

# Paper Cuts

Andy Trattner

I had to pee. Thankfully, the Garden State welcomed New York drivers with bountiful flower shops and gas stations. I exited the tangle of highways to relieve myself, the tank, and my conscience—a speckled purple orchid for a grandmother worth a \$19.99 shrub.

I walked back slowly through the outdoor gallery, a forest of flowers, to my silver Corolla. I removed the painted wood-grain metallic bottle from the plastic cup-holder and livened the clean grey cabin with a foot of blossoming magenta planted between the parking brake and my stash of quarter rolls. I squared the bottle door-side and traced an elbow arc, wondering if I would accidentally play lumberjack with my beautiful new friend.

Off again down the turnpike or parkway or whatever it's called, I snuck a left-lane peek at the prickling mass called Manhattan. To my right, the six-thirty sun peeled the sky like an orange, sprayed the pulpy white clouds in a citrus glaze of yellows and pinks. A row of five headlights twinkled up and ahead in the sky, reaching back into the darkening infinity of space, slightly diagonal to my line of sight. They blinked closer, heavily, like Christmas lights that dangle over a garage on the slowest setting, or a lighthouse that seems to move toward you, or a grotesque fish with a small lamp waiting in the darkest corner of the ocean.

The nearest materialized into a jumbo jet, low and broad enough to cover all eight lanes in a gleaming carbon-fiber shadow, a stiff caricature of a giant bird. As it descended to the airfield immediately on the right, another headlight popped into existence, way off in the distance behind the other four. I marveled at this factory of the dark sky and glanced northeast again, out over the water, at the tallest glassy 'skrapers lit from the inside like clay pumpkins, wondering if the pins of window light prevented people inside from seeing the stream of airplanes setting with the sun. I imagined each of those tiny city lights as a hopeful dream, persisting against the all-consuming darkness of night simply because it could.

On I drove, progressing down New Jersey in that ethereal dusk, happily skipping classes and lame “career week” events to surprise Grammy and Papa in their salty home by the shore after visiting the Big Apple for the first time, smil-

ing as Walk The Moon played on the radio. The darkness became comfortable. Unremarkable, unmemorable. . .

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“Father, wake up please.” She would not ask again. She knows I don’t need coffee nor sympathy.

I opened my eyes slowly, adjusting to the soft glow of afternoon light filtering through the third story windows of the bare one-room apartment. She was standing in the doorway, a youthful silhouette with an armful of my favorite snacks: Gardetto’s, dried mango, wasabi peas, and White Rabbit Candy—those little Chinese tootsie rolls with rice wrappings that dissolve in your mouth. I had not tasted one since I was twelve. I must have told her about them last year, for her fourth birthday. Probably about coffee too.

“Happy birthday. Thank you for waking me.” I sat up, peeling off the thin bedsheets, dangling my legs over the white vinyl floor. My height prevented me from touching unless I arched my feet downward like a ballerina. I grabbed my shirt from the shelf protruding next to my head. The bare walls wrapped us in a cocoon of aluminum grey.

She smiled and walked to the bed with three excited steps, dumping her cargo in my lap and climbing up the side. I watched her smooth caramel brown hair cover her face as she propelled herself upwards and sideways with her skinny arms. She wore tiny jeans and a purple striped shirt. Such incongruous wrappings for the precocious gift beneath. Though I did not remember how I had eaten for breakfast the day before, I already knew what would happen next. She was on the bed, cross-legged and facing me amidst the crumpled sheets. I opened the wasabi peas with the ever-satisfying vending machine pop and placed the bag between us before shelving the other treats and hoping that my shirt would forgive the intrusion.

“Father, will you please tell me about how it all happened?” Of course, she knows that I know. I smile faintly, gazing into her dark brown eyes. They have gotten darker, trading tones with her hair. She has rosy cheeks that say “I was born just last week.” I remember every freckle because I counted them five years ago today, when I couldn’t sleep due to the alien presence in my life. 67. Her color fills my vision, amplified by the rainbow of tears welling up and bursting outward. Inward. I sigh. Gently wrap my arms around her and squeeze. Inhale.

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It began with migraines. Pounding headaches that nobody understood properly. My grandmother always said to eat fish twice per week since it was supposed to help. I loved fish so I did not complain. But even when I ate plenty of

salmon, a combination of sleeplessness and brain-bopping exercise would turn everything blurry. Maybe dehydration was a factor also. Twice per year since I was in the middle school gymnasium trying to do dive-rolls and headstands on the blue mats, I would start to lose focus in class. Dark ovals placed themselves between me and the whiteboard, the screen, or the book. They weren't exactly dark though. It was as if I could not focus on little splotches of vision. I could tilt my head up or sideways a little and make out the words in the center, but the same patch elsewhere would lose focus in turn. Sometime in high school, I put two and two together and learned that this was the perfect time to take 400mg of Ibuprofen and head home to sleep through the rest of the day. But back in middle school I would just squint until the spots went away. And about ten minutes later, my head would get run over by a freight train. I vomited twice, once on Ms. Harlan's carpet. She probably deserved it because she told us about how she accidentally closed her garage on her cat the week before.

I made it to college before I started to get worse. My freshman year, I broke my leg playing soccer. I was lying in my bed recovering from surgery on the twice-fractured fibula while my roommate was sleeping through chemistry. I think I was reading a book. Anyways, I remember what happened next very clearly. The words became splotchy with dark patches of lost focus, so I put down the book. I looked up and around at my room and saw lumps of brick wall disappear and reappear from my vision, engulfed by the spots. I was about to roll over and hop to my medicine box when I heard a millisecond of static and saw a flash like miniature lightning in one of the spots to the upper left of my right eyeball. It wasn't in my left eyeball, I could tell because of the parallax. My mind started racing at the terrifying thought of a super-migraine but I couldn't move because I have always been fascinated by the phenomena of partially losing the ability to see. That is not to say that I love my glasses, but I was quite interested at this new development. So I stayed sitting in bed, propped up by my pillows from Target, waiting for a minute to see if it would happen again. It didn't.

Of course, right on schedule freshman spring, I had another migraine. And this one was pretty scary. I was walking to class, engulfed by the swarm of bodies filtering through hallways and doorways, when peoples' faces started blurring into the splotches of unfocused shadow. Or half their faces. Or the wall or ceiling. Whatever I looked at, really. I couldn't easily turn around and head back to my room for a nap, so I kept surging with the flow and prepared to sit through a lecture on epistemology. My friend Sumac and I really enjoyed laughing at the professor's belly button showing through his shirt, and we placed bets on whether or not he forgot to button and tuck the bottom. I stood to win two dollars that day, double or nothing. Anyway, I was making my way through

the hall. It was 12 feet tall, with room for four abreast, and black doorways lined the cream-colored walls. The floor was a fancy marble in this particular section where the president's office was. I was walking just fine, ignoring people who waved or may have smiled because I couldn't really see, and suddenly I heard a great big *SHSHST* burst of static. Two of the splotches, one in my right eye and one in my left, simultaneously (but in different directions) sprouted little diagonal lightning bolts. They disappeared just as quickly, along with the noise. Then it happened again as I stepped forward with my other foot. A burst of noise, this time I recognized it as the sound of someone ripping cardboard in your ear, and flashes of white in the spots. Like little angry claws scraping jagged slots in dirt. The afterimage was burned onto my retina.

You know some of what happens next. Over the next two years, these pre-migraine attacks occur with increasing frequency and intensity. I visit the doctor twice but neither can do anything particularly helpful for this "natural occurrence" because "everyone experiences migraines differently." I tell some folks in the neuroscience department but they get bored of waiting on my next attack and their inability to throw me into a scan quick enough when it happens. All I can do is describe to them how the spots come, like black ovals whose edges are set to blur and 65% opacity. Then the horrible static ripping sounds, increasing in duration and intensity with what I now identify as clawing, some bulging presence frantically tearing at the spots from the other side in sharp, small-stroke bursts. I didn't know what to tell people anymore, so I started to shut my eyes and go fetal until the spots faded and the headache began. It didn't shut out the ripping, like phone books torn to shreds inside my eardrum.

Then one day, they burst free. I wish I had been there to see it. I would have won 256 dollars from Sumac.

I had a migraine the previous day. The ripping was worse than ever and the bright, choppy claw-marks were coming faster than ever. I might have missed the tiny triangle of white that poked through one of the bright slits that they made. The ripping continued for five minutes after the spots and claw lightning disappeared. I was too scared to sleep.

I drove to visit my grandparents and forgot all about the migraine and its terrifying accompaniment. Migraines, like most pains, are easily forgotten with a bit of time. But I will never forget the call that I took in the South Jersey gas station as the attendant filled the tank with gleaming petroleum gas.

"You were right, the ripping was demons they are here, stay away keep your family safe *SHSHST* oh nonono, OH GOD NO! pleee—*SSHHSHT*—ease W-W-WHHYYYY—*SHSHT-SHHHSHTSHT-SHSHT-SHST*—"

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I paused and appraised my daughter. What a birthday present. But the tilt of her head said she was hungry for knowledge, the slight lean forward said she was intent on the story, and the biting of her lip and furrow of the brow said she was fitting the puzzle pieces into her conception of reality, one at a time. I walked to the ceramic sink and filled my single plastic cup with water. I drank deeply, offered her the rest. I used to give strangers the first sip, let alone family, but the luxury of ready water was still too intimate and unfamiliar to share easily, even after—

“Good afternoon, Michael.” —four years. “Is it OK if I come in?”

I slowly turned from daughter to mother. I took the long route, as if my eyes got lost on the way to the door. They first turned right, toward the sink and closet behind, all shadows. Then grey wall, windows still covered, white floor, grey wall, doorway. There wasn’t much to delay the inevitable. I rose from the bed and stepped toward the doorway on the left. Wordlessly, I absorbed her presence in my little world. I nodded, she stepped forward out of the intense hall lighting, into my life once more. I was unsure of the appropriate response. Our bodies were too close. Her skin was smooth mahogany.

“Well come on, ya great mute idiot! At least give me a hug!” She enfolded me into her arms, and I melted. A tingling like thawing hands or electricity ran up and down my back. I held her warmth to me, gently squeezed. She smelled like fabric softener and chocolate chip cookies and freshly mowed grass. I brushed her cheek with my lips, softly. She gripped me tighter, inhaling into the crook of my neck and releasing with a kiss to hold me at arm’s length. We had fallen onto the bed.

“May I?” she whispered. I nodded. It was why she came in.

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I was wearing heels at the school career fair, talking with a John Deere recruiter. She was strong and articulate and appreciative of tractors just like my ma and pa. I would have felt right at home if I didn’t have to wear those damn heels. Someone told me that they did a study concluding every inch of height gives you five thousand extra dollars per year in salary. At that point, my feet were worth that kind of money. Thank goodness nobody told me makeup gave you extra—I would have ruined all of it crying at what my life had become, probably in the middle of the damn career fair. They probably had only studied white girls anyway.

*PSHHHSHT*—we turned left in time to stumble backwards from the recruiter’s fancy green display boards. The central section of a tri-fold was being torn in a frenzy of jagged crosshatched hair-thin scalpel slices. It looked like the cardboard was self-destructing, since nothing was touching it that we could

see, and it was completely still except for the rapid *sssc sssc* of the slicing. A great gash fell out from employee benefits and the title was just Deere since John was completely illegible, diced with thin razors. The intensity increased, cardboard starting flying in littleshard in all directions, and a light grey slender mass stabbed through the poster board then retracted whip-like, a Pixar 3-D dream. The mangled display fell, whooshing to the ground.

Everybody in the gymnasium had frozen by now, and we were all watching the space behind where the board had stood. *PSHHHSHSHT-SHSST-sssc-SHSHSST-sssssc-sc-ssc-PSHSHT*. There was a dark, flat oval hanging in the air. To the people on the sides it must have been almost invisible, a small slit. To us in front, it looked like an elliptical tinted window shimmering behind a heat wave down some hot country road. But the shimmering came from a continuously slicing of the air by triangular flashes of paper, like giant tangrams but waaay skinnier—razor thin—coming out of the darkness, fading with a terrible concreteness into this world. I knew immediately that I owed your father more than my bank account could afford, and I also knew that it would behoove me to haul my ass out of there, *stat*.

I took off my heels but nobody noticed since they were all crowding around the noisy void. I turned to see more spots opening up, portals of oblivion, maybe 20 all over the fair. Silence except for the pervasive ripping, *ssnic*-ing, static that doubled in volume each step closer. I walked to the propped-open doorway as if I were heading to the restroom or getting some fresh air. In the atrium of the athletic center, people were milling about as usual, and nothing from the gym could be heard. I glanced back through the doorway and saw the recruiter I was speaking with just one minute ago, still standing in front of what was now the largest patch of darkness, an inky, cavernous disk about four feet tall and six across, that faded into the air around it. In that glance, I saw the first of Them come out, straight through the table and recruiter, both of which peeled in half and fell as It shot forward through the air, whipped an eerily exact 90 degrees around, and shot sideways while facing me, rending the recruiter's partner—who was still facing the dark spot—spine from ribcage. His head was still attached, so it kind-of fell downward as the inside of his body unzipped from ankles to shoulders and collapsed outward like a one-bellow, gut-filled accordion. The creature seemed to pause—nobody had even reacted yet, I was seeing all of this in slow motion—and everything erupted into chaos. Between bodies surging towards the doorway and screams cast to the heavens like lifelines, I saw It clearly for the first time.

It was vaguely humanoid, with six main segments that looked like a child had cut them from paper sheets. It had four triangle appendages, two upper arms which incessantly vibrated as they sliced the air and two pointed legs, all

no thicker than the inside of a Coke can and each a solid piece of stiff matted silvery white-grey. It's body was almost transparent, a point-down triangle that had similar proportions to the arms and legs, 18 inches at the shoulders down to a vague point at the hips. It was vibrating so fast that my eyes couldn't quite see it properly, like a helicopter or an airplane propeller. Everything seemed to be free-floating, and it stayed near the ground but I never saw It's legs touch down. It seemed to float about the crowd, going right through people and objects like a knife through hummus. It's head was another point-down triangle, a reptilian blank, mean-looking thing cut from a sheet of A4 letterhead, floating just above the torso, flickering side to side. It was truly otherworldly, except the eyes—two fierce triangles, inward-pointing and thin, just where you might expect them. The eyes were the clearest part of Them, no blur, just little vacant cutouts straight through to the other side of Their two dimensional bodies. The eyes seemed to move a bit, narrowing, but maybe it was just the quick swiveling of Its head.

I took all of this in for about half a second as all the things and bodies in the gym were shredded. Some of the more excited demons were vibrating fast enough to make people kind-of explode when they walked through them. At the first human explosion, I decided it was time to run away, so I dropped my heels and ran, pulling out my phone and calling your father as I weaved through campus to the subway station. More disk portals were slowly opening in the air as I ran, one even opened right next to my head and I didn't see it but the noise went through the phone's receiver. Then I was in the subway, rushing down the steps as the train was about to pull out. It started rolling, and I screamed at it in hopeless sobbing frustration, "WHY!" as portals sliced into being around me. Some passengers in the last car saw that I was alone on the deserted platform and forced open the door as the train picked up speed. Barefoot, I leapt into the outstretched arms from the full subway car, dropping my phone as we pulled away and the station disintegrated in a cacophony of sliced air and explosions of wall tiles.

We were a typical midwestern farm family, happy to have our land and horses and livestock. We would take one of the pigs or pumpkins every couple years to the county fair. Kids would come across the dirt road from the Kowalski's orchard to play in our little corn maze each fall during apple-picking season. We would put out a pail of broken-up salt-blocks instead of candy to reward those who could find the exit, and grandfather would watch from the top of the grain silo to help out the younger ones who had yet to develop a sense of direction. After grandpa fought in the army (mostly with his fellow sergeants, he would always joke), he decided he didn't need or want to do any more school (enough of that classroom bullshit for the first four fifths of my life!) and worked hard

on the farm instead. The old owner was really pleased at grandfather's hard work and passion for the field, so she gave it all to him when she passed. He would always wink at us grandchildren when he told that part.

Thankfully, They had not kept pace with the subway. I took the bus from the subway stop and borrowed Laurie's truck from the last stop. She took one look at me when I rushed in and said the keys were in the glove compartment. I pulled up to our house, a little two-bedroom ranch, with huge homemade porches and play rooms sprouting from all sides, most of it my handiwork. I waved and grandfather up in the silo, his little nest, an American flag hanging over the stairway railing. Inside, Ma and Pa had the tube TV turned up like a radio while they chopped potatoes for an early supper, facing the wall which was our kitchen. I threw myself on them and held tight like it would never be enough, then Jasper came in and I hugged him and kissed him like never before. I always thought he barked at the wrong moments, for instance, Saturday mornings at 7am. But I was so happy to have him slobber all over me, I momentarily forgot about the situation. Ma said it was a bit early to be home on a Friday, and Pa asked how the career day went. I momentarily blanked, it was still so shocking, and then the newscaster reminded me.

"This just in, we have a lockdown at Haverfield College that has caused the city police force to blockade the roads leading into and out of southwest Indiana. The official reports of high-tech weapons and possibly dangerous terrorists are at odds with eye-witnesses claiming to have seen aliens that look like thin sheets of walking paper. We will keep you updated as the situation unfolds. And now Heather has your weather. . ."

"Honey, are you OK?! Did you see any of this? Is that why you are home so early?" They asked as a unit, stopping their chopping and immediately kneeling beside me as I clutched big ol' comfy Jasper. A hand was on my back, and I had to stand. We looked at each other and I knew that nothing would ever be the same. I looked at my ma's hard, tender hands and my pa's scruffy, well-kept beard. In a few years, he would look like Morgan Freeman, but his voice would always be more comforting to my ears. I could fall asleep in the movie theater watching "March of the Penguins" but I could not help but tune my soul into my pa's voice when he spoke. He said a lot of comforting words that day, and I began to imagine that we could survive this together.

We kept Laurie's truck because everything close to a population center was decimated, including Laurie. The government flew out messages with supply drops of canned food and dried milk for a while to our farm, maybe because grandfather was a vet. The messages asked people to come to designated locations and help the military fight Them. They had little map printouts of the safe and the unsafe areas. It looked like a map of Verizon cell coverage, all red.



We were pretty self-sustaining for the most part, mostly we just started eating tons of corn and trying to live like a happy family. But nobody came to visit the next apple-picking season. Some of the neighbors stopped by a few times and we had some bonfires, exchanged news on our explorations. It was a full time job to run the farm, especially when things started breaking down. I was our scout, jogging across the fields to the edge of town. It took me a few months to bravely peer over the last hill that separated our farmland from civilization, and I was certainly justified in doing so. Everything from where the pavement ended onwards—every house, every body, every building, every electricity line, every stoplight—all of it was jumbled together in ruinous heaps of gory rubble as far as the eye could see. And wading jerkily through this mess, Their legs knee deep, slicing, were lone figures from another world.

It took them a while to come closer to us, but after a few years they had nearly vaporized everything that smelled of human, and things just started blowing away as dust on the wind. They slowly circled outwards, and I made maps of their progress through the farms north of us—Barker, Littleglen, Szafranski, Carlyle. They were also coming from the east—Yench, Parnicker, and finally Kowalski. The planes stopped flying, and of course we had no idea what was happening to the rest of the country or the world. Things could have been just fine in California. But it turns out that they weren't. Things were not fine anywhere. And we couldn't pretend that things were OK on the farm anymore, that I was just taking a break from school. We needed to leave.

We were like the Pilgrims but in reverse. There were some tribes of Native Americans who seemed perfectly at home with the mindless demons that set them free from their reservations, happy to slaughter any white folks who were too hungry to avoid trying their encampments. We were cared for by two friendly groups on our way to the East Coast, which we figured was better than the West since we didn't have to cross as much land or large mountains and there might be more survivors and food. It was also an easy choice when we discovered that southwest of our farm was impassable due to occupation by Them. Really anywhere was better than the blender that was the midwest, which seemed to be the epicenter of the Great Calamity, with the highest concentration of the things. We traveled in our tractor, pulling a wagon in the back with mattresses and clothes and guns (and Jasper) to fend off fellow farmer-nomads. We stuck to fields and dirt roads.

I learned a lot more about my family, about your grandparents and great-grandfather. They were brave and practical, and they never complained, even when pa was so ill we had to stop for three weeks and camp in a forest in West Virginia. He looked at me and said, "I'm so proud of you." That was the first time he ever said that to me. It was the first time I felt like we really *saw* each

other, you know? I thought he was going to die, but he pulled through, and it was grandfather's turn next. He went quietly, in the night. I saw his face the day before, lighter than usual but you couldn't really tell because he would smile just as hard as always. He started coughing a lot, and I know those coughs can hurt when you haven't eaten for four days. But he kept on smiling and saying excuse me, darlin' even when he had to wheeze out the words. We were alone in all the world, except for the occasional sighting of a creature. We would stop and watch it, and if it came our way we would turn diagonally backwards and go as fast as we could. The seemed to have trouble making anything other than quarter-hour turns. Anyway, grandfather died with a smile on his face, cuddling up next to Jasper, thin as a stick but not as thin as Them. We buried him by a tree with some of its lower branches sliced clear off, presumably by a passing monster. Mom and dad both cried, but I couldn't help smile that we were all still alive. I knew that grandfather had seen his dream come true, and now that the farm was gone, he didn't have much to stay for.

We had hit the coastal rivers and heard it was safer up north. Outside of Philadelphia, we were ambushed by a gang with lots of weapons who seemed pretty confident since they had apparently killed one of Them. They took all of our things and thank God there were women among them otherwise ma and me would have been in for a rough time—we had seen bodies along the way, strewn in fields that were untouched by the creatures but had clearly felt human passage. These people decided to take pa instead, since he was the largest, the most nutritious. They shot Jasper when he tried to bite them and kicked me and ma until we let go of pa's leg and fled. He was telling us to go the whole time, in his calm voice. He looked us in the eyes as they hauled him off and dragged us along, he looked down and said with his beard moving up and down for the last time I would ever know, "it's all going to be all right."

Ma and I found one of the other kinds of gangs later that week. I put up more of a fight, so they decided that breaking my arm and leg and leaving me in a ditch was enough. They took Ma with them, and all I could do was stare at her greying hair over the lip of the ditch as the horse they tied her onto made her wince with every step. She looked back once, her expression blank and her strong hands useless. Her handler rode up and whipped her cheek, playing baseball with her skull. I didn't see them after that.

I don't know how we ended up in the same place, but your father came out of the woods two days later to find me unconscious and short 256 dollars. I woke up a week later in our forest encampment and found myself crying into a mouthful of moss that was my pillow, so lucky to have been saved by my best friend.

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“So that was when they started disappearing, in 2021?” She couldn’t help it, her little logical circuits had no concept of what was happening as Sumac and I held each other and sobbed. Yes, that was when they started disappearing, although we didn’t know it at the time. I hadn’t known anything other than the area in which I made camp, driving my Corolla into the woods shortly after seeing the gas stations explode down the parkway about five years prior. I saw Them the first time I went to get food and knew that I had to wait it out. I found a library nearby and spent most days walking the soon-familiar woods and reading. After all of the pipe lines were slashed, I had to get water from a stream. But yes, they started climbing back into their inter-dimensional portals, damage done, and we realized it was getting safer when I started to get migraines once more. By that time, Sumac and I were more than friends, and any debts we owed each other or the world were equally shared between us.

But I never told her that They never really left. One was there, right in the corner behind the sink by the closet, still, blending in with the grey walls, squinting through its narrow eyes at my daughter. It followed them out as they took the afternoon and left me with my snacks, and night.

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Re: G.C. Origins

To: Director Johnson

From: Marie Eden, Chief Scientist

The above text was sent to me by my mother, Sumac Eden, when she received a copy of my father's journal after he died. I have abstained from sharing this information until her death because the setting of our last meeting was Urview Asylum, maximum security ward, and it was unclear how much truth there was to the stories they told. She often tried to make up stories to help him remain lucid. I have never been able to ascertain what occurs when he is not, but I have seen my mother in the throes of the worst nightmares imaginable. And there is, of course, her highly visible forehead scar, the origin of which remains unknown. As you know, my father was considered by the New Government to be the source of the G.C., but you may not know how deeply he considered himself to be the source as well. During the time of the G.C., and immediately afterwards, New Government screenings demonstrated his high intellectual function, and my mother and I remained with him. By her accounts, his emotional well-being was greatly enhanced by the G.C. since they had never had romantic relations before, and he seemed highly uninterested in any emotional life outside of what was considered "courteous" or "proper." However, a year later, his guilt drove him mad with hallucinations and stress-induced immunodeficiencies. In light of the horrifying and familiar reports in County 17 two hours ago, I felt it pertinent to publicly release the full details of my interactions with my father, a.k.a. G.C.X.

Godspeed.

Signed: Marie H. Eden, 4/7/2053