanging out with you. Life feels special. And I don’t want that to end; not yet anyway.”

“Ok,” said The Girl.

“Ok?”

She was already walking towards the exit.

“You coming or not?” she said as if it had been the plan all along.

Track 31 (Yellow)

“Are you coming or not?” said Isabel.

“Mum said to stay here.”

“So? That just means we have to be here when she gets back.”

Her sense of adventure was only heightened by the thought of having to get back before anyone noticed anything at all. Considering how much there was to explore, she wondered if getting back was even a thing.

“You can stay here if you want,” she said, knowing too well that he would never stay anywhere on his own. “But I’m gonna go look around.”

It’s not like anyone would notice them anyway; they were all looking at their clipboards or their cell phones – and that’s when they weren’t just standing there staring at their shoes. Nobody had noticed them sitting here all this time, so who would notice them gone?

“Up to you,” said Isabel, slowly walking away.

She got maybe a foot or two before Nathan jumped off his seat feeling the cold breath of a specter on the seat beside him, bidding its time to catch him alone.

“Wait up,” he shouted. “Stop going so fast.”

He reached out and grabbed her shirt making all the monsters in the world disappear.

“Were you scared?” asked Isabel.

Of course, he was, but she knew he liked to be consoled.

“No,” he said in the toughest voice he could imagine. “Well, maybe just a bit.”

“Don’t let go of my shirt then, got it?”

“Got it.”

“And when I say run, you run – ok?”

Even though sometimes she could be a real pain, she was still probably the best bigger sister that ever existed. For starters,

she was bigger than he was so she could see all the best places to hide and all the dangers too before they found them; that and she could sign her own name.

“But don’t go too fast?”

“We’ll just go fast enough so we don’t get caught,” she said.

They were waiting by a closed set of doors that led to a corridor full of empty beds, wheel chairs, and trolleys, that went off in a hundred directions and had almost every room in the hospital connected to it.

“You don’t have to worry,” said Isabel, bending over and resting both her hands on Nathan’s shoulders, pressing her forehead against his. Her dad used to do the same thing when she was scared so she knew how much it worked, but now it was her turn to be brave.

“I won’t leave you,” she said.

There was no-one he trusted more than his big sister.

“You promise?” he said.

Everything hinged on the next two words.

“I promise,” said Isabel.

Then she gave her brother a giant back-breaking hug because she knew that little brothers needed to be squeezed just like teddy bears every now and then, even if it was as much for her as it was for him.

“Knock, knock,” said Isabel.

“Who’s there?”

“Ground beef. No wait.... What do you call a cow with no arms and legs?”

“What?”

“Ground beef.”

Isabel laughed first then Nathan followed, once he knew it was funny.

“It’s funny cause the cow has no legs,” said Nathan laughing.

“How does he walk around?”

“What about when it poos?”

“Ewwwww.”

“I know. That’s why it’s so funny. Can you imagine if you had no legs?”

They both stopped and pondered.

“Ha! That would be crazy. How would I walk?”

“It’s like a paradox.”

And that’s when she saw it.

“I got a great idea,” she said. “Hop in the wheelchair and I’ll push you around. We’ll pretend you’re sick. Then you can push me.”

There was not a degree of caution in the young boy, and neither should there be. The world was like a giant present waiting to be unraveled, and just like a box full of toys or sour candies; it had to be ripped apart with excited fingers.

The two had been sitting on chairs for hours and both of their bums were flat and sore from all the waiting. If they had to sit any longer either their butts would explode or they’d turn into pancakes; both of which sounded hilarious but they’d probably die of boredom waiting for either of them to happen.

“Woah,” said Isabel. “Look at the size of that elevator.”

At the end of the hallway was the biggest elevator either of them had ever seen – in person or even on the TV. It was big enough to fit a jumbo jet and still have space for one of those people who sat on a chair and pressed all the buttons.

“Where do you think it goes?” asked Nathan.

The answer was either up or down but to the mind of a child, especially these two, it might as well have been a portal to another dimension but one where if you couldn’t defeat the bad guys, then they ended up becoming your friends.

It wouldn’t be easy between here and there. As it was, they were exposed – out in the open and there were a lot of rooms and important looking people to pass on the way to the elevator. If they got caught, they’d have to sit on their butts for the rest of their lives whereas, if they made it, maybe they’d escape to a world where people had pillows instead of butts and sitting was like sleeping, but awake.

“Go as fast as you can,” shouted Nathan.

“Rocket blaster wheelchair ready for blast off in five, four, three, two....”

All of a sudden there was only one thing that mattered in the universe and only one way to get there – the elevator and at the speed of light. A thousand things could go wrong. A nurse could drop a pen for example and it could get stuck under one of the wheels and they could tip and fall over. Or the police could come and arrest them once they found out Nathan still had both of his legs.

This wasn’t going to be easy, but then again, what would be the point if it was. At least that’s what their dad always told them; always be curious, always be courageous, and always one step ahead of the rest. And that’s just what they were doing – daring to be the first to discover what it was like to ride the biggest elevator in the whole galaxy and to do it before mum got back.

“Blastoff,” shouted Isabel.

And she pushed as hard as she could, not even looking where they were going.

“This is so much fun,” shouted Nathan, though in truth he was scared to death.

They were going so fast that it felt like the wheelchair would fall to bits at any second. And that’s about how far away Nathan was from jumping out himself before they crashed into a wall or the engine exploded – that’s how scared he actually was.

“Slow down,” said someone.

And “Hey, watch it!” shouted someone else.

It’s not like they did anything about it, though. They just jumped out of the way like everyone else a let the two kids whoosh past and then went back to whatever boring thing they were doing.

“We made it!” said Isabel.

She had half expected a thousand things to go wrong before they even got halfway down the corridor; of course, she didn’t tell any of that to Nathan or else he’d become a big chicken and wouldn’t want to be pushed.

“My time to push now,” he said, climbing down from the chair.

His legs wobbled as he did – that was all the fear escaping.

“Don’t you want to see where the elevator goes?”

She had a way of making the scariest things in the universe sound like they were easy-peezy. Once, when they were climbing in the back yard, she told him that grass was soft like jelly the higher you jumped – that was the first time he broke his arm.

“Ok,” he said tentatively.

The idea sounded more awesome on the other end of the corridor when there was probably no chance they’d actually do it. Most things were like that. It was always easier to imagine doing things; much more fun too.

“Press the button,” said Isabel.

She always did things like that – making Nathan do it. If they were ever in an elevator, he’d have to push the button; if they were in a parked car, he’d have to step on the clutch to make the car roll. But that’s just what big sisters did. They knew more stuff.

Nathan could only reach the bottom half of the buttons, so he pushed them all.

“I reckon there’ll probably be a toy room,” said Isabel. “What about you?”

“I reckon there’ll probably be a toy room too,” said Nathan.

She could have said anything and he’d repeat it verbatim.

“Well kids come to hospitals too,” said Isabel. “So they’d have to have toys for the kids to play with because toys make kids happy and in hospitals, everybody is always crying all the time.”

“They should have toys for grown-ups too,” said Nathan. “Then they wouldn’t be said either.”

“I’m never gonna stop playing with toys.”

“Me neither. I’m never gonna stop playing with mine. But why?”

Two floors had already opened but none of them looked like they had anything remotely fun so they let the doors closed and continued on their journey, not knowing if they were going

up, down, or left or right.

“When people grow up they stop playing with their toys and instead they just work and clean up and drink beer all the time. When I’m a grown-up, I’m gonna play every day no matter what anyone says. And if I do have to come to a hospital, the first thing I’ll ask for is some toys.”

“Me too,” said Nathan, but with a prophetic weight to his voice. “The other day at school,” he said as if confessing to a crime. “Toy day.”

“Yeah, that was awesome,” said Isabel. “We played salon and I was the receptionist. But we had to pretend to put all the stuff on because our teacher doesn’t allow kids to bring it anymore.”

“I know,” said Nathan as if he had just found proof of the Yeti. “My teacher did the same. She took my toy chainsaw gun and she didn’t give it back until the end of school.”

“Why did she do that?”

“She said guns aren’t allowed in school.”

“That’s so unfair.”

“I know. All the other kids had toys and nobody would lend me theirs.”

“What did you do?”

“I pretended my ruler was a gun,” he said.

“Yeah, teachers can be stupid sometimes.”

“Yeah,” said Nathan, as if the idea were his alone. “Teachers can be stupid sometimes.”

The doors opened on a floor with all sorts of people shouting and carrying on; some of them were bleeding. At one point, somebody picked up a chair and threw it across the room. It didn’t hit anybody but it sure was a crazy thing to do.

“Let’s get off here,” said Isabel.

She sure was courageous.

“Maybe we should go back,” said Nathan. “What if mum’s waiting?”

“She won’t be. Mums waiting for dad and he’s waiting for a surgeon and we’re waiting for mum. We’re still waiting,” she said.

“It’s just were waiting here.”

She made a sound argument.

“I don’t know...”

He didn’t want to say he was scared.

“What are you...chicken?”

“Am not!”

“Well then prove it.”

Then she jumped out of the elevator. She didn’t step out or walk out or even run out; she jumped as if it were the kind of thing that you couldn’t turn back from – like jumping off a cliff or being blasted into outer space.

“No, Isabel, wait!”

She’d only gone maybe a foot or two; close enough for him to reach out and almost grab her - far enough, though, for him to feel the diabolical fear of being on his own. And though outside the elevator looked downright dangerous, it was nothing compared to the thought of being left alone; especially in a place like this – and more so, especially in a big metal elevator with millions of buttons with doors on both sides that could go anywhere in the galaxy, and that’s if it didn’t swallow him up first.

“I’m coming,” he shouted.

The second he touched the back of her shirt, all of the monsters and goblins, and the infinite void that followed him like a shadow of death disappeared just like that, and then the whole world felt safe again – kind of.

“There’s bound to be toys here,” said Isabel.

The tumult had settled down somewhat; the security guards had made sure of that. Instead of shouting and throwing chairs, the people were hugging each other and crying. There were kids with them; they were just sitting down on the chairs, though, like how Nathan and Isabel had been, looking more bored than anything.

“Do you think they’ll have somewhere to watch cartoons?”

“Definitely. I have this friend at school. She’s in a bigger grade but we talk sometimes at lunch. We both prefer Pegasus’s instead of unicorns. So she said she was in hospital in the holidays and

she had her on TV in her room where she got to watch cartoons all day and all night.”

“All day and all night?”

“Yep.”

“Woah. Oh, I know a boy in my class and he went to hospital and he had a TV in his room and he watched cartoons all day and all night too.”

Though they were on a mission to find a television, a toy room, and cartoons, without even wanting to or even thinking about it, Isabel was drawn to the three kids sitting on the uncomfortable metal chairs, their faces shaped like square wheels.

“Hi,” she said as if they were meeting in a park or a playground or a party for some kind that neither of them knew. “I’m Isabel.”

Nathan stayed by her side – silent.

“I’m Sofia,” said the girl.

“I’m Jasper,” said the boy.

And the other boy was too young to speak.

“Wanna play?” asked Isabel.

“We can’t,” said Sofia. “We have to wait here.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you wanna hear a joke then?”

“Do you know a good one?”

“I have the best one ever.”

“I’m terrible at jokes,” said Sofia.

“I’m probably the best person I know at them. Except for my dad. He taught me most of them. He’s really funny.”

“What’s the joke,” said Sofia.

“OK, so this one I just made up now.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” said Isabel, laughing as she did as if the idea of making up a joke on the spot were so crazy, all you could do was laugh.

“Ok, so let me tell you a joke about insecurity.”

“What’s insecurity?”

“I don’t know. I saw it on a thing. But someone shouts out ‘Security!’ and then security says, ‘I’m inside you and there’s nothing you can do’. And then she says, ‘Oh no, I’m insecurity’. Wait, no. How is it again?”

Her face was shaped like a microscope.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” she said. “I got it. I got it.”

Were the children fish, her words were succulent bait.

“So she’s inside the security. Yeah, that’s better. So someone shouts out, ‘Security’ and then security says, ‘You’re inside me, I’m gonna poop you out’. Cause she’s insecurity.”

The kids all laughed; it didn’t matter if they didn’t know why. It was funny.

“I can’t wait to tell dad that one when he wakes up.”

Track 32 (Blue)

The walk home was quiet; no-one said a thing. It was the complete opposite of the fun they were having inside the club. With every step, the discomfort became more and more apparent, and the silence only worsened the thoughts of uselessness and inadequacy in Isaac's head and the insecurity he felt.

"So...do you like....stuff?" he said.

One would hardly suspect they had spent the whole night singing and dancing and holding hands; and that they'd even shared a kiss.

"You wanna vandal something?" asked The Girl.

She already had a stone in her hand.

Isaac immediately panicked. His demeanour changed altogether. Gone was his gooeey indecisiveness, and instead, as if he had landed ass-first onto a fence post, he stood upright and alarmed; and for the first time since they had left the club, he actually had something to say.

"I don't think we should," he said.

His face was shaped like a sea cucumber.

"Just one small window," she said. "It doesn't have to be a car. Here," she said, passing him the stone. "I'll let you choose."

Isaac quickly threw the stone on the ground.

"Watch what I do with mine," said The Girl.

She barely gave him a second to think before running into the middle of the street, turning with a maniacal grin, and hurling the stone in her hand which, by the sound it made when it smashed the glass of the factory beside them, could have been excused for being a rock, or maybe even a small boulder. Such was the weight she had to use both hands.

"You don't have to run," she said, as the sound of shattered glass echoed like a clap of thunder. "But I reckon you should."

She said that and yet there she was, dancing in the middle

of the street as if there was music, a disco ball, and hundreds of drunken patrons clapping and cheering her name.

“You’re insane,” he said, as he joined her in the middle of the street; half dancing and half-listening for the sound of police sirens.

“You asked if I liked stuff,” she said, her voice louder than the alarm that was blaring from the smashed window. “I think I like this; I dunno. I think I wanna try again – just to be sure.”

Just as she had gripped his hand all those times before, he gripped hers, pulling her with him as he scuttered along the darkest parts of the sidewalk thinking they would be caught and hauled into jail at any second; and all he could think was, if that were to happen, who would feed his cat?

“All you need is a bit of noise,” she said. “And you can have all the fun you want.”

Isaac didn’t have the breath or the time to respond. All he could think of was getting them somewhere dark, quiet, and safe. And then, when they got there, as he was heaved over himself gasping for air, The Girl leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. It rattled him; it took him by surprise. It was unlike any he had ever had before. Her kiss was uncommon; even to her.

“Are you having fun?” she asked.

All Isaac could manage was a dim-witted smile.

“Nothing ever ends,” she said, stretching and looking around as if she still had a pocket full of stones. “Even when it does.”

“I can’t tell if I’m scared or having fun,” said Isaac.

“What’s the difference?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t care. Let’s do that again.”

He’d barely caught his breath back and already he was set on losing it again.

“Let’s break something else,” he said.

“Nah,” said The Girl, plonking herself on the grass. “It’s no fun when you’re expecting it. C’mon, sit down,” she said.

Isaac sat beside her, stiff and fidgety.

“You’re not tired?” she asked.

“No. Well yes, but no. I know that if I go home then it’s over. At least for now, the world seems ok – better than ok.”

“Fair enough,” said The Girl. “So, ask me anything.”

“Alright, let me think.”

Were this a movie, he would just recite her poetry until the sun came up, and then they could take a hot air balloon over the city and get married in a cathedral, even though neither of them believed in God. He had no idea what to ask.

“Ok, so let’s say there’s a train hurtling down a railroad track and there’s five people tied to one track and one person tied to the other. You have your hand on a lever to divert the train. You can save one or the other but you can’t save both. Who do you save?”

“Okie dokie. I thought you were gonna ask me what my favourite band is but..... That’s easy. Save five, let one die.”

“Give it time. Think it out.”

“I don’t need to. It’s simple.”

“Let me guess. The death of one is more shocking. It has more impact. It’s easier to brand and market and print onto t-shirts?”

“Sure, but no.”

“OK, brainiac. Why?”

“Survivor’s guilt,” she said. “No life is more important than the other so you have to scratch that whole argument. It’s not about ethics or morals at all. It’s not a question of right or wrong. It’s about the next day. Let’s say you choose that one guy, he’ll spend the rest of his life feeling shitty and guilty about every little bit of joy that he receives knowing five other people had to die for him to have it; to the point where he might choose to not have any. He’ll have nobody who’ll understand him, no matter how many people are around him. He’ll probably even kill himself down the line. At least the other five have each other. I think that’s more important. You’d want to have someone.”

“Do you have someone?”

He regretted it the second he said it, feeling a burning Promethean stone in his stomach. It didn’t matter that it was the dead

of night either; he knew that she knew that his cheeks were as red as traffic lights.

"It's not what I meant," he said, tripping over every word. "I mean.... Ah shit."

The Girl laughed; and snorted as she did.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to laugh it's just..."

Isaac's face was shaped like a thirsty koala.

"You're cute," she said, laughing and snorting some more. "But yes," she said. "I've got someone."

"Oh ok. Yeah, no, of course, you do."

He tried to act aloof.

"He's a bit of a weirdo and a mega dork but I think he's cool."

"Ok, cool," said Isaac, wishing she'd ease up on the damn salt in his wounds.

"He's a little bit slow, though."

He still didn't catch on. He sat there, cross legged, staring at his fingers as they pulled grass out of the ground, wishing he had the courage to look her in the eyes. And she sat cross-legged too, looking right at him with a big goofy grin on her face, waiting for him to find or fake that courage.

"Are you always this awkward around girls?" she asked.

Again Isaac's face flushed red. This time she could tell.

"You can kiss me if you like," she said, completely cool, as if there weren't an orchestra in her chest, pounding at her heart and plucking on the strings of her wound up nerves. "I like awkward kisses," she said.

And she could have kissed him right then and there and got it over with, but she didn't. She loved the nervous energy. And that's not to say that she wasn't nervous either, it's just that by looking at her, you'd never be able to tell.

And so Isaac kissed her. It was short and sharp, and it took both of them by surprise. It was probably the fastest thing he'd ever done in his life – that's how scared he was. He did it, though; he found his courage. And they stayed there for some time, not saying

much, just sitting and holding hands and smiling.

They couldn't stop smiling.

"I'm happy," said Isaac.

Because nothing else would suffice.

"Me too," said The Girl. "But, uh, I have to go," she said.

"Now?"

"It's getting late," she said. "You have to be at your boring job and I have to clean my mothership."

"Five more minutes," said Isaac. "Then we'll go, I promise."

"Ok then," said The Girl, lying back on the grass. "Five more minutes."

They lay there for maybe twenty minutes or more, side by side, their hands lightly touching, and neither one saying a thing; not because there was nothing to say, but because there was no need to say it. Their silence covered them like a soft and warm blanket.

"I really do have to go," said The Girl, picking herself up off the grass. "I had fun, though," she said. "A lot of fun."

"Me too," said Isaac. "I'm glad we did this. I'm glad you came."

"Me too," said The Girl.

"I know the rule and all but..."

The worry on Isaac's face was unavoidable.

"I really want to see you again," he said. "It was the most fun I've ever had. I'm being serious. I felt like we connected. And I'm cool, you know, if you're not looking for or interested in a relationship or a boyfriend – that's totally fine. I just..."

"For the love of God just spit it out."

"I mean, if something happens, it happens, it's just... I don't want to lose you as a friend."

"You won't," said The Girl.

Then she kissed him once more on the cheek and walked off towards the far end of the park, looking as if there was a skip in her every step.

"Do you want me to walk you home?" shouted Isaac. "I

don't mind."

The Girl didn't even turn.

"I'm a big girl," she said. "Have fun at your boring job. Oh, and that kiss was nice, even if it was expected. See ya, Goofball."

And that was it. He watched her slowly walk along the grass and into the dense brush and umbrage that dwarfed and camouflaged the other half of the park. He waited until she was completely gone before he turned and walked off in the opposite direction. And though it was the middle of the night, he had to squint from the blinding joy that beamed from his heart.

The universe was no longer an infinitely lonely place.

He thought about their kiss a hundred times and though she'd pretend it was nothing at all, The Girl did too. They both walked through the cold dark remembering tonight and looking forward to tomorrow, whatever that might bring.

Isaac whistled while he walked, listening to the leaves crackling beneath his feet. The Girl whistled too, trying to block out the sound of the crackling leaves, somewhere in the darkness behind her. All Isaac wanted to do was get home so he could paint something that reminded him of the way he felt right now. All The Girl wanted was to get home. Isaac thought of their kiss and The Girl thought of it too. He smiled as he skipped along. He couldn't wait to see her again.

He wasn't smitten; he was in love.

"Hey there, princess."

The car stopped that had been following her stopped.

"Awfully late to be out here by yourself. Dangerous, some might say. Let us give you a lift. Hate to see a pretty thing like you get hurt."

The Girl was still smiling. They wouldn't take that from her.

"You can rape me if you want," she said. "But you'll never make me cry."

Also by C. Sean McGee:

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