**Small Pieces of Machinery**

(Part of a longer work)

1.

Prior Moore’s apartment is two stories. The walls are mostly white, except for the kitchen. In the kitchen, the walls are patterned with fat little cherubs staring wistfully at the ass of the next fat little cherub. There was a decorator at some point, someone with a lot of energy and opinions about negative space. They tried to engage with Prior in a discussion about what kind of furniture should be purchased, and how it should be arranged. Prior had very little input on this process, the end result of which was a smattering of menacing chairs that were most likely rejected from Guantanamo Bay for being too uncomfortable. Two days after the decorator left, Prior ordered a Laz-E-Boy on the internet.

Prior’s apartment gazes majestically over the pristine waters of Chicago’s Lake Michigan. It gazes rather less interestedly at a park, as well as a highway, both of which antecede the aforementioned pristine waters. As Prior lives on the twelfth (and, technically, the thirteenth) floor of his fifteen story building, he is offered an excellent view of whichever side of the highway is currently being the most interesting. On a typical day, the most interesting side of the highway is neither of them.

Every morning at seven thirty a.m. Prior goes to work in an office filled with people who are about as friendly as his Guantanamo Bay chairs. Prior spends a small amount of time in this place moving his fingers in meaningful patterns across a keyboard. He spends much of the remainder of his time watching his co-workers do distasteful things when they think nobody’s looking. Cubicles allow these people to achieve almost domestic levels of comfort. Inevitably during the long, tedious day they will forget that they might be under observation, much like someone on a long drive might begin to pick their nose only to look over and find that they are being judged by a Protestant family of honor role students.

Prior’s favorite co-worker to watch is Deborah a plump and unpleasant woman who works three cubicles down across the aisle. Deborah has a variety of strange habits that Prior finds simultaneously disturbing and fascinating. The most interesting of these is that she clips her fingernails at work with a small pair of pink scissors, and then shuffles the clippings into a drawer on her desk. The first time Prior noticed it he assumed he was going crazy. After all, there was a trash can right next to the drawer where she was apparently saving her discarded cuticles. To be entirely certain of his observation, he waited in the office late one night until almost everyone had left, and then went over to her desk and checked the drawer. Inside was a small mountain of nail clippings.

Prior didn’t know what to make of this, but he does have several theories, all of which are wrong and reflect poorly on his judgment. The real reason that Deborah keeps her nails is simple; she is a hoarder. She has one of those incredible houses that are filled with towering piles of junk and childhood memorabilia. Three weeks from now the structural integrity of one of these piles will fail, and Deborah will die after being struck in the temple by a thousand-piece blue-sky puzzle box that she filled with her childhood rock collection. With better deductive reasoning and a more altruistic attitude, Prior might have been able to affect this outcome.

When Prior leaves work, the hardest part of his day begins. Though he is not an unfit, unintelligent or unattractive man, he has always been inept at social interaction. While those around him pair off or group up to go somewhere and laugh at each other, Prior goes directly home and remains there for the rest of his night. At his work Prior can accept solitude, but at home he feels a pressure that builds against his introversion. Prior knows that unnamed forces expect him to be out laughing at people as well, and judge him for his failure to comply.

The result of this pressure is nothing. That’s a lie. The result of this pressure is that Prior achieves this nothing with a perpetual sense of discomfort that make his solitary activities far less enjoyable. Sometimes he will watch television, sometimes he will read. Sometimes he will look out of his majestic window at his majestic view.

A couple months ago, when it was colder, Prior watched homeless people in the park below his window as they gathered around fires. He even bought binoculars so that he could better observe their clustered, communicating shapes. They had so much to say to each other. Prior found it fascinating that they would have so much to say to each other. He was just beginning to pick up lip reading when the cops evicted them. After that, bum-resistant barbed wire was installed around the park fence. Prior’s landlady sent out an email announcing her victory over the temporarily-warm individuals that ended with a winky-face emoticon. ;-).

If Prior’s world was a metaphor, then it would be a music box that played one tune at one pace and was operated by an aging Swedish man named Sven who was very particular about perfect meter and adept at the maintenance of small pieces of machinery. The tedium of Prior’s routine was paralleled only by the staggering expectation of more tedium. Having only lived the one life and therefore lacking a certain amount of perspective, Prior was unaware of the monumental levels of boredom he was achieving. Contentment poorly sums up the utter acceptance that Prior felt towards his music box, because contentment has some awareness that there are other possibilities.

If Prior was possessed of a broader consciousness, he would wonder if his life was ever going to change. To his great surprise, the answer would actually be yes.

Here is the impetus that will begin this change. Deep beneath the surface of the earth, two tectonic plates are going to hit an unusually disagreeable rough patch. This is not an accident. Tectonic plates have been watching Prior for a long time, and, losing patience, have decided to intervene. The collision will send reverberations through many layers of magma and molten rock until they reach the surface of the earth. By San Andreas’ standards the collision will register as little more than a geological burp, and almost nobody in the world will ever know that the disagreement occurred. All that will happen is that one square of sidewalk, specifically the square at the bottom of the steps to Prior’s building will sink exactly 1.23 inches into the earth and then settle there. Waiting.

2.

The alarm clock that sits next to Prior’s bed goes off the next morning at seven a.m. exactly. It does not play any music, nor repeat a funny pre-recorded mantra. It makes the sound of defcon five, over and over, a sound that a synesthetic girl once told Prior is definitely the color of vomit. Prior spends the next three minutes thinking about not getting out of bed. This is the first of his many morning rituals. He thinks about calling his boss, telling him that’s he’s sick. He has the whole speech planned out. In Prior’s mind, this is how the speech would go.

“Hello? Mr. Watterschmidt?”

“Speaking.”

“It’s me sir, it’s Prior. Prior Moore.”

A short pause here while Prior would await some kind of recognition from his boss.

Mr. Watterschmidt would break the silence. “Well?”

“I don’t think I can come in to work today sir.”

“What did you say? Speak up Moore, you’re mumbling.”

“I said I don’t think I can come in to work today.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Well you see sir, I’m not feeling that well.”

“Not feeling that well?”

“Yes sir.”

“Is that it?”

“Well, yes but I –”

“Moore, today is a pretty busy day for us, a lot of new clients coming in. I think you’re going to have to come in anyways.”

“Oh well I don’t know if that’s a good idea, sir, I might… well I could get other people sick.”

“You just let someone with management experience worry about that, Moore.”

Then Mr. Watterschmidt would hang up the phone, and Prior would sit in silence for a while thinking about how he now has to spend his whole day at work pretending to cough every time his boss comes around. This is how Prior imagines things would go. They would probably go worse.

Three minutes later, Prior gets up.

He throws white comforters over white sheets and slides his feet into pink bunny slippers from the Pottery Barn. These slippers cost 24.99, and boast a micro-fiber lining with ComforTread Technology©. You can find them at potterybarn.com, where they are currently not on sale. Prior marches his bunnies to his bathroom, which has a heated tile floor. When Prior bought the bunnies, he hadn’t considered the compounding effect of a heated floor and Pottery Barn’s one-of-a-kind ComforTread Technology©. That effect is sweaty feet. He would take the slippers off, but he is possessed by the certainty that morning people wear slippers, and therefore he must as well.

After he is finished in the bathroom, Prior marches to the kitchen in his soggy slippers and has a bowl of Cheerios, half a grapefruit and a glass of orange juice. Some days he will have to cut into a new grapefruit, and some days he will have a half ready for him, sitting under Saran Wrap. In a very small way, Prior savors the day when he doesn’t have to cut into a new grapefruit. This is because Prior, like almost everyone else in the world, is a bit lazy.

As Prior eats his breakfast, his well-advertised window treats him to a well-advertised sunrise, the kind of sunrise that would be perfect on a postcard with the word ‘*Chicago!*’ under it. Unfortunately for him, the angle of the sun bounces off his incredibly shiny kitchen table, so that if Prior lets his head rest down enough the light will hit him in the eyes. To avoid being blinded by his shiny furniture, Prior eats his breakfast every morning with exceptional posture.

Eventually, the Cheerios are gone. Prior frees his feet from the bunny slippers now, and lets them rest in the cool carpet of his bedroom. They enjoy this freedom for about five minutes while Prior puts his suit on. It is a gray suit, with pinstripes, that he got with his mother when he graduated college. “Pinstripes are good.” she said to him as they both sized him up in the mirror. Behind them, the sizing lady chewed bubblegum. Her name was Wanda, and she was forty-five year old Korean-American. Right then, she was thinking about the dress in aisle seven, the red one with the black sash. The dress cost 549.99 after the employee discount, which wasn’t as much as you would expect. Wanda was planning on stealing that dress. Wanda would carry out her plan later that day, which involved waiting until no one was looking, clipping the security tag and making a run for it. She would be unsuccessful. Prior’s mother continued, “Pinstripes are the most serious of the stripes.”

Five minutes would pass, and Prior’s feet would be subjected to their second torture of the day, which was an impressively uncomfortable pair of dress shoes. These shoes were made with hard angles, and had very little give. Wanda said they were Italian. They were actually made in Vietnam by a boy named Danh. Prior takes the discomfort caused by the dress shoes for granted. Their clog-like rigidity seems appropriate to him.

Now that Prior is cleaned, fed, and dressed, he leaves his apartment. The hallway is green, and lit by seashell wall lamps that give off a gentle glow. Prior finds that if he spends too long there, he becomes very sleepy. He has a daydream turned paranoid theory that the landlady uses these sleepy hallways to lull unsuspecting residents to sleep, at which point she kidnaps them and sends them off to be fry-cooks at a chain of greasy southern-style restaurants in Albuquerque. For this reason, Prior has allowed himself to fall asleep twice in the hall outside his room. Twice now Frank, the building super, has found Prior sleeping in the hall and left him there. Frank has found several residents in this position over the last eight years, and while he doesn’t understand it, he feels it is not his place to judge.

Prior used to get on the elevator at 7:31 in the morning. He found that if he gets on at this time, he almost always has people get on the elevator and go down with him. Prior hates it when other people are on the elevator. He hates that on an elevator, you have to actively pretend not to notice someone. They are one of the few spaces in the world where this is socially acceptable. After a few months of unbearable, silent, forward-staring elevator rides, Prior moved his routine back five minutes and started getting in at 7:26. For whatever reason, this time is characterized by a depressed rate of elevator-goers, and now Prior almost never has to share.

Today Prior is getting in at 7:25. He shaved a minute off at some point, he doesn’t know where. He thinks that it was probably his socks. He must have put on his socks really quickly today. Prior makes it to the fifth floor before the elevator stops. Prior groans inwardly, moves to his left and fixes his gaze stoically upon the faux-wooden paneling in front of him. A young woman gets in, moves to the back right corner, and resumes staring at the tiny screen she keeps with her at all times so that she won’t have to look at anything else. This works for Prior. The tiny screen is an excuse to not feel quite as ignored in the elevator as usual.

Prior looks over at the woman for a second to see if she is attractive or not. She is. At least she has a nice body, and she’s wearing white shorts that barely cover her ass. He can’t see her face since it is turned down into her portable distraction device. The woman seems so invested, in fact, that Prior wonders if he could set off fireworks on his side of the elevator without her noticing. This gives him enough confidence to try and get a look at her face. He glances over, and finds her staring back at him. She has a gloating look on her face, which is in fact rather pretty. Prior looks back at the paneling quickly, busies himself in an eye-level whorl in the faux wood that he’s seen a hundred times before. The elevator chimes for the third floor, then the second, then finally stops.

As Prior moves to get off the elevator, the young woman pushes past him, asserting her dominance. Prior follows behind her. The woman pushes through the double doors of their building and descends the steps. Prior is watching her ass descend the steps when he notices the lip in the sidewalk. The woman still has her phone out, she certainly doesn’t see the depression in the concrete. Prior realizes he should say something. He bumps through the double doors clumsily, opens his mouth. She hits the bottom step, and suddenly the ground is not where she expects it to be.

3.

She falls spectacularly. Many actors have spent many thousands of hours trying to simulate a perfect flop. Not one of them came close to the total commitment that the young woman displays. She is a toddler at a swimming pool. She is a narcoleptic sprinter on a bad day. She falls with a level of grace that can only be achieved by someone who has absolutely no idea they are falling. When we fall, or when something equally unexpected happens, we instinctively protect whatever is most important to us at the moment. This is an evolutionary impulse, coded into our DNA, so that in moments of sudden crisis parents will protect their young and their young will protect themselves. Perhaps this is why, as the young woman falls, she raises her phone high over her head. Unfortunately for her, this is not what the government would describe as an ideal crash safety position. You can’t blame somebody for their instincts.

The young woman’s body connects with the pavement chin first. The cell phone, high up in its precarious perch would have been fine were it not for the concussion that she sustained when her chin hit the concrete. No evolutionary impulses can stop fingers from loosening upon moderate brain trauma. Thanks to the young woman’s efforts, the phone falls no more than ten inches before landing screen first on the concrete. The manufacturer of this phone, however, expected this situation, and designed the phone to be ludicrously fragile so that people would constantly break them and have to get new ones. The screen shatters in three different places. Her left arm is badly fractured. Her warranty is expired. Retail is 479.99. She bit through her tongue.

Prior, meanwhile is standing at the top of the stairs, frozen. His mouth is still hanging open, and will stay that way for the next two-and-a-half seconds. This is long enough for a little bit of drool to come out of his mouth, which is entirely inappropriate for the situation. After almost three seconds go by Prior finally has a thought, the first of three in quick succession. First, someone should call the cops. Then, someone should help her. Finally, I am the only one here. I have to do these things. He hurries down to her side and says the three stupidest words than anyone can say in an emergency.

“Are you ok?”

She looks back up him slowly with pupils the size of quarters, and blood begins to spout from her chin.

Prior decides that she is in fact, probably not ok. He pulls out his phone and dials 9-1-1.

“9-1-1 what is your emergency?”

“Hi! Hello! Um, this woman, she fell, she’s bleeding, like from her face, she looks really messed up. I asked her if she was ok, and she didn’t say anything.”

“Ok sir where are you right now?”

At that exact moment, Prior’s address decides to take a quick leave of absence from his brain. It simply gets up, packs a bag, and fucks off to the coast for a little R and R.

“I- uh- hold on, just a second.”

Prior looks down at the young woman, who thankfully will remember none of this.

“What’s our address?”

She doesn’t register this comment. She is looking a foot ahead of her at her shattered phone while a small pool of blood forms under her head.

The operator cuts back in, “Sir?”

“Um, ok, we’re at the Gates building, the Gates Apartment building. On Lakeview Drive.”  
 The address comes back, with a tan, and a necklace with a shark-tooth on the end of it.

“OH MY GOD ok 1127 Forest Hills Drive. That’s my address. Sorry. Sorry about that.”

Silence for a second from the operator, then, “We have an ambulance on the way. Now I need you to stay with her for the next few minutes, do you understand?”

Prior begins to feel a strange tightening in his chest, the kind that you get if you jump into a lake in December or forget your lines in a school play. He realizes that he is having an anxiety attack. The realization that he is having an anxiety attack at such a crucial moment makes him even more anxious, and Prior begins to sweat profusely.

The 9-1-1 operator chimes back in, “Sir?”

Prior begins patting around his pockets looking for his anti-anxiety medication before remembering that he keeps it in his medicine cabinet. For whatever reason his brain takes this moment to contemplate the absurdity of that decision. What kind of person has an anxiety attack in the bathroom? What sort of situation would both induce the need for anti-anxiety medication, and also afford the anxious party time to go to their bathroom and return? Prior makes a mental note to keep his damn meds on him from now on.

It has been over twenty seconds now since Prior has responded to the operator. She is becoming very concerned. She prompts him again, “Sir please respond if you are still there.”

Prior jolts back to the present, “Sorry! Sorry yes I’m still here.”

“Is she bleeding?”

Prior looks down at the girl. Her chin is starting to bleed less, going from a healthy spurt to a clotted burble. Her hair has fallen into the puddle on the ground, just at the tips. Prior notices for the first time that she has short blond hair, attractive hair. It bothers him that she can’t keep her hair out of the blood.

“Yes, from her chin. It’s not so bad, like it was bleeding a lot before, but now not so much, I don’t think it’s like dangerous bleeding. Just bleeding.”

The tightening in Prior’s chest is now making it hard for him to breathe. He also is feeling a sudden urge to urinate. So this anxiety attack is now decidedly more ‘forget your lines at the school play’ than ‘lake in December’.

“Um, operator?” says Prior, “I think I’m having a little bit of a panic attack over here. I’m kind of an anxious guy, you know. Anyways I have these meds but they’re upstairs and uh, well. Would it be alright if I just ran upstairs really quickly?”

“What? No! No sorry you absolutely cannot just run upstairs really quickly. You need to stay with her so that we can monitor her condition while the ambulance is on its way.”

Prior continues, “Yeah, yeah I get that but it will just take a minute and I’m really not feeling good. My therapist, Dr. Green says I don’t handle stressful situations very well on my own and-”

The operator cuts Prior off, “Ok sir I understand that these situations are stressful but I need you to stay with her. The ambulance will be there shortly. Can you take a deep breath for me?”

Prior closes his eyes puts the palm of his hand to his forehead and takes a deep breath. The tightness in his chest eases slightly.

The operator waits.

“Ok,” Prior says, “I’m ok. Wow, sorry, I’m really sorry about that.”

“It’s perfectly normal. Can you tell me your name?”

“Prior. It’s Prior.”

“Thank you Prior. Now Prior, can you describe her other injuries?”

“Yes. Um, I think she has a concussion. Like her eyes are huge, and she isn’t really making words, so… Oh and her arm, her arm does not look good. Purple and lumpy. It looks broken.”

“Ok Prior I need you to do your best to keep her still and talking until the ambulance arrives. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, yeah I can do that.”

“Ok. I’ll be on the line with you the whole time.”

Prior has been pacing in small circles for the last minute. He settles himself, then turns back to the woman. She’s looking up at him now, still not saying anything. Her brow is creased, slightly, and though her eyes are still dilated beyond recognition, the bewildered look on her face is unmistakable. Prior tries to imagine what this woman could possibly be thinking. Where am I? What happened? Who the hell are you? Prior decides to take the initiative and answer these questions. He sits down next to her, locks eyes on her massive pupils.

“My name is Prior. You had an accident. You fell. On your face. And also your arm.”

The look of confusion stays. Aside from the slightly ragged rise and fall of her breath, she is completely still.

“The ambulance is on its way.”

Still, the woman remains inert. Prior changes tactics.

“Can you tell me your name?”

Still nothing. At least she isn’t moving, Prior thinks to himself. That’s half my job. The operator pipes up again.

“Has her condition changed at all?”

“No, she’s good. I mean the same. She’s not good. But not worse.”  
 Sirens wail from around the corner, and then careen wildly onto Lakeview Drive.

Prior breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh thank god.”

Next to him on the ground, the young woman says something that Prior can’t hear.

He turns to her, “What?”

Her expression hasn’t changed one bit. She looks at him with her crazy eyes, coughs a little, and says, “Briar.”

Then the ambulance pulls up. There is a flurry of activity as people trained to handle situations such as these tend to the woman, shine a light in her eyes, gently remove Prior from the area. It all happens very quickly, one minute she was looking at him and the next she is loaded up into the back of the ambulance and the doors are closing behind her and she is wearing one of those little neck things and then they are driving her away. Prior finds himself alone on the sidewalk next to a small puddle of blood. He wonders who is going to clean it up.