

Sweet Chariot

by Nick Anderson

In heaven, there are no angels. There are lots of people, people who have lead average to extremely good lives, but in no way do they share the characteristics commonly associated with angels; apart from being dead, and in heaven.

Now, there is much less to do in heaven than you would think. It's very quiet. Since there are so many people there, its pretty hard to find a type of music everyone can agree on, so it was decided early on to just avoid the argument completely. There is no real architecture in heaven either, so everyone sits more or less indian style on a great plateau of clouds, trying not to be rude by bothering the person next to them.

Basically, you have two options. The first is that you can lay on your back and stare into the sky, relishing in the fact that you have no more responsibility and no chance of physical harm or death. This in itself is very nice, for a upon death a great realization occurs regarding the levity of the matters you took part in while on earth, kind of the way the problems you had in high school seem silly and insignificant five or ten years later. You will feel so silly when you get there.

Your other option is to lay on your stomach, push your face through the soft clouds, and watch the people of earth. You can zoom in on them (after you are dead your eyes become remarkably more useful; retractable lenses whirling around inside your sockets so that you can see through walls and watch ants work - you will see when you get there, it is really quite amazing.), keep track of their lives and perhaps find a story somewhere that is interesting to you, worth seeing through to completion. However, as previously stated, after you're dead these problems seem so nonsensical, you're pretty much over all the stuff that is going on down there. Though watching humans provides some initial entertainment for noobs, this activity is quickly regarded as a novelty.

However.

There was one day that everyone, and I mean absolutely everyone, lay face down watching the streets in a reverential silence, a piercing tension hanging all throughout heaven.

It started very simply - A boy, about ten, who had just died lie face down watching his sister playing in what used to be his back yard. The boy had come to realize that the things that transpired down there were of little to no consequence, still he was simply *fascinated* by the way his tiny existence had scabbed over so quickly, becoming a glossy scar in only a few months, covered by the sleeve of life's daily routines.

As his sister played, the boy noticed a short, white bus slowing to a stop sign at the corner of his street. Once motionless, the side and back doors opened, and out poured a slow parade of elderly women and men, one of which descended from a motorized wheelchair ramp attached to the back.

Out the driver side door leapt a man in his mid-forties, greying hair and thin-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in some sort of faux-security uniform, a zippy white number with buttons and shoulder snaps, but no powerful utility belt. His slight pot-belly bounced awkwardly above his belt, back and forth, as he dashed around like a sheep dog, attempting to corral the aging flock.

"Mrs. Jenkins," the man called to a red-haired woman leading the pack, "I've told you this before. You can't sit by the door if you're going to open it. When it's time to get off I push the button and the door opens by itself."

"But the door *didn't* open by itself," the woman explained. The group gathered in an informal semi-circle around them.

"That's because we weren't getting off. We don't get off every time we stop."

The woman threw her hands in the air as she and the rest of the passengers climbed back onto the bus, which took off promptly out of the boy's old neighborhood.

"His name is Tom." pointed out the young dead boy, who was still trying out his new eyes.

“Said so on his name tag.” The man next to him looked at him awkwardly, offended, saying not a word. The boy began to feel a little sheepish. The people around him avoided eye contact; not just with him, but with everyone.

Later that night he lay on his back, staring into the the now much closer stars, waiting restlessly for the daylight to return. Not even the slightest whisper permeated the wakeful air of heaven, and most eyes were fixated on the deep sky or wandered around the complacent shapes that filled the cloudy plateau. Someone very far away coughed.

He turned to his stomach and began to search the city for Tom. The boy, so recently deceased, still harbored some phantom of a feeling for the living, a smokey vapor that was dissipating - this was a fairly common feeling. Maybe that is why he felt a tinge of empathy for Tom. The boy watched him drop off his elderly patrons at a group home, then drive himself back to his one bedroom home beneath a water tower. Standing beside his bed, Tom had swallowed a small pill and gone to sleep; he had been asleep since. In heaven there are no clocks, but on earth it was almost dawn.

When the sun began to rise again, the boy blinked, and scanned Tom’s room. He was already dressed and lacing his shoes, his quiet home buzzing with the hum of central air. The van, which he had parked in front of his house, started cheerfully in the promised warmth of a late May morning. Within half an hour, Tom had collected the same group of people as before (the boy counted five total), and was driving west into town.

“It’s so *warm!*” Mrs. Jenkins moaned. She sat in the first row, right behind Tom, but off to the side so that should could be seen. “Tom, turn on the A.C.”

“I apologize Mrs. Jenkins, but the A.C. is broken. I put in a maintenance request.”

“Those lazy bastards never fix *anything*.” Mrs. Jenkins hollered. “Damn car’ll be a ball of *rust* before the touch it. At least crack a window.”

“No, noooooo . . .” bemoaned a man in the back row. He smoothed the lapels on his dilapidated brown suit. “My hair, you never think of my hair.”

“You both know the windows don’t open.” Tom sighed, knocking two fingers against the

bolted down glass panes. “Besides, the museum has very good air conditioning. You’re always cold by the time we leave.”

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head. “I’ve been to that damn museum a hundred times, I don’t know why we have to go there again.”

“I think the museum is nice!” cooed a soft looking woman in the back of the van. She appeared to be wearing some sort of pajama-like gown, and sat in a wheel chair.

“Like hell it is, Ethel, its a crock a shit is all it is.”

“No swearing Mrs. Jenkins.” Tom reminded gently.

Inside the museum Tom stood in front of a diorama of a prehistoric couple sharing a meal over a fire. Fake fabric flames danced over a portable fan while a spotlight faded from orange to red. For a long time he studied the hard plastic mannerisms of the couple that failed to make eye contact due to the vacant imprecision of their glass painted eyeballs.

“Damn landscapes don’t make a lick of sense,” Mrs. Jenkins yelled from another room. Tom was jarred from contemplation by her voice, and hustled away from the scene to collect the now quite scattered passengers.

“I think Tom is dying,” the dead boy in heaven said out loud. A few people turned their heads slightly, but in general he was once again ignored.

“No really,” he went on, “I think so because he’s taking the same pills I was before I died. They tasted awful because they were so strong and they worked really good but they wouldn’t give them to me until they were really sure.”

Still, silence.

“I heard my dad talking to my mom after I died and he said ‘You knew, you knew, because his doctor told you the pills would only make him comfortable.’ And they did, I really didn’t feel anything.”

Finally, the insolence of the boy could no longer be ignored by the other inhabitants of heaven.

“What do you care if ‘Tom’ dies, now or later?” asked a man a few feet away. “Everyone dies.”

“Yes, but,” the boy replied, “I don’t think that Tom should die yet.”

Everyone within earshot laughed at this. Even the boy began to question what he was thinking.

“No no, its just that I’ve been watching see, and from what I’ve seen, you . . . well, I’m sorry, what did you say your name was?”

The laughter reached a fever pitch.

“My *name*?” the man ridiculed, “There are no *names* in heaven!”

Now the boy felt completely sheepish and intruded upon, so he lay down with his blushing face in the clouds.

Mrs. Jenkins’ voice was piercing the reverent calm of the museum.

“All I’m saying is that that this photograph has clearly been doctored, as the city council building is right *here*,” she argued, pushing her finger into an area of sky in the framed picture, “and therefore this picture has no place in a museum.”

“That picture was taken in 1887, Mrs. Jenkins.” Tom responded.

“Then why the hell would I want to look at it?”

Tom stood back and examined the rows of black and white photographs, though in reality they were brownish and yellow. The other passengers milled restlessly from frame to frame, reading the scribbled dates in the bottom right corners, examining the stark rolling land, the few wooden buildings.

“Some people like to consider the way things used to be, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Well, I don’t know why.” Mrs. Jenkins began to hobble to an adjacent exhibit.

The ride home from the museum visit was a quiet one, though the peacefulness of the silence was a matter of opinion. Some passengers were asleep, though it was barely four o’clock, whereas Mrs. Jenkins sat ruddy and awake, her arms crossed.

Tom knew better than to tap the the vile obscenities fermenting beneath her surface, yet it escaped nonetheless.

“God damn . . .”

Tom sighed, and kept his head facing forward.

“God damn museum . . .”

“Mrs. Jenkins,” Tom protested.

God *DAMN* that crotchety old museum and all of its . . .”

“Mrs. Jenkins, please,” he begged, “You can’t swear, you’re upsetting the other-”

“We’re all dying Tom.”

Tom was struck silent, as no words seemed to match the unconventional turn this conversation had taken. Everyone else sat silently, seemingly oblivious to Mrs. Jenkins existential insistence.

“Not one of us here have more than five years left, that is except you Tom, which makes this all the harder to understand.”

In his training, Tom had been told over and over again to never mention the age or subsequent condition of the people he was to spend each day shipping around.

“ . . . What do you mean by all that, Mrs. Jenkins?” he asked cautiously.

“What I *mean*, Tom,” she mocked, “Is that if this is all we’ve got left, if we’re one foot out the door as it is, then why the hell are we wasting what little bit of life we’ve got left?”

“No swears, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Hell isn’t a swear and you’re not listening to me. If you’re afraid we’re going to die doing something reckless don’t be. Most of us are going to die in our sleep, or in the kitchen making a warm glass of milk, and I don’t know about all of you here but I don’t want my last sight to be those god-awful tiles. And I don’t want the last thing I remember to be some shitty black and white photos from before I was even born.”

The cab writhed with a sort of inarticulate contemplation of Mrs. Jenkins’ words.

“Is it such a stretch that maybe I want to ride a bike one more time? See live music? Are you in such a rush to throw the lid over us that you’re not even going to respond? You think

we're already dead?"

"Hell is a swear, depending on context." They had arrived at the group home, and slowing to a stop, Tom pushed the button that opened the door.

Mrs. Jenkins moved her way to the staircase that lead down to the pavement - she turned and looked at Tom sadly. He refused to return eye contact. Sighing, Mrs. Jenkins descended the stairs and walked slowly towards the automatic sliding double doors of the group home, the other passengers filing single-file behind her. As the door shut pulled away quickly, though he drove home reasonably and without exceeding the speed limit.

"Wow, he's only got twelve left." said the dead boy in heaven, watching Tom as he shook another tan pill into his palm. "Those aren't the kind of pills you get refills on."

The boy felt alone as he gazed down upon the darkened town. He remembered taking the pills, counting how many he had left.

A middle aged woman near the boy had been listening and watching this show that the boy seemed to be taking such an interest in. She was roughly three feet away from him, so when she pushed her face through the clouds, she could see him at a comfortable distance.

" . . . Are you watching that man still?" she asked out loud.

The boy startled, and looked over at her, nodding earnestly. "Yes," he answered, "I've been watching him for a while now and . . ." the boy knew how ridiculous it would sound, "I'm just worried about him."

The woman nodded back, a vague sense of understanding gripping her. "When I was alive, I remember feeling worried about people." she told him. "Not since I've died though."

They shared a confused, but contented smile.

"I had a son once that was your age," she continued, "He was very emotional and had a lot of problems because of it. He could be very selfish, the way he acted; he'd cry and scream over what seemed like nothing, every little change he experienced was met with such frustration and anger. Naturally I wasn't surprised when the first thing I saw from up here was him crying on the sofa, pushing his face into the crevice between the seat cushions like he always did. I imagined

that had to be the most jarring and painful experience for him. But when I listened to his sobs, he wasn't crying for himself. He was saying to himself 'Mom, mommy, mom, its not fair, you never got what wanted or what you deserved.' Now I remember feeling that way, before I died, that I had given everything and had never gotten any of it back. I was quiet about it though, back then, I never thought anyone knew that about me. Or why of all people *he* would care about that. Life is unfair from the beginning, I knew that, yet here he was bemoaning my silly life not being everything it could of been." she stared down into the night sky with the boy. "For a second I felt like I understood him, but then the feeling faded and I just laughed a little. I just couldn't picture it anymore. But hearing you talk about Tom, I start thinking about it again. I'd like to feel that way again, if just to understand what it was my son felt."

The boy nodded again. He felt like he should introduce himself.

"I would tell you my name," he said, "but for some reason I can't remember it."

"That's ok, I don't think anyone can." she confessed. "There are no names in heaven."

Accepting that as reason enough, the boy turned his attention back to to Tom's sleep. In contrast to the night previous, Tom clenched his fists and moaned quietly, privately into the dark room. He was having a dream. In the dream he was holding a glass store-front door open for an endless line of people who walked through it at a slow, constant pace. His arm was burning with pain; for what seemed like years they walked on while Tom waited for a break in the line, where he could cut in. Finally a sizable gap appeared - quickly he pivoted into place, but as he turned to face the doorway, he finally saw what lay on the other side. It was too late, he was being swept away by the crowd. Tom writhed his sheets into a spiral, until finally he sat straight up and hollered loudly.

"That *would* be frightening." said the woman, and they boy agreed, for they could also see dreams.

It was was almost dawn - Tom could see bluish light just beginning to creep into the room. He set his head back down on his pillow, pulled the sheets around him back to their original positions as best he could, closed his eyes and waited for his alarm to go off.

That morning the van started with a tired rumble, the wheels ticking slowly into motion, the

engine groggy and unwilling to accelerate. Tom tested the gas pedal, pushing it sharply, which wielded no results.

“You’ve been driving the same route for 20 years, how it is you can manage to show up *late* is beyond me.” Mrs Jenkins yelled from her seat, inches from Tom’s ear. “So mad I could *spit* but these damn windows don’t open.”

Tom ignored her, his mind still wandering the alcoves of the previous night’s dream.

“Where are we off to today, Tom?” Mrs. Jenkins asked in her feistiest tone. “Tell me Tom, will we be visiting the *museum* again?”

“Ooooooh I *love* the museum,” caroled the quiet woman in the wheelchair. “Why not Tom, we haven’t been there in *ages*.”

Mrs Jenkins looked at her in horror - “Jesus Christ Ethel, I . . . oh, Ethel . . .” She laid a hand on the woman’s knee. Ethel clasped the hand happily and smiled vacantly back at her.

“Tom, look what you’re doing to these people.” she lamented.

“I don’t set the schedule Mrs. Jenkins,” Tom explained, his eyes fixed on a left turn onto a larger city road. The van accelerated predictably to the minimum speed, its lethargy of the morning seemingly cured. “Also, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Ohhhhh Here it comes again.” Mrs. Jenkins spat on the carpeted floor of the van.

“Did you just spit?” Tom asked, at last turning his attention to his payload.

Mrs. Jenkins spat again.

“Harriet, stop it” protested a woman seated in the back row. “That is disgusting. Tom, can you open a window?”

“My hair’s a mess Tom, its really fine with me today.”

“Tom,” Mrs. Jenkins pleaded, “Is it so much to ask for a little air? To feel the wind in my hair again?”

“The windows do not open for your safety.” he responded.

Mrs. Jenkins inhaled and puffed her chest full of resolve, unwilling to concede to a statement so maliciously arbitrary. “Do I have to break one then?”

Tom sighed. Still denying Mrs. Jenkins the confrontation she craved, Tom began to answer

her without turning. “Do you really think that-”

The base of an aluminum walking cane flying past Tom’s ear, making a loud *THWACK* as it bounced off the curved glass of the windshield. Tom ducked and jerked the wheel blindly, swerving the car into an adjacent, thankfully unoccupied lane. Mrs. Jenkins stood in the center of the van’s narrow aisle, gripping the cane’s handle like a loaded gun. Taking another deep breath, she thrust the cane forward again, this time producing a small crack where it hit. “Cover your eyes, Tom!” she hollered.

“Harriet NO!” Tom pleaded as he scanned the busy street for a place to pull over.

“I WANT TO LIVE!” she shouted as another forward shove enlarged the crack, spidering horizontally across the width of the windshield.

“Mrs. Jenkins, you are about to lose privileges for the whole group!”

The van shook wildly as it began to straddle the edge of the right lane and the overgrown field it bordered.

“We HAVE no privileges! Fresh air is not a PRIVILEGE Tom.” Mrs. Jenkins yelled. “FREEDOM is not a PRIVILEGE!”

The van and all its contents leaped suddenly as it hit a large lump in the field. Tom skidded the car to a stop as the passengers cupped their hands to the back window panes, attempting to make out the shape of what lay in the dirt, about thirty feet behind them. Bolting from the driver side door, Tom was careful not to step in the tiny trail of blood that left from the back tire to the small furry mass - there, turned over several times in the dirt, was a young rabbit, feet still twitching as though they still chanced escape. Behind him the doors to the van opened, and the wheelchair ramp began to lower.

“You forgot to open the Door, Tom.” Mrs. Jenkins called to him.

“We don’t . . .” Tom was shaking, “Every place we stop we don’t . . . THIS IS EXACTLY LIKE YOU, THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU DO!” Tears lit like an oil slick down his face.

“You act and you don’t think at all what it might mean for someone else! You just storm your way through everything without an ounce of courtesy and PEOPLE GET HURT. THINGS get hurt.”

“And I suppose your way is flawless?” Mrs. Jenkins retorted. “To just keep scurrying out of everybody’s way, just keep smiling and doing everything someone else tells you to, well that is a perfectly AWFUL way of life and I think you know that Tom, how can you even get out of bed in the morning?”

“How do *you* sleep at night? This . . .” Tom gently stroked a tiny, crushed pay, “This is a baby. It never had a chance to live. It was on its own side of the road, but its dead because of you.”

“Oh, so I was the one driving now. I was the one that tried to slow down and stop everything, just as things were beginning to happen.”

“What was I supposed to do?!” Tom exclaimed, standing.

“Keep up with it, Tom. Things move fast and you’ve got to accept that. You can’t stop the current, if you try to do that you’re going against what the world’s got planned and THAT’S how things get *HURT* Tom. YOU are the reason things are hurting.”

Tom stared down into the lucid, half-open eyes of the now dead creature. Tom turned and walked slowly, silently back to the driver’s seat of the van, and pulled the door shut.

“Oh, you’ve really done it this time Harriet.” said a short, pudgy woman. “He’s probably going to go drive off a cliff.”

“Maybe he’s going to back into you, Harriet.” said the man in the brown suit. “You should move.” But Tom simply sat inside, without even starting the van.

“No, I don’t think that’s it at all.”

The boy and the woman in heaven had been so focused on the unfolding events, they had failed to notice the man a yard away, watching right along with them.

“All that - see it reminded me of this conversation I had with my father once.” the man continued. “I was probably nineteen, and I was asking him for money again. I was trying to tell him that I couldn’t make ends meet just pickin’ bugs off the grape vines and he said ‘Well who’s fault is that?’ and of course at the time I said ‘Hoover!’, or ‘Old man Baker!’, or anything but myself. And he said to me, ‘When you were born your mother and I were livin’ in a tree trunk

outside the old ranch with no money for any damn cigarettes or gin and I made it work. The problem is YOU.”

The woman and boy nodded attentively to the man’s story, which decompressed so naturally in the stagnant air.

“Well he never gave me another penny after that and I hated him for it and he just became another part of my lot of things that were keeping me in that horrible place I was in. It wasn’t til years later that that list became so long that I was forced to admit to myself that maybe it wasn’t the whole world trying to bring me down; that maybe I was doing that all by myself.” He pointed a scrutinizing finger down to Tom from the clouds. “When it hit me, I had a moment like that. Cried like a damn fool. For a while. But when I was done with all that, you know what I did the very next?”

“What?” the woman and boy asked in unison.

“I went down to Old man Baker and told him I’d been pickin’ bugs long enough and that knownin’ how everything worked around there that it was about time I started helping with the planting. I told him how much I wanted a day and he said that’d be fine. Then I threw the other boys one hell of a party, and emptied all my gin down their dumb happy throats and I never touched the stuff again. Two years later I met the love of my life and she never knew that sad, wretched part of me. Would of never happened had I stayed the person I had been. When I realized that I was so . . . well I remember feeling so thankful for that.”

“ . . . Do you think that it will be that way for Tom?” the woman asked.

“Who knows? That sure as hell ain’t me down there. Who knows how *he’ll* stomach that.”

Tom was sunken low in the driver’s seat, watching the nervous activity of the seniors in the left mirror. The tears had stopped and now a humid stillness hung in the cab like the first moments after a sudden summer rain. Slowly the group approached and re-entered the van, in a polite silence. Finding their seats the looked to one another uncomfortably, waiting for someone to speak.

“I had a dream last night.” Tom said abruptly. “I was hold a door open, for a long line of

people. I was just trying to be polite. But the people just kept coming. I kept looking for a break in the line, where I could cut in, just someone to hand the door off to - but when I finally got my turn to enter, I saw what was beyond the door . . .”

“What was it?” asked the man in the brown suit.

“ . . . Nothing.” Tom replied. “Just a blank, a white void.” He pulled himself up in the seat, making eye contact with his passengers in the rearview mirror. “All my life I’ve told myself that my time is coming, that if I just smiled and kept my head down my turn would come. Well, that was it. I’m just like the rabbit. Everything, over before he even had the chance to live.”

“Never the CHANCE to live?” Mrs. Jenkins slapped her knee. “Tom, you are middle aged. What about life has been kept from you?”

“I understand Tom, I do.” said the pudgy woman beside her. “But that’s all anyone gets. A blank space.”

“She’s right Tom.” agreed the man in the brown suit. “Nothing’s ever going to be given to you. You want something, you have to stand up and take it.”

“It’s the same damn thing I’ve been telling you since the day I started riding in this damn hearse.” Mrs. Jenkins told him. “Nevermind what you’ve *got* out of life. What have you fought for? Don’t tell me we’re the first people to point this out to you.”

Tom fiddled silently with the air vent above the steering wheel.

“Tom, you talk to people besides us don’t you?”

He sank down into the seat again.

“Tom, do you even know our names? Do you know who this man is?” Mrs Jenkins pointed to a nervous looking man in the front row. “We’re the only people you talk to and you don’t even know who we are.”

“I know who you *are*.”

“No Tom you don’t, not without a name. Do you know why we give things names? Because they are important. Because you value them, and you want to be able to find them again. Because they’re not objects Tom.”

In heaven, the boy, the woman, and the man took in each other, contemplatively.

“It makes a lot of sense, what she’s saying.” said the man.

“Do you think that we should give each other names?” asked the boy.

The woman smiled at him. “Would you mind if I called you Gregory? That was my son’s name. Is - is that an alright name?”

“Yes!” exclaimed the boy, henceforth known as Gregory. “It sounds perfect to me.” he turned to the man. “Vincent was what I was thinking for you.”

Vincent smiled and smoothed over hair, as if he was wearing a new suit. “Well if a Vincent’s what I’ve made of myself, I’d be a fool to argue. And what about you lady, what will we be calling you?”

“Helen!” Gregory suggested with his index finger.

“Oh that’s a lovely name.” the woman agreed.

“Are you giving each other names?” The head of a young girl popped out below the clouds - her long, bristly red hair hanging in bright bunches down towards the earth.

“Yes we are.” Helen replied. “Would you like one?”

The young girl giggled. “When I was alive I named *everything*, stuffed animals, blankets, cups . . . it was really quite ridiculous. My mom had to put sticker labels on everything so that she would know what I was talking about. So yes. I would like one, if you feel like giving one to me.”

“I do . . . Erica!” Gregory said, throwing his finger at her as if the name needed to be caught.

More heads popped below the surface of the cloudy ground, loitering awkwardly, waiting to be invited into this new ritual.

“Do you all want names too?” Vincent called to them.

“What is going ON?!” came a man’s voice from the topside of the clouds. The group pulled their heads back up to see an infuriated older man standing with clenched fists, a seeming-giant compared to the rest of heaven which was seated politely.

“We’re giving each other names,” Vincent explained, “so it will be easier to talk.”

“About *what*?” the man exclaimed. “What is there to talk about? We know *everything*. We

understand everything.”

“We don’t though!” Gregory interjected. “I don’t understand how Tom feels. None of us do.” The crowd of people that had begun to watch Tom, some openly, some in private, all nodded in agreeance. “I know that when we came here we realized a lot of things, but we forgot things too. And I think the things we forgot, the understanding, is more important than the knowing.”

Inside the van Tom had just finished being introduced to the people he had been driving around for some time now. Mrs. Jenkins was the only one he could really name, the rest - five others in all - he knew only by their faces.

Now he knew that the pudgy woman who sat beside Mrs. Jenkins was Ariel, who before now knew simply by her regular rotation of cat-themed sweaters. Her hair was tall and permed like a Southern beauty queen, thick blue eyeshadow creased in her wrinkled eyelids.

On the other side of Mrs. Jenkins sat Benjamin, a quiet Asian man who would divert his eyes if you ever tried to talk to him. No one had ever heard him speak.

The back row had two people; Ethel and Rodger. Ethel was the soft-looking woman in the wheelchair, the one often confused by the previous day’s events but nevertheless thankful that they had happened. Her skin was a translucent white, with red veiny lines around her eyes, nose and mouth like a newborn kitten.

Rodger, the man in the brown suit, was a classic gentleman. Never had anyone seen him wear anything less tasteful than a three piece suit, even if the only trip he had planned for the day was to the kitchen. He was notoriously stubborn but a kind person nonetheless.

And Tom was a middle-aged mystery, even unto himself. The questions considered the most basic, favorite foods and season, took ages for him to answer; and even then, they were guesses at best. The cab watched him, fascinated and confused, as he attempted to name a hobby.

“Umm . . .” he fretted, “Sometimes when I’m driving I count the dashed yellow lines for as long as I can. Does that count?”

“Absolutely not.” Mrs. Jenkins answered.

“Tom,” Ethel said slowly, “Maybe we should go about this differently. Tell us what you *do* know. A memory perhaps, that even you have been unable to set aside.”

“From when?”

“From whenever, Tom. Your choice.”

Tom pondered this, tracing the cracks on the windshield with his index finger. “My uncle had a motorcycle, when I was young. He wanted to show it to me, but my mother wouldn’t let him. I didn’t really have a reason to question them. But one night when my parents were having a party he came to my room and woke me up. We went downstairs through the back hallway into the garage . . . I think he was really just going to show it to me, let me sit on it and what not, but I must have looked just enthralled by it, because he put a finger to his lips and opened the garage door real slow . . . Outside was just the purest, blackest night. The kind I wasn’t allowed to go out in. He held my hand and walked me out to the middle of the street, then went and pushed the motorcycle out of the garage. He sat down and pulled me up on his lap, right in front of him. I heard his hands clicking some switching, but I couldn’t see anything, it was so *dark*. Then all of a sudden the whole thing came to life beneath us. I was so scared at first that I wanted to jump off, but the purring beneath me became so steady and calm . . . I relaxed and we just shot off into the night.” Tom was looking now far beyond the windshield, deep into the sky. “We probably just went around the block, but it felt like we drove for hours. The night landscape was so perfectly vignettied by that single headlight, I believe it was the only time in my life that was able to focus on that exact moment, without thinking about what might happen, or what already had. When we got back we pushed the bike into the garage and he said to me ‘that’s something they’ll never let you do, or even forgive me for if they found out, but something that needed to happen.’ He said that when I was older I would understand.”

“Well I hope its sinking in now!” Mrs. Jenkins yelled, standing. “Now, let’s finish what we’ve started!” With a tremendous breath she threw the cane back into the windshield, but it bounced off the curve of the glass and produced no results.

“You can’t break a windshield that easy.” Tom said. “They’re designed to not break. Besides, we can’t do that. We can’t destroy a van just because.”

“It’s not *just because* you moron!” Mrs Jenkins shoved the cane into the glass again. She was panting heavily.

“Just stop it Mrs. Jenkins. You can’t break it by yourself.”

“Well then,” she said, sitting to catch her breath, “You’re going to have to help me.”

Shaking, she reached out and dropped the cane into Tom’s lap. “If you want to feel that way again, the way we all do, you’ve got to fight for it.”

Without a word, Benjamin unhooked his seatbelt and removed the cane from Tom’s lap. Slowly, and aiming with great care, he pulled the cane back and slammed it forward with a single, focused *THWACK*. Exhausted by this simple action, he returned to his seat as Ariel stood and took the cane from him. Tom began to feel weak as he watched the squat woman conjure so little force out of herself, breathing heavy as she levied her attack. Hesitantly, she handed the cane off to Ethel, who beckoned for it desperately. Cradling the cane in her lap, she rolled slowly to the front of the van; Mrs. Jenkins held her chair steady as she raised the cane slowly, like a lead pipe. With every ounce of strength conceivable, she let the cane meet the glass with a soft tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

“We can’t, Tom.” Mrs Jenkins let go of Ethel’s chair, as she was generating so little force that the wheels did not even rock. “Though we desperately want to, we aren’t able. You *can* Tom. You can feel these things again Tom, it is still possible for you. Outside that glass is a whole world, filled with just, well, everything, *waiting* to be embraced. Open up the glass and *feel* it!”

Tom stared past the sparse cracks, out to the road. In his mind, he overlaid that one dark night, the deep ocean of possibilities he had then thought had filled the dark spots just beyond the reach of the single headlamp.

Clasping his hands around Ethel’s, he pulled the cane back with her, and slammed it forward

with such velocity that every window in the entire van burst into innumerable shards, a shower of sliver so tiny and bright that the sky looked as though it was raining pure sunlight.

In heaven, Gregory, Helen, and Victor were holding hands. Whether their combined thoughts and feelings had anything to do with the events happening on earth, I can't really say. People on earth, and in heaven, are capable of incredible things. But at this time about a thousand people had names, and whole acres of them lie face down, observing Tom.

In the van, Mrs. Jenkins cheered. "THAT'S what I'm talking about!" she high-fived Ben. "Now we're cookin' with gas!" A cool spring breeze passed through the van.

Tom laughed heartily. He sat down in his seat, took a deep breath, shifted into drive. "Where are we off to first?"

"Oh for crying out loud." Mrs. Jenkins shook her head, exasperated. "Don't aske *me*, Tom. You have to ask yourself that."

"Oh, of course Mrs. Jenkins."

"HARRIET for crying out loud."

Tom nodded. Adreneline coursed through his veins, and he could think of no way of using it. "No, uh - I guess no place in particular comes to mind."

"Oh for Chrissake . . ."

"Well, someone else," Tom suggested, "Does anyone here have someplace they'd like to go? Someplace that they can, recapture this feeling we're chasing?"

Rodger raised his hand. "I've a place I'd very much like to visit again, if its alright with everyone."

"Sure Rodger." Harriet replied. "Where do you want to go?"

"See," he explained, "There's a cafe not far from here where I met my wife. I'd like to have my usual, that is a coffee and a croissant, one more time. They won't let me have coffee anymore, they say it makes me restless. I have to pour warm water into a mug and make believe like a damn fool."

Harriet shrugged, demonstrating the idea's adequacy. "It's a start. Restlessness - that's a good thing! People need to be restless, its what keeps them moving!"

“Do you remember where it is, Rodger?” Tom asked.

“Like I could forget a place like that.”

The group cleared the remnants of the windows from their seats, and buckled up as the van began to roll in the direction of Rodger’s index finger.

It was about ten minutes before Tom began to question Rodger’s directions.

“It’s a hidden little place, out the way. That’s why I always liked it. Our little secret.”

They rolled slowly through a decaying strip mall, in a part of town that made Tom nervous.

“This one right here!” Rodger pointed to the back of an old red brick building. “Door’s on the other side.”

Tom rounded the establishment, finding the other side of the facade to be clearly decorated with large 7-11 signs.

“Oh no . . . Ethel muttered sadly.”

“Well Rodger, I’m sorry . . .” Tom said, “It, it looks like it’s a 7-11 now.”

Rodger straightened his tie. “Well, we will have coffee here then.” He stood, wearing a surprisingly jovial smile, and made his way to the front of the van.

Entering the convenience store, Rodger swaggered uncharacteristically to the counter. “The usual, my good man.”

A young boy behind the counter looked at the man through a plexiglass container filled with a tiny hot dog ferris wheel, waiting for more information.

“A coffee and a croissant you dope!”

The boy, still confused, snapped into action - “Uhh, ok sir - you get the coffee yourself at the machine over -”

“Like HELL I do.”

“Uh . . .” the boy scurried over to the coffee dispenser, and began to fill a styrofoam cup. He was scrawny and young, awkward looking but not particularly unattractive. He employed this strange new group of customers with a surreal diplomacy, without asking questions. Popping on a flimsy plastic cap, he hurried it to Rodger. “Also, we don’t have croissants.”

Rodger sighed. “Well what do you serve?”

The boy scanned a heated case beside the coffee maker. “How about a breakfast burrito?”

“That will do I suppose.” Rodger answered. “Table by the window please.”

The boy was clearly losing his composure. “I’m sorry sir. I’m really trying, but don’t have any table and chairs.”

Rodger fixed his glare onto the employee, into him - “Listen boy, I was a regular here before you were born. You want to contest me on knowing this place?”

“Never.” the boy answered, rescinding his previous statement with apologetic palms. “I just started this week, I’m sorry, I don’t know if you have a regular thing going or something, my boss didn’t say anything about - ”

“Ok ok now,” Tom interjected, “Let’s not scare the poor kid any further, he’s trying best.”

“I have a folding chair in the back . . .” The young man, whose name was John and who could not care less about his job, retrieved the the folding chair, along with a brown, metal card table he had found leaned several crates of Snickers bars. Rodger stood waiting by a large pane of glass with a vinyl sticker of a hotdog afixed to it. As Tom and John set up the table, Rodger peeled away at it, tugging at its corners, pulling it off from the top down. Morning light flooded the storefront, outlining in sharp chiaroscuro the decaying facade of a hundred red brick buildings towering in the distance.

Rodger sat. Silently he raised the cup of coffee to his lips, his eyes fixed upon the scene beyond the window, the ghosts of concrete and mortar.

“This used to be my whole world.” Rodger muttered, without breaking his gaze. “When I was nineteen,” he pointed to a crumbly-looking building with three smokestacks, “I worked in that factory right there. And I lived in the middle floor of that one there. I used to come here every night to reflect, but mainly just to talk to this cute barrista named Helen. I used to stay late, past when I knew they’d closed, so I could talk to her after everyone had left . . . It was one of the handful of times in my life where I knew the things happening to me were perfect, that I would look back upon them fondly.” Rodger closed his eyes and took a long, deep draw from his cup. When he was finished, he looked up and around at Tom, John, and the rest of the passangers.

“Thank you for making this possible.”

Rodger nodded happily, closed his eyes again, and slowly bent forward until he was face down on the table. Rodger did not move.

The quiet smile of satisfaction Tom had been wearing melted into abject confusion. “Did - did Rodger just?”

Harriet placed two fingers to Rodger’s throat. “. . . Yep.”

“This is horrible!” Tom exclaimed in disbelief. “This ruins the whole day!”

“Did you have something better planned for him?” Harriet asked. “Here, help me lift him.”

Tom shooed Harriet away, and with the help of John, began to carry Rodger’s body back to the van.

“Where do we - I guess the only place really is his seat.” The passengers watched inquisitively as Tom and John buckled Rodger in, ensuring that he leaned into the wall. Tom and John held their hands at either side of him like a Jenga tower about to collapse, until at last he seemed steady. John exited the van first, nearly falling face first as he scurried to distance himself as much as possible.

“Thank you John!” Ariel yelled after him, to which he waved recklessly as he walked back into the 7-11, nervously returning his attention to the hot dog ferris wheel.

“This has never happened to me before.” Tom sighed plaintively into the ceiling. “Never when we were out and about like this. I don’t know what to do.”

“Tom, can we go to the fair next?” Ethel asked politely.

Tom cranned his neck to see if she was serious.

“Watching those hotdogs reminded me. I’d like to ride a ferris wheel again.”

Everyone was buckling their seatbelts, looking at Tom expectantly.

“But what about Rodger?”

“He’s the only one of us that can’t die now.” Harriet explained. “He’s the least of our concerns.”

“How could you say that?” Tom asked, looking at Rodger’s poor rumpled lapels, his sagging frame.

“He’s gotten what he wants Tom. The last thing he’d want now is for us to break this

energy, to deny the other's what he's gotten because of this little hang up. Stop looking at him Tom." Harriet insisted. "That's not Rodger. Rodger is gone."

In heaven, Rodger, smoothed the ruffles in his suit. His eyes were still adjusting to the ethereal white glow of heaven, the clouds reflecting light like snow. He could see masses and masses of people seated in the distance, many of them looking at him - a large group seemed to be quarreling, though they seemed oblivious to Rodger's presence.

A few stood and, while delicately stepping around their neighbors, made their way up to him.

"Rodger!" called Gregory, though he was still a fair distance away. "Rodger, are you alright?"

"Ah, as alright as I'll ever be. Do I know you?"

Gregory excitedly explained the situation, augmented by Helen and Victor explaining things slower for the old man.

"Is that what I look like?" Rodger lay face down to the clouds, looking into the van, flattening a section of his thinning hair with his left hand. "I suppose that's why they put a man underground when he dies. This is just too perplexing to see."

"Are you upset they continued on like that? With you there in the seat?" Gregory asked.

"Oh, that's not me." Rodger answered.

"The North Pole!" Ariel suggested. "The North Pole has a ferris wheel."

"That's the only one I can think of." agreed Ariel.

"There's no way The North Pole is open in May. Its all Christmas themed." Tom was trying to let go the thought of the dead man sitting behind him. It had become a moot point, he had been outvoted on the severity of the situation. He attempted to occupy his mind with more solvable problems.

"Do you think if we ask polite Tom, that they might let us in?" Ethel posed.

"We can try." he responded. "I don't even know if there would be anyone there."

The North Pole certainly did not look open. Situated between a major highway and a group of foothills that would be snowy at the right times, the park was partitioned off like an ancient fort. A blue, steel gate closed tightly across the length of the entrance, on it a mural of Santa Clause bade them to stop. ‘SEE YOU NEXT CHRISTMAS’ it insisted. To the left of the gate sat a guard post of some sort, like a toll booth, clearly designed to dispense tickets to people fortunate enough to visit the park when it was open.

“There’s a guy in there,” Harriet pointed, “Tom, go get us tickets.”

Tom would have sighed at the increasingly unrealistic path the day had taken, but then again, reality had not been as constant a factor today as it normally was. Tom went with it.

Rolling slowly into the ticket-taking alcove, Tom rolled down his window to address the very confused man trying not to look up from his magazine.

“Hey! Hello . . .” Tom called to him through his window.

Reluctantly the man slid open the tiny glass door and stuck his head out, eyeing with interest the jagged remains of glass outlining the van’s windows. “You guys need directions?”

“We’re actually more interested in the ferris wheel.” Harriet called.

“We’re not open.”

“Is *no one* inside?” Ariel asked.

The man laughed. He was young and slightly pudgy, visibly lethargic but at the same time piqued by probably the only visitors he’d had in months.

“Nope, it’s just me. And I’m just here to keep the place kinda clean and stop people from getting in.”

“So in the entire park, there are no lines?” Ethel asked.

The man smiled. “Yeah, guess not.”

“And there’s no one here to keep an eye on you?” Harriet asked.

“It’s a small park, they trust me.”

“So what you’re saying is, you’re sitting in this little box, reading a magazine. And behind you, there is an entire fully functional amusement park, hidden from all authority?”

The guard's name was Dave, and he had keys to everything.

"I actually do this alot." he explained as he fiddled with a circuit breaker inside a small shack. The park was hauntingly empty. Everywhere hung hyperbolic Christmas decor; garland, tinsel, lifesize wooden reindeer, a monolith Santa Clause standing atop a cane-stripped slide. "The rides should be alot easier to operate with someone on the ground working the controls." Dave flipped a switch, and the whole park lit up and began to slowly creak into motion like a aging record player.

Ethel clapped her hands happily. "Dave, will there be funnel cake?"

"Hell yeah there's going to be funnel cake. You think I take a spin on the carousel without a funnel cake?" Dave approached a row of vendor shops decorated like the log cabin bunkers we have been lead to believe elves live in, and began lifting their roll-top covers as the passengers dispersed and wandered into the park.

Tom switched on a large fryer as Dave proceeded to retrieve some batter from a large industrial refrigerator. "So . . . what the hell are you guys doing?"

"Li-living our goddamn lives." The unbelievably smooth flow of the day mixed with the promise of funnel cake was having a positive effect on Tom.

"Sweet, me too." Dave replied. "Not enough people doing that." He took a big fingerfull of batter and directed it towards his mouth, conveying a look of indulgent ecstasy.

"Does the batter taste good?"

"No, not really." he admitted. As the oil began to sizzle Dave directed a small stream of the batter into it in spirals. The bubbling pool sizzled as the tan goop congealed and floated in the boiling sea of oil like mystical sea creatures.

A couple booths down, Ben was scrapping frantically at the inside of a cotton candy machine. Tom felt inclined, and rather obligated to help him, but he seemed to be doing alright. A blue ribbon of flossy sugar began to float like wispy sails out of the machine. Ben danced back and forth, catching them on a rolled paper tube, like butterflies.

"What on your face, Ben?" Tom called to him. Ben pointed to his cheek with his free hand,

which appeared to be blazoned with paint, and made a pawing motion with his hand.

“It’s a tiger!” Ariel answered, who was abruptly standing in front of the funnel cake stand. She held a palette of grease paint. “You know I used to paint faces at the church carnivals. Lots of crosses and mountains. I never got to do anything so *ferocious*!” Ariel herself had a sort of sun drawn on her forehead, clearly created without the aid of a mirror. “What can I paint on you, Tom?”

“Do the Spiderman thing.” Dave suggested, crossing his face with his fingers. “Like you’ve got the mask on.”

Tom shook his head hesitantly. “That’s seems little intense. I don’t know if I want anything like that.”

“Here Tom.” Ariel leaned across the counter with the palette, dabbing a makeup brush into the red paint. Beneath each of Tom’s eyes she painted a single streak. “Today you are a warrior!” She continued the lines down his cheeks, to the outer sides of his eyes. “I know, this must be terribly disorienting for you. I’m sure it goes against everything you’ve ever done. But you’re doing so well!”

“I-it’s happening quite naturally.” Tom said, flinching. The paint was cold.

“I want the Spiderman if you’re not going to do it.” Dave insisted. “Let me finish my funnel cake first so I don’t get paint all over it.”

Tom, Dave, Ariel, and Ben collected Harriet (who had been trying to operate a roller coaster herself), and finally Ehtel, who had wheeled herself directly to the base of the Ferris wheel and had been sitting quietly ever since.

“Here you are Ethel.” Ariel said as she crouched before her, swiping a thick stroke of black grease paint. Delicately she applied three whiskers to each side of Ethel’s face, as well as two pointed ears at the corners of her forehead.

“Am I adorable?” Ethel asked.

“Oh ABSolutely!” Ariel replied.

Dave began flipping switches and pressing buttons at a control panel near the giant wheel,

and as he did so, music began to emanate from the platform as the wheel began to creak and trundle.

“Ok two at a time. Pull the bar down all the way. Ma’am, please sit down, that’s not safe.”

Tom leaned over and lifted Ethel from her wheelchair - she couldn’t possibly have weighed more than eighty pounds - and assisted her to a carriage. Setting her gently against the back of the seat, he pulled the safety bar down as the ferris wheel lunged them smoothly upward. The breeze up looked like it might choke Ethel, the air so heavy against her pale, nightgowned frame, but as they slowed to a stop at the wheel’s apex Tom could hear Ethel laughing. It was midday and the sun shown down upon the city and foothills like a spotlight, revealing everything evenly, leaving no shadow. The carriage rocked gently back and forth like a cradle.

“You know Tom, I can’t remember the last time I was on a ferris wheel. I can’t remember the first time either.”

“You can remember times in the middle though? Some time?”

“I think so,” she chuckled, “you know, I feel like I’m losing a little bit more each day.”

“That’s . . . that’s too bad.”

“No, not really, you know Tom, there are alot of memories I miss, like the ferris wheels and carnivals. But there’s alot of other memories just sitting around, talking up space. You know how they make sure we keep our rooms at the house clean? So there’s not alot of useless empty boxes and whatnot sitting around?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well you’ve got to treat your mind the same way, Tom. If there’s something getting in your way, you’ve got to get rid of it. It doesn’t matter where it came from. You know, each morning when I wake up, my room’s a little cleaner. I’ve held on to maybe . . . one or two things, of sincere importance, but let go of everything else. Its a good thing Tom. Everyday there’s a little more space for me to work with.”

The wheel pulled backwards, and began to spin swiftly in circles, fast enough to excite but gentle enough not to disorient.

“May I suggest something Tom?” Ethel asked. The patterns of shadows from the ferris

wheel bars danced across her face as the wind fluttered the remaining wisps of her white blue hair. “When you wake up from now on, do so in an empty room.”

The Ferris wheel slowed to a stop, and when Ethel reached the bottom, she lay lifelessly against the back of the carriage, a look of peace across her face. Gently Tom lifted her from the seat and placed her back in her wheelchair. Dave didn’t notice as he let the passengers off one by one, back onto the platform. He stood idly scratching red paint from the inside of his ear.

“Ok guys, we have to go.” Tom announced. He motioned discretely to Harriet by shaking Ethel’s chair lightly back and forth.

Harriet exited the platform and hobbled down thin metal stairs as quickly as she could. “Alright everyone,” she chimed in, “Back to the van . . .”

“You guys leaving?” Dave asked, setting his funnel cake down on the control panel. “I’m just getting warmed up!”

“Sorry Dave, we have a busy day. I hope you understand.”

“Definitely. Life doesn’t slow down for anyone.” Helping the last passenger out of the cart, he sat down in an empty cart, and struck the power lever with his foot. “You guys come back any time.”

“We will!” Ariel yelled after him as they darted through the tiny snow village, back to the bus.

In heaven, Ethel realized she was standing. The nightgown that she had been wearing had been replaced by the sun dress she hadn’t seen in twenty years.

Ahead of her was a crazy bustle of voices, shouting. Soothsayers attempted to calm the situation, while others lied on their stomachs, pushing their faces through the clouds.

“Well isn’t this lively.” Ethel said aloud. For the first time in a while she knew she was making a pun.

Gregory ran up to her, explaining things in a quick but more practiced manner. Helen and Victor stood proudly by, exchanging sly smiles with Ethel over the boy’s exuberance.

“Well I hope *I’m* not the cause of all this fuss.” Ethel wandered into the crowd of people

where the heated argument was centered.

“And I’m saying you should be quiet!” the angry man boomed at a group of teenagers. Behind him stood other men and women, nodding in agreement to his words. “You’re being completely impolite by talking aloud in front of others like this.”

“Who?” one asked, “Stacie, Eric, or Ryan?”

“I am NOT calling you by the silly names you’ve made up, and I’m not - ”

“Bradley,” Ethel asked the man, “Bradley, is that you?”

The man paused mid sentence and looked at Ethel.

“Oh Bradley, if I had told you just how many people told me to let you go.” Ethel approached the man slowly, her eyes watering, embracing him fully, “If you knew just how close I was to doing so, but I never did. Of all things, I never forgot you Bradley.”

The van was a safe distance away, in a park-and-ride off the highway.

“Ok.” Tom said. “Ok.” The car was rolling in circles around the big empty parking lot.

Ariel had smuggled a palette of oil paint out of the park and was painting a giant stag on the right side of Harriet’s face - its antlers were wildly exaggerated, and wrapped across Harriet’s nose and eyes, to the other side of her face.

“Tom, I’m gettin Hungry.” Ariel called. “Think we could get lunch?”

“Yes, I could definitely go for some food.”

“You know what I could really go for?” Ariel mused, “An Orange Julius and a Chicken Basket from the Dairy Queen.”

Tom looked in the rearview mirror at Harriet, Ariel, and Ben; then also to what used to be Rodger and Ethel. “If that’s fine with everyone.”

There were two yeses and a nod.

“The Lakeline Mall has both, about ten feet apart from eachother.” Ariel added.

Tom speed up and rocketed out of the lot onto the freeway, the air drying the paint on everyone’s faces.

Tom peered in the windows of the van, as it sat in the mall parking lot. The afternoon sun was waning into diagonal tangents, illuminating the inside of the van.

“Can you see them?”

“Not really I don’t think.”

“Come on Tom, godammit. Leave that fear in the van, my funnel cake is starting to wear off.”

The inside of that mall was crowded for a week day - Tom remembered that school had probably just been let out for the year. Kids everywhere hung to the counters of various fast food stops, shooting inquisitive glances to other groups of kids, talking and joking with each other in ways that Tom found difficult to place into clear-cut categories of aggression and affection.

“Oh no, are we having flash backs Tom?” Harriet jabbed. “Was High School your Nam?”

“No everything went just fine.” Tom retorted. “Besides I’m an adult now.”

“What, these kids?” Ariel asked. “They’re harmless. Just a bunch of mall rats.” Ariel sashayed up to the counter of the Orange Julius. Behind the counter a boy in tight black jeans sat on the edge of an ice tray in front a row of fountain drink dispensers. Two girls chirping merrily hung on the frame of a door to a back room, and watching out of the corner of their eyes to see if Ariel was only browsing, or intended to purchase.

“You must be Tommy.” Ariel said to the boy on the ice tray. “You’re not wearing your tame tag.”

Tommy slid off the counter and straightened his shirt. “You . . . did Rodney?”

“Oh, I’ve known Rodney a very long time. And I can tell you that if he were here he’d be throwing a fit.”

Tommy made a knowing glance to the girls by the door, who immediately straightened up and began to make themselves look busy with a pair of bleach-stained rags.

“Well first of all, I’m gonna need a large Orange with Immunity booster. But before you make it change the sugar water, I can here the syrup spout clicking.”

One of the girls darted into the back room and began fussing with a large mess of tubes and syrup packages.

“Now, what will you three be having? I’m going to warn against the hot dogs.”

The three inspected the menu carefully.

“Oh, ya’ll don’t know what you’re doing. Ok we’re going to need a large Fruitasia with chunks of banana in it, a medium strawberry and pineapple with some frozen yogurt and drizzles of raspberry on top, and a large Chocolate Mocha with extra chocolate syrup.”

“Ah, none of those are on the menu.” Tommy said, pointing to the large plastic placard Ariel had bade the group to ignore.

“Also its not called a Fruitasia any more. They changed the name after the hurricanes in Southeast Asia.”

“Now that is the damn *stupidest* thing I’ve ever heard.” Harriet contested.

“The tag line was ‘A tsunami of real fruit flavor’.

“Damn sensitive bastards.”

“Tell me about it.” Tommy said. “They took the banana out of it when they changed the name too. What the hell, right?”

“You’re telling me.” Harriet agreed. “You’re going to let them tell you how to make drinks because they don’t want to offend the Chinese?!”

“Hell no!” Tommy said, “Well, no, not entirely. I mean, I’m not doing it to offend the Chinese.”

“What else have you guys been making?” Ariel asked. “You don’t have to lie to me Tommy, I know how it works. You may not believe it, but long ago I worked here. I worked here for years. Of anything I ever did it was my favorite job and you know why?”

“Not the money, right?” Tommy laughed. The girls from the back room, their guard lowered, joined him at the front counter.

“Heavens no!” Ariel laughed in retort. “Because of the freedom! There’s alot worse work to be doing on your summer vacation then hanging out in the mall, drinking free smoothies. And part of the fun was experimenting with new drinks. I always thought that when deciding new drinks, they should come and talk to the people who worked here. Who would know how to make a better smoothie than a bunch of bored teenagers surrounded by ingredients and blenders?”

“That’s EXACTLY what *we* say!” one of the girls chimed in. “We joke all the time about leaving and making our own smoothie shop.”

“One that puts banana in the Fruitasia.” the second girl added.

Tommy wandered around the fruit bin with three blenders clutched in his left hand, scooping heaping piles of strawberries and orange juice into their open tops, his hand already caked with all sorts of liquified fruits. All three workers smelled of strawberries and had Pollock-esque splatters of various fruits down the fronts of their shirts. As Tommy dumped heaping scoops of smoothie powder into the blenders, clouds of white dust billowed out and around them.

Ariel inhaled deeply. “Its like I never left.” Complacently she set into place the crooked lid of a nearby straw dispenser. “You know, this place is a very complex entity.”

“This Orange Julius?”

“Well, yes, but on a larger scale, this mall. Its all interconnected into its own strange society. Just coming here occasionally isn’t enough to realize that. You spend alot of time here, you start to notice new things. The way everything works together.”

“Its true.” one of the girls said, leaning over the counter with a handful of straws. “Did you notice the king of the mall is here?”

“Oh I didn’t! Can you point him out to me?”

The girl pointed to a early twenties man standing by the bathroom’s entrance with a long ponytail, dark reflective sunglasses, and a leather trenchcoat.

Ariel began to laugh. “Oh, that’s a new one. The king looked different when I was hear.”

“Who is the king of the mall?” Tom asked. “And how is he . . . appointed?”

“The king is the leader of the mallrats.” Tommy said.

“There’s always been one.” Ariel added. “The mallrats need an older gent to flock to, one that can buy them cigarettes and alcohol, teach them in the ways of life after high school. But its important that this person is also as immature and petty as a teenager. So this man here, who would never be able to relate to people his own age, has found a niche area of society where he has been declared king.”

“ Its sort of poetic, really.” added one of the girls. “Even though that guy is a total douche,

he serves a purpose. For instance, you'll never find mallrats around the Gap. That's because all the pretty girls the King went to high school with work there, and he doesn't want to be seen with his legion. And that works out perfectly because the Gap doesn't want mallrats."

"But there's *more*" the other girl said, leaning in. "With the mallrats gone, all the girls come and try and clothes with their friends. But when there's a bunch of girls in there, the janitors come stand in front of the store and watch them, just mopping the same part of the floor *over and over again*."

"Now this makes the woman that runs the Celtic Treasures kiosk angry. She's like, either jealous - "

"Or the janitors are blocking *her* view of the Gap!" Tommy interjected.

"Yes, there are several theories." the second girl continued. "Anyway, she'll get all flustered and call the security guards, always something about the perverted janitors raping young girls with their eyes. It is pretty creepy, after all. So the guards will come and hassle the janitors, and keep an eye on that general area."

"And THAT means that the security guards are too preoccupied to keep an eye on the mallrats." the first girl concluded. "They're free to smoke, yell profanity, and basically be themselves with no intervention."

"It's a very delicate ecosystem." the second girl rung her rag out into a gutter built into the orange-plastic floor. The water could be heard trickling through the floor beneath them and through pipes somewhere behind the walls.

Ariel grabbed the four smoothies off the counter and distributed them amongst Tom, Ben, Harriet, and herself. "Its a complex entity. And like I said, not just this Orange Julius, but also not just this mall. Do you see the way relationships play their way into everything, Tom? Nothing is disconnected from the whole. You may think of yourself as separate, but you're just as caught up in it as all of us. You always have been." Ariel reacher her hand into a bucket of orange halves sitting on the counter beside a juicer. "And everyone is just waiting for someone to set the whole thing spinning."

Ariel held an orange half up to the workers of Orange Julius. "Do you know what we used

to do with these?”

“Juice them?” Tommy asked blankly.

“No. You know that Dairy Queen across from us here?”

All three began to smile.

“They have limes.” the first girl said.

“We’re *really* not *supposed* to.” the second girl said, “And even if we *did* it has to be really slow, not like now -”

Without much hesitation Ariel launched the orange at a truly remarkable speed directly into the Dairy Queen - a boy behind the counter demonstrating the structural integrity of a blizzard moved his head out of the way just in time as the fruit made a loud *THUNK* against soft serve machine.

A large rotund woman emerged furiously from the back room, her Bouffant hairdo held down by a drive-thru headset. Enraged, the woman scanned the crew of Orange Julius, but her anger subsided when she saw Ariel - a mutual smile spread across their faces, and suddenly the woman thrust her hand into an open canisters, pulling with it a half dozen or so sliced limes.

Ariel went in for more oranges as a fistful of limes peppered the counter top of Orange Julius like errant machine gun bullets. The occupants of the crowded food court watched at first in horror, then in fascination, as Ariel reached into the bucket for more oranges.

“Embrace the complexity!” Ariel hollered loudly to Tom, tossing extra oranges to the workers behind her. Tommy emerged from the back room with another five gallon bucket as teenager and adult alike turned their attention to the two fast food shops, clearing the path between them.

“I knew we’d meet again!” the woman with the bouffant called to Ariel. “I hope you know - this is where it ends.”

They were both chuckling uncontrollably. Ariel raised an orange in her right fist, and the workers behind her followed suit. The woman at Dairy Queen raised a fistfull of limes, as did the matching line of workers behind her.

“Grab some damn fruit Tom!” Harriet insisted, removing a jug of sliced strawberries from

behind the counter. Tom shoved his arm elbow deep into the vat, retrieving a gooey mess of strawberries.

“CHARGE!” Ariel screeched, and as she let launch another sling of oranges, shouts of protest and camaraderie alike rang through the food court as people everywhere dashed to either leave or join into the soggy fruit crescendo sailing above the white and grey tiled floor.

There were slices of pizza, chicken sandwiches, double cheeseburgers and Pepsi, god, so much Pepsi. Cartons of Red Hots burst in the sky like a sucrose fireworks, frenchfries pounded the linoleum like a monsoon, and Tom stood in the middle of all of it cradling a tub of mashed blueberries, staining passerbys with bright colbalt smears, as teenagers, children, and a surprising number of adults ran cheering through the food court, picking up scraps from the floor, feverishly purchasing more food to be thrown.

Ariel caught Tom by the elbow, pointed out the window that lead to the suspended balcony. On it a crowd of people stood, appalled, looking into the mess inside.

“You see those people?” she said. “Those people are making excuses. FUCK EXCUSES. You don’t get anything that way.”

“Participation!” Harriet seconded. “It doesn’t matter if it hurts!”

“THIS IS COMBAT TRAINING!” the King of the Mall declared, smashing a handful of raspberries into Tom’s forehead before laughing hysterically. “This is the best day of my life.” he sighed, shaking Tom’s hand. “Free cigs and now this. FUCK!”

Tom knew what was coming, and had not lost himself too completely to forget it. As he saw Ariel begin to stagger he collected the wheelchair he had seen sitting by the entrance, and circled around behind her just as she collapsed.

“Harriet! Ben! We’re done here!” he shouted as he made his way to the door. The crowd failed to notice as the three and Ariel burst through the double doors laughing, stained from head to toe with smears of fruit and other foodstuffs, their face paint blurring in with it all. Pushing off the wheelchair like a skateboard Tom balanced himself upon the handles and rode the chair down the hill of the parking lot, to the van. “Hurry hurry!” he insisted as Harriet helped him lift Ariel into her seat, strapping her in.

“Nobody smells yet, that’s good.” Harriet commented as the three pulled themselves hurriedly into the van, Tom fumbling with the keys, at last clunking the van into drive.

“Watch the chair!” Harriet called to Tom, who swerved but still managed to clip the wheelchair that was still rolling down the sharp incline of the parking lot, shattering the right headlamp of the van.

“Don’t stop!” Harriet yelled as they shot quickly back onto the street and sped away.

In heaven, Ariel checked her blouse for bits of fruit, and found none.

“Rdoger! Ethel!” she hollered into the crowd ahead of her. They waved politely back, beckoning her to join them. A group of people ran to Ariel to begin explaining things, while Gregory Helen and Vincent remained listening to Ehtel and Bradley. The man was seated now, calmly discussing things with Ethel, a confused look on his furrowed brow.

“I don’t remember any part of it, not the normal way. I can’t place events or faces, all I can remember are feelings.”

“Feelings like when you look at me?” Ethel asked.

“Yes, I feel a feeling I remember when I look at you.”

“That’s enough.” Ethel said. “That’s all memory is really good for.”

“Who’s next?” Tom called to the backseat.

“Ben, where do you want to go?” Harriet asked him.

“Probably no use.” Tom sighed. “I’ve never heard that man utter a single word.”

The sun was beginning to set over the interstate; the passengers, or what was left of them, had never been so far away from the group home. Ben sat peacefully in his chair starring out the jagged broken windows, the spring breeze pushing in the sweet smell of flowers from a nearby field.

“Ben!” Tom called, craning his neck to look at the man. Shaken from his quiet meditation, Ben turned to Tom and clasped his hands politely, widening his eyes as if to say ‘I’m listening’.

“Where do you want to go.” Tom asked again.

Ben began to think. Out the window passed a large field of wild grass, the sun beginning to sink into it. He extended his finger and pointed out to it, at no particular place.

“Where?” Tom asked. “Where are you pointing to Ben?”

“Just pull over you damn fool.”

Tom slowed the van off the highway, through the cheese-grater wake-up strip onto a gravelly turn off beside where the road meet a steel-girder fence.

“Here?” Tom asked, looking back at Ben.

Ben stood and fidgeted the passenger door open. Tom and Harriet exited with him, following him along to the break in the fence that lead out to the large open meadow. The sun cut in the sharpest angle through the valley, tinting the fields yellow, punctuated only with the infinite black shadows of the three remaining passengers. Ben wandered out into the center of the field, until it was hard to see the van. He smiled at Tom and Harriet and nodded, smiling a serene, bemused grin. There he stood in silence, starrng out into the setting sun. All around the group was grass, flowers and other unknown plants; and in the quiet of the far-removed highway field the group could hear their deep rusting and breathing. Facing the setting sun Ben outstretched his arms as if he was catching sunlight and held there like that for a moment, before collapsing backwards into the soft grass below.

From heaven Ben watched Harriet and Tom struggle to load the body he had left behind into the wheelchair and push it through the thick flora back to the van, their efforts hampered by the fading light.

“Over here Ben!” Ariel called to him. So many people lie on their stomachs in the vast clouded plateau it looked much like nap time in a preschool, only a few people still sat upright. Those that did made nervous chit-chat with each other, discussing mainly the Tom and his fated passengers, but occasionally things they remembered as well. An intent curiosity pressed itself upon the space and Ben remained quiet in respect of it.

The road before the van became dark and soon was unfamiliar to the two remaining

passengers. This situation was not helped by the right headlight that refused to work after its collision with the shopping cart.

“Harriet,” Tom called. His chest seemed heavy, somehow. His neck also seemed to be falling asleep, a strange feeling he tried to alleviate by stretching his neck from side to side.

“Oh no,” Gregory said aloud, popping his head out of the clouds. “I wasn’t even thinking about it but, Tom should have taken his pill an hour ago or more.”

Those within earshot also sprang their heads up with a look of abject surprise. “Is that bad Gregory?” a man near him asked. “What happened when you stopped taking the pills?”

“What are these pills you’re talking about, that Tom is taking?” Rodger asked, the rest of the passengers looking on in confusion.

“Harriet, where are we going?” His neck was beginning to tingle in the most peculiar way.

Harriet was leaned against the wall of the van directly behind Tom, as always, but for once spoke quietly.

“Anywhere is fine, Tom” she closed her eyes as in a half sleep, “The whole damn time that’s all I’ve been telling you. Anywhere is fine, its what you do with the anywhere that matters.” Harriet cozied herself into the molded plastic wall, attempting to find comfort in the inflexible piece. “I think its just you now Tom. Don’t disappoint me.” Harriet became silent, and Tom was alone.

All of heaven looked down on Tom watching the streets in a reverential silence, a piercing tension filling the space.

The wheels beneath Tom made a rubbery purr on the pavement, quite audible through the broken windshield and windows; the road he rolled down was now completely barren and unfamiliar. The paint and food smeared across him was now dry and creased everywhere it touched skin with sticky ripples forged from laugh lines and labor, of carrying and throwing things in ways that Tom was still recounting - the day had been long and there were still parts of it he was remembering hours later, like lost childhood anecdotes that resurfaced years later to make

you smile. And now - the single remaining headlamp shone a bright vignette into the road ahead of Tom, illuminating only one necessary piece of landscape at a time, the cool spring breeze blowing straight through him.

Tom could feel his neck tightening, his breathing becoming hindered - letting out a small, private chuckle, he pushed his foot onto the gas pedal and the van roared like a lion-drawn chariot as it accelerated into the uncharted depth of blackness before him.

In heaven Tom stood silently, confused at first. As his eyes adjusted to the breaking daylight he could see an enormous crowd of people before him, and then faces - Harriet, Ethel, Ben, every one of his passengers. The people standing behind them were unfamiliar to Tom but they smiled warmly as if he were an old friend, one they had been waiting to see for quite some time.

“Welcome home, Tom!” hollered a young boy near the front of the crowd, and the entire place erupted into applause and cheer.

Tom was not sure where he was, but as he could tell, it was the friendliest place he had ever had the pleasure of finding.

THE END.