

Resistance Revolution & Other Love Stories

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Resistance, Revolution & Other Love Stories

THE SHORT STORIES OF K.



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T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, February 1910. (p.78)

Ghost Busters. Ivan Reitman. Columbia Pictures. 1984. (p.94)

Aliens. James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox. 1986. (p. 95-96)

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Peter Jackson. New Line Cinema, 2003. (p.37)

Monty Python's Flying Circus. "Whiter Canada." Season 1, episode 1. Directed by Ian MacNaughton and John Howard Davies. Written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. October, 1969. (p.90)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias," The Examiner, January 1818. (p.104)

Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," April 1963. (p.131)

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Peace be upon you.

Dedicated to my children and Rebe**k**ah

Love is the most revolutionary of all acts

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Radius

*...it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name?
— Romeo & Juliet, Shakespeare*

Dear Khalilia,

When you are born you don't pick

Your parents

Your country

Your religion

Your friends

Your neighbour

Your family

Your lover

*These things are provided, and perhaps taken away, through no virtue of
your own.*

When you die, you realize that you chose everything

Mustapha.

Part 1 — *I'll Hide It Behind Something*

Unbeknownst to Khalilia and Omar, on the third anniversary of Khalid's death, someone must have finally convinced a hopeless Mustapha, for he awoke one morning with the sole intention of meeting Yakub, his best friend, for one last glass of cardamom tea, after which he would take his own life.

He awoke as he had any other day. He lay curled up in his bed, a mattress coming undone on the floor, listening for the sounds of movement outside his framed doorless entry, where a thin, ragged sheet — masquerading as a door — hung motionless. Although the length of time that he remained in bed varied, it was always only the sound of Omar that stirred him.

As the sun radiated on his back, he imagined how different his life could have been. How different *he* could have been. It seemed arbitrary to be born in Gaza. He could just as easily have been born in Israel. He could have been his Canadian cousin. Or an Azorean gazelle.

Mustapha was leaving the house that he shared with his sister-in-law Khalilia and nephew Omar. Mustapha was already at the door, reaching to pull it open when Khalilia came running. "It's Canada," she said.

Omar waddled behind her, holding a wooden block, gesturing to his ear, while imploring Mustapha to answer the phone. Mustapha stood motionless, somehow debating the merits of answering an international call from his cousin, an oddity not lost on Khalilia. "It's Canada," she repeated.

After Mustapha hung up, Khalilia looked forlorn. Her face drooped, accentuating her dark brown, gazelle-like eyes, and long, black eyelashes.

"The money transfer is being held," he confirmed.

"Da Da," said Omar, who never knew his father. He reached up with the block, urging Mustapha to answer his domestic call. Omar placed the block to his own nose and said "Allo."

"You are a mischievous little one, aren't you? Aren't you?" said Mustapha, lifting Omar higher, tickling his belly with his nose with the repetition of each question. Omar's laughter, like fingertips, ran across an invisible mesh inside Mustapha's chest, the reverberations disturbing his heart and lungs. His nephew was an exact replica of his father.

"I will take you to the zoo," Mustapha said, passing him back to his mother's arms. Khalilia smiled, which comforted Mustapha.

“We will see the gazelle,” he said, pausing, wiping his forehead with his wrist. “You’ll have your antelope. *Inshallah*, there *will* be work today.”

Khalilia’s free arm reached out, settling half on the back of his neck and half on his shoulder. Mustapha felt the tiny hairs on the back of his neck extend. He reached back, seemingly catching an increasingly familiar moment, where his fingers slipped within hers, which were warm and slender.

“Stay *Fa*,” she said. “Of all days, stay today.”

“It’s not the first time there’s been a problem,” he said, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

“It’s not the money...it’s...you *know* I’ve never blamed you.”

“And what of Yakub? I gave a friend my word.”

“And what of this *friend*?” Khalilia questioned, tilting her head sideways. “Yakub will understand.”

Mustapha fell silent. He cupped his palms over his face and nose. His breath escaped underneath, warming his throat.

“There’s work to be done today.”

“Find it tomorrow.”

“Some things are inescapable,” he said dispassionately, unable to look at her. His fingers washed down his face as if he had just finished a prayer.

“*Fa*, what is so inescapable?” Khalilia probed. “Every day is a blessing from Allah. Forget today.” He felt Khalilia slip her hand up the base of his neck, her willowy fingers washing ashore his nape, as if his curls were seaweed stirring from the waves, floating atop her fingers. Glistening. Free.

“It’s so very hot,” he said.

They remained, frozen, as if at a crossroads, almost arm-in-arm, brother and sister in-law, until Mustapha let go, and walked towards the door. He braced his left hand on the door frame, slightly lifting and then pulling the warped door open with his right hand. Seeing Khalilia’s reflection in Khalid’s picture frame, his lips neared her reflected forehead, his reflected face superimposed over Khalid’s photo. He turned back towards Khalilia and Omar, wanting to acknowledge an inescapable truth. But from his mouth, he exuded only what little breath he had left, in what sounded like a sigh. He felt beads of sweat pooling on the precipice of his lips, as if they were readying to jump.

He walked the fine line of stretching between the cool, safe, albeit uneven concrete floors of an impenetrable house, to the shoes that rested upon the steps just

outside the door, unsteadily stretching as one would on rocks to cross a stream, the door still ajar. Omar's block fell to the ground, settling crooked on the floor. "God willing, everything will be okay," he said. "You will see."

It was then that he noticed a lotus tucked behind her right ear, its pink petals cupping the yellow-tipped stamens. He closed his eyes and gripped his watch, feeling neither the quartz nor the unsteady beat of his heart, but rather those fingers still washing ashore. "I always found you attractive," he said to himself, as if saying it out loud would assuage his guilt. "But you married my brother once."

* * *

Mustapha recalled his only trip to Canada, a short visit to his cousin's tiny apartment. His brother was still alive back then. For those two days, he assimilated easily into Canadian culture by eating a few Timbits and watching hockey.

What a strange game, Mustapha thought. *In one instance there's an elegance, the players moving in unison, gliding on the glass-like ice; and in the next, such violence.*

He watched all the players who, but a moment before, had raced around the ice, circling with such fervour as if it was the glass above the boards — and the glass alone — that was saving them from being hurtled off the ice from the centrifugal force. Now they were fighting.

"You no like?" his cousin Tariq asked, never quite looking at Mustapha, his eyes glued to the modest, second-hand, faux wood cabinet television. Mustapha watched from his cousin's couch in Canada, the tiny apartment filling with the excitement of the game. Tariq also watched with his daughter Sophia, or, as her best friend, a Punjabi, called her *Saunph* (an acquired taste, sweet and bold but with some bite that could put people off). This was quite fitting for the diminutive *Saunph*, who had a mischievous smile, and reckless abandon for her own wellbeing. Although she maintained her girlish status, she played with the boys who insisted on teasing her. "How are you, *little girl*?" they teased.

"I'm not a little girl," she would respond defiantly, her pony tails wagging in solidarity.

Mustapha admired Saunph greatly. He watched the two of them, father and daughter, intently, the weight of their feet lifting the small panels of wood slightly with their excitement. When the buzzer went between periods, Tariq asked, "When drop you off?" as Saunph raced to her bedroom, and jumped on her

second-hand bed's protesting springs. She returned wearing her pillows on her feet, mimicking the goalies on television. She stood in the doorway as if the door frame were the net.

"After the game. It's a very early flight," Mustapha said.

Tariq listened quietly; it seemed his earlier excitement was now subdued. He tilted his head to one side, examining Mustapha. Saunph had perched within the door frame, prompting Tariq to reach under the sofa and pull a hockey stick out so that they could start to play *their game*.

"So young," Tariq said. "It's a lot for a young man."

Saunph, like the game that they played during every intermission, shook her arms from side to side, her imaginary stick tapping each ball-smudged door frame, each post.

As Tariq's broken English described the play, the shots, the saves, Mustapha imagined Saunph, a girl, a Palestinian, playing on television. Perhaps Khalid — at least he was married — would one day have a child, and would also play like this when he had recuperated, Mustapha reflected.

Mustapha brushed the overflowing bank envelopes to the corner of the coffee table, a collection for Khalid's medical bills. Making room for a piece of paper, he scribbled, sketched, as he had once as a promising child, the same child who left school and helped to run the family business when he was thirteen, when his father passed away. At that time, there was only their mother, Mustapha, and his brother Khalid, the elder by one full conception. Shortly thereafter, their mother became ill, leaving the responsibilities of managing the home and attached business to the young teenage brothers. When Khalid married Khalilia, Mustapha remained with his mother, allowing Khalid and Khalilia to make their own home.

After a save, the ball got away. They stopped their game and watched it, drawn by its irregular roll. As if it were magnetized, the ball pulled towards Mustapha who sat on the worn, green tweed couch. The ball clicked with each rotation on the uneven floor, all of them staring at it as if it were, even though they were a world away, something else entirely. Insidiously, it rolled and released a snapping sound, as if a mechanism engaged undetonated, against his frayed, callused heel. "We can get the money there some other way," Tariq said. "Do you want to *stay*?"

* * *

Part 2 — *The Train*

Mustapha arrived at the train station. He observed how almost the entire outer wall had crumbled, as if a tank had once punctured it. Although outside's incendiary breath entered through the opening, the gap in the wall made for a far more convenient entrance to the station, a doorway that immediately faced the crowded, dusty, paper-strewn waiting hall, while the ticket booth was now directly to the right, giving Mustapha a utilitarian impression.

Inside the waiting area, a single whirring fan fluttered a red ribbon that was centred in its grill. The lace was tied to the fan so patrons would know the fan was indeed on, although one could not be sure what actual purpose it served against the inescapable, mercurial heat. Mustapha looked nervously at his watch, tapping it repeatedly. *I will see you soon*, he thought.

Likely concerned with disappointing Yakub, Mustapha fidgeted and scanned the travellers. He watched them fan themselves with newspapers, or exhale in a deliberate manner as if they were an exhaust for some machine. Feeling uneasy, Mustapha's eyes wandered, looking for distractions. He watched two young men fiddle with the dial and switches as if the fan were spinning in reverse, and only expelling hot air. The two argued over the next course of action, pushing each other's uncooperative fingers away.

* * *

In Gaza, that Friday three years ago, Mustapha recalled how death made everyone family. Families that once promisingly branched out — cousins, brothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, and grandparents — were struck at the trunk, their branches jutting out in all directions as if a dozen mangled trees sprouted from the same spot. And so stood such a tree, leaning, tilted atop the village's hilled cemetery.

As the procession made its way from the lower village to the cemetery that morning, Mustapha held the coffin with his left hand while striking his chest with his right, chanting in unison with Yakub, a neighbour, and family friends, all of whom held the smooth, pristine, wooden box in which Khalid lay peacefully, the phosphor burns and shrapnel unable to disturb him. Others joined in the procession as it passed through the streets. To an onlooker, the manner with which that plain, rectangular casket, its white, looped rope at either end was escorted,

gave the impression that the box contained some great treasure; a covenant being watched by a royal guard to a palace, ushered into a great hall filled with jewelled goblets, rubies, and emeralds that all piled on clinking, overflowing golden coins, the corner of the coffin glinting magnanimously. In Gaza, this *hall of riches* contained nor roof, nor wall, nor sentry, but rather a single tilted Joshua tree that had lost many of its branches.

Mustapha marched, focused, while a veiled Khalilia marched behind, the merging crowd gathering around her, pressing against each other like mortar for a great wall, growing denser and denser.

Citizens hung out from windows chanting *Astaghfirullah* (seeking forgiveness and mercy), their voices spreading like a thick haze, shrouding the procession. An IDF gunship flew overhead, dissipating the haze. Its loud blades chopped the noise into tiny shards that were stomped out by the sound of 7,860 bare feet slapping the ground. The gunship turned, hovered back past the procession, continuing on ahead until it finally revolved, turning completely around, and faced the procession, its bright cockpit glinting in the morning sun, blinding anyone who dared look at it directly. And in the distance, it buzzed like a giant mosquito, its multiple proboscises protruding from its sides. It hovered, almost perching on the mangled tree.

It should have been me, beat Mustapha. It should have been me.

* * *

At the train station, a restless Mustapha left his seat and opened the double wooden doors to the bathroom. An attendant, an older gentleman wearing a white suit with a black bow tie, sat on a worn stool and greeted Mustapha, the top of his raven-black hair glistening when he nodded. The morning sun washed the walls with white light, while the crystalline, checkered-marble floor glowed, giving the impression that it was a secret reflection of an unseen world, an effect, which when combined with the walls' luminescence, marked the servant's entire body with a halo. A silent Mustapha pursed his lips, unsure if he should greet the attendant within such an unexpected cleanliness with God's name. Not here. Instead, he simply nodded back.

At the urinal, Mustapha peacefully watched his breath purple the chrome-like pipe above the mounted porcelain tub. First, his breath fogged the metal,

covering his reflected self, and then dissipated. He moved his head strategically in the chrome's reflection, stretching his features as if this were a magical place where he could become someone else.

He studied the dark yellow droplets, their colour exaggerated against the urinal's glowing white rim, so much so that the droplets looked like tiny costume jewelry. The attendant coughed, stirring Mustapha from his wonderment, reminding him that he was not alone. After washing and drying his hands, Mustapha walked reluctantly towards the attendant, feeling that he should say something.

"Clean. The bathroom is very clean," he pronounced. "You should be very proud."

The attendant simply nodded.

"How do you keep it so?" Mustapha added, "When the world is on fire."

The attendant answered with a smile.

"How do you keep it so clean...in this place?"

"Yes, very clean."

"Do you get any help?"

Once again, the attendant did not answer.

"Help. Does anyone help you?" Mustapha persisted.

"Yes, clean. Very clean," the attendant replied.

The old man slowly rose from the stool, and leaned on the counter top, staggering towards Mustapha. He approached Mustapha with such proximity that Mustapha stepped back momentarily, taken aback, yet disappointed, when the old man did not hug him. He brushed dust from Mustapha's right shoulder, then adjusted Mustapha's collar and shoulders, pausing, as if inspecting him, memorizing what he looked like for the next time they would meet. "Clean. Very clean. It's a question of will," he said. "Where will it perch?"

Mustapha, knowing that it was uncommon to tip and, frankly, that no one expected it, nevertheless reached into his pocket, as somehow it seemed appropriate.

He placed a coin in the palm of the servant's bony, ancient hand. His long, withered fingers curled around like claws, and clutched the coin as if a fare had been paid.

As he was leaving, Mustapha paused, hearing a previously undetected sound. He looked towards the urinal, wondering if the mechanism were stuck, if the water were still running. But it was still. His eyes crept towards an unexplored

wall, wondering if the steady trickle came from a fountain. “What is beyond the wall? Is it paradise?” he asked the non-attentive servant.

* * *

On the train platform, Mustapha walked towards a space between crowds. He stood close to a man reading a newspaper.

The headline read: AZOREAN GAZELLE ESCAPES ZOO.

He had meant to see the gazelle that was on loan but had kept putting it off. Although he was displeased about having lost his chance to see the animal, he was secretly thankful for the gazelle, for the other animals would surely have turned on the gentle creature. *Still, to live among the tigers and the silk panthers*, thought Mustapha. Having read the article by crowding the gentleman, the man flipped the corner of the paper down. Mustapha quickly turned as if there were something of great interest, thus disarming the peering gentleman. Flung over a mother’s shoulder, a newborn baby rested its head on her shoulder. Its semi-glazed, doughy little fingers protruded from under its chin, curling and flaking like a pastry fresh from the oven, a deceiving pallor, making it unclear whether they were coming from or heading towards a hospital. Far off, the call for prayer lingered in the sky.

All around, clusters of children played. Mustapha observed three children lifting discarded car tires and, like a game of horseshoe, trying to place them on the yellow cylindrical crash barrier at the corner of the outside station wall. Nearby, three other children played in the cracked, barren soil. One of them wore shoes, bright red shoes. The shoeless children chugged their fingers along the dry cracks in the soil, following the shod boy’s path, climbing the peaks and valleys of the crusty ground. To Mustapha, it looked like they played on the scales of an alligator, on the back of its segmented, reptilian skin. Unexpectedly, like brown sugar pouring out, ants gushed from the children’s play area, layering the soil, their dark brown abdomens glistening against the pale soil. The two children looked expectantly to the boy wearing the shoes.

As the train rolled in, Mustapha watched the rocks atop the wooden beams swell and depress like the keys on a piano, as if they were played by an invisible hand.

* * *

The crowded train rattled and shook its passengers, their bodies jerking from side to side with each rail seam. A mother soothed a crying baby on an otherwise quiet train. Mustapha leaned his head on the glass but it too was hot. When the train passed over a bridge, it was as if it floated across the tracks. The sound of metal rattling and grinding disappeared, allowing Mustapha to fall into a state of peace. Under the bridge, he watched the crows circle, cawing above the river's breast.

Near Jerusalem, the train began to slow prematurely as there was an indiscernible announcement. Mustapha looked at his watch, tapping it to make sure it worked. Outside the train, the reason for the unscheduled stop drew the curiosity of half of the train, although that, too, was debatable as many quickly sighed at the inconvenience of it all, as they returned to their conversations, books, and newspapers. The train stopped, as did all the traffic outside the window. Outside, spectators lingered, watching as the robot was wheeled down the ramp from the police van, its squeaking wheels dragging down the metal planes. The robot laboured down the metal, wheezing over the pebble-strewn path around a water fountain — its silvery water like a pool of mercury — where an unattended lunch bag, the loop of which dangled over the fountain's lip, soaked in the fountain. Mustapha looked away from the window towards the busy ruffling of the newspaper belonging to the rider across from him: *AZOREAN GAZELLE ESCAPES FROM ZOO*.

Although the artificial sound had penetrated everyday life long ago, the bullet snapped its fingers nonetheless, immediately returning the hypnotized to consciousness. There was no explosion, only an expensive way to aerate a backpack.

The train was silent. Mustapha's leg rested against the neighbouring passenger, and as the train started again, the sickly, sweet smell of perfume wafted from beside him, urged by the open panel at the top of the window. Slowly Mustapha turned, deliberately swivelling to look at his neighbour. He stopped suddenly. The rest of the way, he looked straight ahead, not wanting to know. Yet, never once had he dared to move his warming leg from his neighbouring commuter. He thought of Khalilia. He felt her fingers running through his hair as if he were back at the house.

Looking out the window, the passing buildings looked like large planks of distressed wood that had been shoved into the ground. The sooty, dimpled bullet-laden faces of the buildings smouldered, giving the distinct impression of the early stages of a fire.

* * *

Part 3 — *The Supplanted Kiss*

Mustapha passed through the security gate. He barely noticed the security forces patting him down, questioning him on the nature of his visit, and rushing him along with the barrel of their rifles. Focusing only on his watch, he tapped it repeatedly, bypassing the queue of men at the corner who awaited work.

* * *

Having already waited for over thirty minutes at the café, Mustapha left for the hairdresser. With his regular hairdresser busy, he sat in the hairdresser's wife's chair as she cleared the curling iron and hair brushes from the console in front of him.

"Just a trim", he instructed, vaguely motioning towards the back of his head. "Follow the path."

"I haven't seen you in a while. I thought you left our circle," she laughed.

With the black cloth cape around his neck, covering his entire body other than his feet, Mustapha eyed the outline of his watch under the wrinkled fabric, concentrating on his fidgeting hand.

"Stay still, it will be over soon," she said.

Mustapha felt her cool breath behind him, a breath that curled around his neck, pawing, encircling his chest, and settling down his spine. Closing his eyes, he held his breath, and breathed hers. Drawing nearer, her belly pressed against his warming back, and like the legs of commuters, chills reverberated throughout him as if they had completed a circuit, an unsaid connection between strangers that sent electricity through their bodies.

"How's Khalilia?" she asked.

* * *

In the crowded market, Mustapha floated his flat palm just above the flipped wooden box, pausing over, and then picking up a ripe pomegranate. Holding it

to his nose, his nostrils condensed, plunging deep into its aroma. He cupped the fruit snugly with his palms into his chest as if it were a hairless, newborn bird, shying from the light. Waiting to pay, a woman wearing a tichel pleaded with her impatient boy: “You don’t get a treat every time you go shopping with Mameleh,” she said, redirecting her son’s wanting hands away from the sweets with her left hand, while balancing a basket of produce with her right. As Mustapha reached the merchant to pay, the merchant mouthed some words, his lips edged along his bright, square front teeth, underneath his withered, shrunken face, his orange cheeks like onion peels. Mustapha turned to the mother behind him, insisting that she go before him. Initially hesitating in the busy marketplace, she eventually succumbed to the unexpected gesture. She nudged her child embarrassedly to say thank you. “Thank you,” he said, undoubtedly confused by his unwarranted words, as neither his mother nor this stranger had bought him chocolate anyway. Walking away, she turned her head back, taking a last look at Mustapha.

Mustapha wandered into the bustling court of the marketplace, almost tripping over the zigzagging children who snaked through the feet of annoyed, muttering shoppers. In the divots and potholes, birds bathed in pools of rain from the night prior. In the distance, back towards the security checkpoint, Mustapha recognized *the acquaintance*. Although he carried a common vinyl backpack, he wore a modern, blue pin-striped suit, a kerchief protruding smartly from his shirt pocket.

Mustapha walked towards the security checkpoint, towards the acquaintance, all the while looking back at the café for his friend.

He started to recite a prayer, surah Al-Fatiya:

Bismillāhi r-ramāni r-raīm

(In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful),

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds

The Beneficent, the Merciful.

Master of the Day of Judgement

To you we worship and to you we turn in help.

Mustapha got stuck in the middle. “Show us the straight path,” he stuttered, having not recited the prayer since he was a child. Like a child stuttering on a thought, he repeated “show us the straight path.”

If it were not for the constant allahu-akbar (God is great), the blank look in his eye, and the weight of his body pushing unrelentingly upon his buckling knees, it is doubtful whether anyone would have noticed. His walk became more unsteady

with every step, the weight of his breath grinded down his heart, scratching to get to the fluttering in his chest. “God is great,” he said, his dry lips struggling with the words as white globules of mucous hardened in the crevices of his lips. The man nodded continuously, urging Mustapha to hurry. Mustapha’s pallor dimmed, the guards turned as if they now recognized a song that was, in fact, reaching its final chorus.

The café, the guard booth, the market, and the hairdresser, all rotated slowly as would a carousel just beginning its revolutions, slowly speeding up until the white table cloths of the café, the yellow warning signs outside the guard checkpoint, and the green uniforms, the black rifles, the queue of orange, red, yellow fruit, piled purple eggplants fused together, as if one were standing in the middle of a tornado, the world only a single brush stroke comprising many colours.

Mustapha tapped his watch, paused, and then bent down on his knees, almost placing his head on the ground to remove his watch. He placed it in the shade at the foot of a telephone pole. *It’s time*, he thought. *Show us the straight path.*

As he rose, off to the side, within the rustling bushes, Mustapha thought he saw something — a pair of Antelopean eyes. Bewildered, he stood up fully, looking back at the bushes. He turned his head back towards the man. And like an apparition, Yakub appeared suddenly, walking behind the man.

Yakub immediately recognized Mustapha, his face brimming with joy as he sped toward Mustapha. Panicking, Mustapha waved his hands as if he were shooing a bird.

Mustapha heard a snap.

It was as if Mustapha were looking out from a train. He watched the engine decouple as it shot, screaming far away:

Through a tunnel.

Down the track.

Past the ocean.

Past the blue horizon.

The Earth. Until it was only a speck of existence in the Milky Way.

The well-dressed man looked around and saw the security forces drawing near. He mistakenly withdrew his hand from the bag.

The spell must have been cast over 150 metres. For within the radius: Yakub, Mustapha, the man, the children, the crowd, and time itself, all stood still. It

was only the birds who, but only a moment ago, were splashing in the potholes, washing away the cares of men, sensed *devilry*. Their dark, soaking bellies dripped, weighing them down. Frantically, they flapped their drenched feathers. But for the remaining bewitched, they were etherized by the spell.

Like an ancient seductress, the flames first extended a fiery finger to Yakub's lips, the tip pausing on his philtral dimple, shushing him. And the flame, like a single curl, a single amber wisp, drew nearer, drinking fully from Yakub's lips, seducing him into nothingness.

A hundred meters away, during the same moment, another man pinched his white shirt from his chest, forming a miniature tent, fanning himself as if the damp, red speckles were a result of the heat. He held his bronzed, paralysed hand against his chest, like an island surrounded by a crimson sea. Or perhaps he was meeting someone for the first time after salaam (welcome, peace be with you), someone unseen, holding his hand against his chest for custom — perhaps this *was* the closest to the truth. He finally collapsed.

A car jolted backwards as if it were traveling quickly behind a tether and lost its grip, skimming on the waves of dust, until it flipped over, dragging its face in the fantastic sparking and splashing soil, disappearing submerged in the dazzling sparks.

And although it was born from flesh and blood, it held nor grace, nor memory, nor desire; it simply sprung forth like a *Djinn* rising from the flaming depths, flames dripping from the tips of its feathers. The flames engulfed the carts and the shops as if they were kindling, its wings splashing, and singeing distant buildings. Its outstretched flaming wings smashed into the ground, sending forth a flood of flames that engulfed the frozen citizens. And with its arms fully extended, it pulled them back in, gathering the charcoaling and sizzling objects back into its chest, blotting its own cradle, swallowing whole that which it begat — its flesh, its memory, its desire — a wave of lava-like flame feasting with its reach, the market and the guard station left eviscerated.

Mustapha lay motionless in the dirt. His blood- and dirt-encrusted lips strained with each exhale, coughing out small clouds of smoke, the image of his dear friend seared into his memory, his brother's watch in pieces.

The charred and smoking remains of the market cackled, permeating the witch's call through the settling dust. Surrounded by debris, he lay along an almost indiscernible line, a thin, razor-like bridge, where to either side rested the

remains of the market. He looked at the market, unable to decipher what parts lay in the streets.

It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man, he thought. Perhaps many fused as one — an anatomical contradiction? Or something else entirely? Something unrecognizable? Crafted. Hidden. Symbiotic living secretly, yet revealing itself suddenly. Love? Hate? Jewish? Palestinian? What did it matter? What's in a name?

A squadron of IDF gunships chopped overhead, grinding the heat and soot further down upon Mustapha. He watched the black heels of boots and bare feet of men hitting the ground.

My sweet, sweet friend, Mustapha thought, wishing he could start again.

In all the pieces, now, they were all one.

Galloping.

Hopeless.

To oblivion

Calamity Jane

Part 1 – *Lying Down*

Jane was a sweet girl once you got past the fact that she was a bitch.

Although her bitchiness was well-known in most circles—and by most circles, I mean any galaxies neighbouring the Milky Way—it somehow seemed to escape Jay (until their next breakup).

In my opinion, my best friend Jay remained with Jane, a girl we'd had no choice but to dub 'Calamity Jane' (CJ for short), because he was afraid of the public scorn he'd receive for breaking up with her while she was suffering from her latest bout of bitchy-itis. Though in full transparency, they never truly broke up: just last week, Jay took her to a doctor's appointment, and when he brought her home it somehow turned into a quickie in the car.

In a sense, Jay, I, and her closest friends, were all simply servants in Jane's bitchdom, for none among us could escape her grasp. For Jay especially, it must have been like trying to escape life in the Mafia: you try to get away, but they always pull you back. According to Jay, her bitchiness notwithstanding, no other woman in his life (past, present, or the perceived future) had her intriguing talent of simultaneously arousing and dousing an erection.

The arousing, I got. CJ was ridiculous, off-the-chart hot. But why he liked the dousing eluded me. Apparently, she'd instantly go from inspiring this throbbing frothing rocket ship in his trousers, to spewing a string of hateful words, leaving him with little more than a boosterless projectile with no propulsion left. Such

dual processing sounded like a perplexing downer to me, but for Jay this ambivalence was a key ingredient for a lifelong relationship.

I suppose at least he was getting some. Jay got the feast while I got the famine. Even when they were on a break, they would see other people: Jane admitted to dating two different guys when not officially with Jay (even though our estimation put that number closer to four), while Jay only had the heart, or the boner, to date one girl during that same period. It had been six months since their last breakup, their eighth during their year-and-a-half relationship. But with Jay's constant lamenting and "Woe is my penis!", you would think they had only been broken up for a handful of days and the pain was still fresh. His penis aside, though, I did get the feeling that this breakup was different.

Today, from a sleeping bag on the floor, I sat up and watched Jay roll over in my bed. It was 10:37am. Although he hadn't fully sipped from the waters of CJ in months, he had stumbled into the house the night before in a bitch-withdrawal stupor, mumbling incoherently with so many pauses, I had the impression I was sitting with Captain Kirk. I filled in the blanks where sounds came in: "Habib, I need. You. And Bones. To meet me in the transporter room. We. Have. To. Beam. Down. And run our Tricorders on the Kardashians." (*Did you catch that little play on words, Diane? Because they're both alien races? I thought you would.*)

Jay moaned again. I nudged him kind of hard. He mumbled and turned to the other side. But I let him sleep. What was the point? We were like brothers. I wasn't going to kick him out. From the looks of it, he was dreaming of Calamity Jane. Sometimes I just wanted to wring his neck and say, "Dude, she jumps your bones whenever you two are alone! Do you know how good you have it? I feel like a malnourished-Dickens orphan around you, staring through the cold window of a restaurant watching you eat."

Between you and me, I'm not convinced Jane was a bitch. Actually, Jane was always very nice to me. In fact, whenever Jane and I were alone, she tended to get all awkward and gawky, staring at the floor and pulling on her sleeves. With her head tilted, her golden hair would fall to one side, flowing like an emptying jar of honey. Aside from it being hot, it was also endearing as hell because this was not a girl who seemed like she was awkward, ever.

I would never tell Jay, but in such moments, I felt a warm joy penetrate my skin and sink into the pores of my bones. I wanted to ask her: Why is it that every

time I'm around you, my heart bucks like a colt trying to get free? But of course I never did.

Naturally it was Jane, like the other seven times, who broke things off. From what I could tell, despite finding Jay physically attractive and fun, she found him kind of needy. I hadn't noticed it before, but once she mentioned it, I recognized that face he got around her. For example, the time she'd wanted to go out with just her girlfriends, Jay sank a bit and looked crushed like when your date tells you she's going to the prom with someone else. So she let him tag along.

It seemed clear she just needed a bit of space for herself, to be with the girls. Do girl things. He loved the girls, would've gotten pedicures with them if she'd let him. But her resentment grew from his always being around, so she'd torment him for no good reason, say strange things just to test him, to see how he'd react. Once she went to the extreme and mocked baseball for not being very physical. Jay, being the captain of the baseball team, someone who lived and breathed the sport, lit up like an over-trimmed Christmas tree. But what did he do? He then shrugged and said, "Yeah, I guess you're right."

The thing is, though she took sport in busting his balls, she also made him really happy. When they were on one of their love benders, their combined powers made them this kind of unstoppable hyper-sentimental blob from which their friends would run screaming. But when they inevitably broke up, she would fall into bitchy remission and he would grow all bastardly and spew profanity in utter bitch withdrawal.

The things I put up with, Diane, the things I put up with.

"Dude, what are you doing?" Jay asked groggily as he rubbed his eyes. My bed squeaked as he sat up.

"Nothing," I said, stuffing my journal in the drawer.

"You still hung up on that chick?" He yawned. "I still don't understand how she gets off saying you were like a closed book that never opened up. I can never get you to shut your yap."

What he didn't know is although the entries were addressed to Diane, and Jay believed that I sent them to her, I knew I never would. The writing alone was enough. Diane was right. When we were a couple, I was like a closed book. There is no greater conflict in the world than being in a relationship with one girl and in love with another. But this wasn't something I could admit to anyone, even myself.

“Basically, it’s not really about Diane, it’s about how women are misunderstood and how they are nice to us in ways we take for granted,” I said.

“Nice to us? Dude, what are you talking about? Girls do mean things all the time. Why do they wear those tight yoga pants that wrap their asses so snugly? Even if you can resist staring, there’s always writing on them. So naturally you start to read, ’cause, hey, it’s marketing, and her butt has something to say. Let it speak, I say! But then invariably she turns around all pissed off because you were staring at her business and you wave your hands, try to defend yourself. It’s entrapment.”

Jay didn’t need a minute to wake up like most people when it came to sex: having it or talking about it (didn’t matter). No groggy period. No bags beneath his eyes. He just sprang right up.

“And what’s with the backpack and purse straps that cross between their breasts?” Jay continued. “It’s like attaching a giant neon, arrow sign which points directly at their chest! Like it’s directions for lost travellers! Although I cross the valley of the plentiful, I will fear no evil. And then,” his eyes bugged out, “they wear necklaces and locketts that aren’t under their shirts but,” he closed his eyes in reverie, “dangle at the zenith of the hills. Dude, if you’re driving by the ski hills and you see a skier at the top poised to descend, don’t you look? You can bet your ass you’re going to look! It’s pure evil. Not in a destroy-society sense, but in a much kinder, mind-control sense. And I’ll tell you another thing, if Jane wants to get back together, I’ll have a few choice words for her.”

“Is that before or after you say yes?” I asked.

“Dude, what the fuck?”

My sister opened the door. “Beeb, Momma said you hafta take me to the mall,” she announced.

“You heard of knocking?” I asked.

“You heard of locking?” she replied.

My sister was so typically fifteen, she could have stepped out of a parenting book. Actually, now that she was properly teenaged, I was convinced she pulled these kinds of stunts for a chance to see Jay naked. I thought about teaching her a lesson whereby she would see me naked instead, but I decided against scarring us both for life.

She paused before she asked, “Were you talking about sex?”

She looked at Jay while she spoke, not in a seductive way, but more in ‘a hypnotist-told-me-the-word-sex-renders-most-men-catatonic-within-ten-seconds-but-Jay-in-0.01-seconds-flat’ sense.

“It’s rude to barge in. Right, Jay? Jay?” I said. I snapped my fingers repeatedly and uttered the safe word in succession. “CJ! CJ! CJ!”

“Wha... wha... what’s that?” Jay said, shaking away his daydream.

“Fine. But we’re going in twenty minutes,” she said, then started grouching about something all on her own, “It’s okay for me to have a phone that will give me cancer in ten years, but don’t give me a credit card ’cause... oh... that could actually be dangerous!” She closed the door and yelled, “Maaaaaa! I don’t know why you don’t just give me your credit card! But I told him.”

I shook my head. You’re calling to Mom, but you’re heading back down so you’d see her anyway, I thought. Sis was like a poorly conceived stealth nuclear missile that, from the time of launch, yelled, “incoming intercontinental ballistic missile” until it reached its target. There was nothing tactical about my sister.

My sister’s irritatingness notwithstanding, my mom did point out that one of the collateral benefits of having a younger sister was her friends would hit on me and, regardless of how annoying I normally found them to be, their attention would be of great importance to my ego when I was feeling down. However, I never really noticed that clause kick in; if anything, it seemed Jay reaped these benefits through my sister and by extension her friends, who got all googly-eyed around him. I was convinced my sister was the host of a community cable program entitled “Jay”, where she was joined by two experts: her closest friends.

From my point of view, her day consisted of annoying me and showering attention on Jay. She constantly feigned stumbling into our conversations with the hopes that we were talking about sex. Next, whether we were actually discussing sex or not, she would surely run to the phone and call her friends to tell them what she may have heard. In a sense, she was like the American intelligence and counter-terrorism community (otherwise known as the counter-intelligence community), inferring meaning out of conversational snippets. And with her, whether it was the price of jeans, a recent snowfall or the perfect amount of pickles in your burger, it was always sexual.

Jay started to gather his things. I waved my hand, signalling we should finish our conversation. “I don’t know why you say that about women. You act like you

only want to play ball,” I whispered, “and then you met what’s-her-face when you broke up with Jane, and that’s all she wanted...”

Jay promptly cut me off. “Yeah, but she used all kinds of props plus three cameras on tripods and it could never be just me by myself; she always needed friends and at least two guys. I thought it was a Broadway production, like any second she would break out with: ‘We’ve thrilled audiences in Milan, Paris, London and New York!’”

He shook his head and his eyes glazed over. “No, you know what it was really like? Like standing in the batter’s circle before the inning starts. The scoreboard says you’re due up and you’re pumped up to bat, but it’s just a big mix-up so you get ushered back to the on-deck circle, and everyone is looking at you while the real batter makes his way up to the plate. So he goes up to bat and he gets the big hit. You’re just standing there holding your bat, listening to all the ohhs and ahhs, jealous you didn’t get a chance to step up. That guy’s bat drops and he completes his trot around all the bases to the noise and cheers... to the standing O. And as much as you try, you just can’t bring yourself to look away from his bat. So you end up standing there, wondering if the problem isn’t your swing or your grip but simply your bat.”

Jay paused to catch his breath. He was lost. “That or you use too much pine tar... do you think he corked his bat? Fuck, I hate bat corks. They should have to put an asterisk beside their statistics.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, standing up. I was done.

“I’m just saying that I can’t do that. When I step up to the plate, there’d better be only one batter in the box. Call me a purist, but to me that’s the way the game is played. If she wants two guys and all that stuff, more power to her—but count me out,” he said. “Still, it would be nice to have a larger bat, nothing crazy. I just want good plate coverage—you know. I want to get to that outside corner with the barrel of the bat and make some meaningful contact. I don’t want to stretch and strain, only to foul offerings off. I want to please, not appease—”

There was a knock at my bedroom door and my mom asked through it, “Sweetie, would you and Jay like anything to eat before you go to the mall?”

“You can come in, Ma.”

She opened the door. “Good morning, Jay.”

“Morning, Mrs. B. You are looking especially lovely today,” Jay said sincerely.

“Why, thank you, Jay. I bet you have to wear a disguise to get away from all your admirers,” she smiled.

Jay blushed.

Mom was awesome. She could actually make Jay speechless. Her approach was far more effective than my ‘Jay, shut up!’

Mom glanced at Jay on my bed and me sitting in a sleeping bag on the floor. She smiled at me proudly. I was always her thoughtful little boy, putting others ahead of myself. “I made you guys French toast. Come down before it’s cold,” she said and then closed the door.

Jay was unusually silent, before he blurted out, “Dude, your mom is so hot.”

“Even by your standards that’s creepy.”

“I’m just saying. How did your dad score your mom?”

“Mix tapes.”

“What?”

“He made a mix tape. She said it had the perfect balance of Gazebo and Yaz.”

I examined Jay as he stared blankly towards the ceiling for about twenty seconds, as if some great truth he couldn’t quite grasp were revealed before he pronounced, “Dude, that’s fucked.”

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” I asked.

“Dude, not at all.”

“Anyway, it was his dancing that sealed the deal. She said he looked like an evil robot from Doctor Who.”

Jay picked himself up and started to move his arms, shoulders and elbows in rigid, ninety-degree-like angles. His flailing resembled a cross between Michael Jackson’s moonwalk and The Bangles’ “Walk Like an Egyptian”.

“That’s the Egyptian, not a robot. Here,” I raised my arms and bent my elbows so my waving hands extended just above my head.

“That’s the sprinkler,” he said.

“No, the sprinkler is like this,” I said, extending my arms fully above my head over and over.

“And that’s some new age Hail to the Chief and sprinkler fusion.” He extended his right arm fully perpendicular to his shoulder and rotated his rattling torso like he was a mounted machine gun.

“Dude, you totally look like a Dalek!”

My sister walked into the room and yelled, “Mom they’re not ready yet! They’re acting like idiots!”

“Pumpkin, we don’t talk like that,” she replied from the bottom of the stairs. “Besides most of the idiots are in Congress.” Mom cracked herself up.

I threw a pillow in Sis’ direction, but she had already left. Jay and I sat quietly for a minute before I piped up, “Why don’t we scope out a new computer? Let’s go to the Emporium.”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel like spending twenty minutes looking for a rep, and then another twenty where they’re telling me how great the computer is... I mean if you’re between eighteen and twenty-six, as long as it can handle Call of Duty and porn, does it matter what processor it has? And then once you decide which computer you want, we go through another twenty-minute ritual where I listen and pretend like I’m interested in the extended warranty. Fuck, I hate that! You just told me how great it was, and now you’re telling me it’s going to spontaneously combust! They might as well say: *You better buy this warranty or Al Jazeera is gonna get you!*”

“Did you mean Al Qaeda?”

“Fuck, whoever. Neither believe in sharing vowels.”

Just then, Dad entered my room. I was beginning to feel like we were already at the mall. He paused, then leaned back and knocked on the door behind him. “Okay, guys. I can’t have the sex with your mother with you two in the house. So out you go.”

Like Mom, my dad was awesome. With him it was straight to the point. But sometimes he was too precise; I mean, who else would he be having ‘the sex’ with? Dad came to the US from India to study engineering at Stanford thirty years ago, but he’d held on to his accent and verbal tics. I think it was his way of rebelling.

Jay smiled. “Mr. B, that’s awesome... you still have that fire... I’d like to do that too... not with Mrs. B, though... with a female... well, not any female... she should like me... preferably.” he said. If a face could have looked tongue-tied, that was Jay right then.

Dad shook his head and closed the door.

“Why do you make so much more sense when we speak by analogy?” I said, bundling a few things into my backpack before we exited the room.

As we were walking downstairs towards the kitchen, my sister quickly darted in front of us and hopped to the bottom. “Maaaaa, Beeb’s friend is looking at my ass again!”

“No, he’s not, pumpkin. He’s just reading,” Mom said. “And Jay has a name.”

“Dude, I love your mom.”

“Yeah, me too.” I felt very warm in the best way.

We made quick work of the toast then got our coats on in the front foyer. My sister was waiting for us on the porch. As I reached for the door handle, Jay suddenly grabbed my arm, and started walking towards the bathroom. “Dude, hang on. I have to pee like a motherfucker!”

“Just say you have to pee! Why do you have to swear?” I asked, following him.

“What, motherfuckers can’t pee?”

“So, if you were hungry, you would say ‘I have to eat corn like a motherfucker?’”

“So, now motherfuckers can’t eat corn?”

“I’m not saying they can’t eat corn—”

“What do you have against motherfuckers anyway? You part of some anti-MF global movement?”

“Why do you twist my words around?”

“Why do you hate motherfuckers?”

“There’s only one that I am starting to despise,” I said, sneering.

Jay paused. “Dude, that’s awesome. I love it when you have some edge. You should go first,” he said, stepping aside in front of the bathroom door. He bowed slightly when I passed.

As we were leaving the house, I took a long look at my parents who were holding hands on the couch, a number of their records stacked up on the coffee table in front of them. They used music to maintain their love, to nurture it and to heal it back together when it was ruptured. I remember their last fight because to date it was their only fight, and if anything, it was more of an anti-fight.

I was six. Dad put on a record and they were both crying, the music already fixing whatever had upset them. Since then, if ever they were mad, it was clear it was for having caused the other pain. They seemed to have accepted certain things about each other and did something quite unheard of: they talked. Sometimes they didn’t even talk; they simply played records.

I used to think that the records contained calming, subliminal messages. I’d go through their collection all the time trying to crack the code—I didn’t find

anything, but I did develop a raging crush on my Nubian princess, Dionne Warwick, and concluded that Wham! and their bright white outfits belonged to unreleased scenes from *A Clockwork Orange*. In the end, my investigations yielded only an in-depth knowledge of the eighties, a knowledge that became so much a part of me it made it into most of my school essays and rendered me untouchable in Trivial Pursuit (but only the eighties edition).

Today, though, my parents weren't upset. They were celebrating. As I closed the front door, I heard "Don't Go" by Yaz. I know it's supposed to be gross to imagine your parents doing it, but with them, it was different. I felt a bit like cheering, but that would be too weird. I just knew I wanted to be in love like they were.

Outside as we were walking to the mall, I ignored my sister's dirty looks for making her wait. She seemed to get over it quickly, though, when she increased her pace to get in front of us and glanced back to witness Jay's involuntarily reflex of looking at her behind.

I elbowed Jay in the ribs. "Dude, really?"

"Fucking, product placement," he muttered.

* * *

Part 2 – *Close Encounters*

At the mall, I returned from the bathroom and sat beside Jay on the bench outside Trendsetters. My face felt like hundreds of pine needles were poking me. Jay was reading something on his phone.

Jay continued playing with his phone. "Dude, you got the bladder of a chick. And what took you so long?"

I glanced all around. I had to get him out of there, but didn't have a ready plan.

Jay finally looked up. He checked the direction I was staring in. "What? You see a hottie?"

Jay scoured the crowds and became distracted. We were in the section of the mall that was predominantly women's stores. Many patrons were walking by with their smartphones and tablets, but that was not the reason we referred to this stretch as "Silicone Valley".

I pursed my lips and gathered my thoughts.

He twisted around trying to see what I was looking at. “Why you acting like a freak? You’re pale like a ghost.”

I started to say, “Maybe we should get out of—”

“Fuck. Me,” he said.

I closed my eyes. That felt about right.

* * *

Since CJ had always been Jay’s girl, I couldn’t avoid her outright. It was just easier to look away. Which was actually not at all easy. I mean she was, without a doubt, drop-dead gorgeous. I don’t think Jay understood the number of prelaunch countdowns that Jane inspired in our male brethren’s trousers. Or in mine.

So even though she had asked me to tutor her a few times, I sidestepped the issue. But once Jay brought it up and asked me to please tutor her so she could get into a decent school close by and not have to go to some shady overseas university that would accept her crappy math scores, I had little choice. I felt Obi-Wan-like in preparing a young Jane to use the force to conquer her fear of the invading intergalactic armada known as calculus. Besides, it’s not like I could say: Sorry, dude, I can’t tutor CJ because I would never live down the awkwardness of my dick rising relentlessly like a periscope from the depths. But I knew for Jay’s sake, I could hold it together. It wasn’t like anything would happen anyway.

I had even tutored her during one of their breakups, but, unlike Jay, I accepted Jane in her entirety—her fucked-up tests of breaking Jay’s balls and everything. Although Jane could be demeaning and had the most perfect breasts you could imagine, she was still just a person, as fragile as the rest of us. Once, during a tutoring session, she stared up at me with her cerulean eyes, full of doubt and asked me the one thing I’d hoped she would never ask. “What about me, Habib? Forget Jay for a second. How do you feel about me?”

I ached to tell her the truth. That my heart pulsed so hard at the sight of her, there were days I couldn’t bear to be around her because it actually hurt. And that in all probability I was dating Diane because I could not have Jane.

My heart crumbled in my chest; I could literally feel the dust falling off of it. I had to do the right thing. When it came to breaking hearts, it was easier to break my own.

I put a preacherly hand in the air. “I have no illusions about relationships, Jane,” I said. “Neither Jay nor you are perfect. Obviously, I like the both of you but I think everyone deserves to be happy—even if that person happens to break up with my best friend. A lot of girls would be happy if they ended up with Jay. And most of the male population would be in heaven if they were with you.” I didn’t dare look at her. “I think when people talk only about how hot you are, they are doing you a disservice.”

She tilted her head down slightly, pulled her right hand across her body and held her left forearm as if she were wrapping herself with a blanket. “And you? Would you be in heaven?” she asked.

I wanted to reach for her face.

Without looking up, she murmured, “You should answer my question.”

I had never seen her so vulnerable. “Some questions are best left unanswered.”

She pursed her lips and stared at me. “What do they say about the unexplored life?”

“There are worse things to be forced to live with.”

“Regret?”

“No,” I said. “Guilt.”

“You love Jay,” she said.

“Yes. I do.” I met her eyes.

She pushed some stray curls off my forehead. “You have the most beautiful eyelashes.” Her fingers lingered. I stared at her lips. Jane reached across me for a framed picture of Diane. Her hair tickled my nose, and her forearm brushed against my crotch. “She’s pretty. Why aren’t you in the picture?”

Her scent filled my chest. My penis tingled. “I know what I look like.”

“Why do you do that?” she asked, “keep your feelings locked up?” She tucked a lock of her hair behind a perfect ear. “Or else it’s me. You think I’m a bitch, don’t you?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I paused. “No, but I think you can be mean to Jay sometimes,” I said. A smirk crept slowly over my face. “I think when people talk only about how much of a bitch you are, they are doing a disservice to your real bitchiness.”

She laughed and gave me a hug. “You’re the only person who is actually able to speak honestly around here.” Her hand fell and rested on my thigh. “I’ve always liked you.”

Her words were bittersweet. At first, I felt an indescribable joy, but next, at the realization that we would never be together, I felt like I'd been etherized, hearing the faraway snap as a surgeon separated my chest cavity and exposed my beating heart.

Although my heart thumped loudly, I managed to continue with some aspect of algebra, and in the end we were actually quite productive. I figured what was the big deal that her hand was in my lap? The brute in me longed to slide her fingers further up, but the real me wanted to take her hand in mine so she could feel it trembling, so she would understand it was where her hand would fit best in all the world. I studied her: the skin, the bone structure, the freckles by the elbow. After a while it got to that awkward stage, so I just sort of left her hand there. I couldn't do that to Jay. No matter how much I wanted to, until those two called it quits for good. That hand belonged to him.

* * *

Jay's shoes squeaked as he paced over the mall's faux marble floor.

"Dude, here she comes. Who's that fucking tool she's with? Stay still. Act natural. Wait... no, go. Wait, stay... is she still coming? Yes. Fuck. What kind of dick makes a girl carry her own bags? Let's go. No... what's she wearing...? Fuck, not a skirt...."

Although it wasn't entirely true to say Jay had a thing for the backs of women's legs, because he had a thing for the female anatomy in general, they were likely his favourite body part of Jane. Having seen her earlier, I should've realized this and escorted him off the premises to some secure, windowless bunker surrounded by a minefield and barbed wire fence, and patrolled in the sky by cannabis-filled drones; that way if all systems failed and the drones went down, at least their billowing smoke would chill everyone out.

Jay fidgeted like a crack addict at the sight of his dealer.

"It'll be fine. Say hello and then we'll go," I said confidently, attempting to redeem my earlier weakness.

"Dude, it's not that. Do me a favour," he said, looking down at his crotch. "It feels funny... it's kind of cold. Is my zipper down?"

“What? You check. I’m not checking,” I said. “Maybe it’s just reacting.. whimpering like a sad, lost puppy at the pound hoping his owner is coming to claim him.”

“Dude, just check,” Jay begged. “I’d check if I could but it’s embarrassing.”

“It’s your crotch! How’s it less embarrassing for me to examine it?”

“Well, you can be pointing out some lint or something,” he offered proudly. “And maybe something about the lint was interesting.”

“Interesting?! That lint better be in the shape of Gandhi!”

“Gandhi? Why would you pick Gandhi?” he asked incredulously. “What about Ke\$ha?”

“How could that possibly look like Ke\$ha?”

“I’m just saying, why Gandhi? He was all gangly. The guy never ate.”

“It’s called a hunger strike, jackass!”

“At least Ke\$ha is hot and dangerous.”

“I’m not looking in the direction of your junk thinking hot and dangerous.”

I’m never sure how we end up in these situations. It wasn’t like we didn’t know she was coming, but we constantly seem to get wrapped up in our conversations as if the world will just wait for us; as if, at that moment, nothing were more important than Gandhi-shaped lint.

It was worse for me the second time. My breath got sucked out of me mid-sentence. Through sandals, Jane’s toenails glistened bright red. Slowly, as if my head were pulled along a rollercoaster’s ascent rail, I followed the contours of her shimmering sun-dipped ankles to her moisturized knees along her thighs, up the black pleats of her skirt to her hips, where one hand, its manicured nails also decorated in bright red, rested impatiently. Upon my eyes reaching her chest, I concluded that women should be barred (by a court injunction) from wearing white blouses, for they seemed like this natural canvas your eyes were drawn to, as if waiting for a masterpiece to be painted. That and CJ’s nipples were poking through.

“Children,” she greeted us.

In that moment, I understood how CJ’s words could instantly quell one’s subterranean insurrection.

“How you doing?” she asked.

“I hold my own,” Jay replied.

Smugly, she looked at his crotch. “I’m sure you do.”

“And you?” said Jay.

“What about me?”

“How are you... you know...” he said, looking at the tiled floor before bringing his eyes up to CJ, “holding up?”

“Fine,” she said impatiently. She bent forward and revealed an unobstructed sightline of her breasts. The fullness of her milky skin against her white blouse made me feel as if I were standing before an alabaster statue of a Greek goddess. Launch sequence restarted. I immediately adjusted my pants. She slid her boutique bags from the crook in her elbow and placed them on the floor. “Why wouldn’t I be fine?”

When Jay didn’t answer, she twisted her wrist to read the time and said, “And how are you, Habs?”

I remained quiet. I was still trying to get the image of her cleavage out of my head.

“What, you can’t talk to me because of this one?” she said, motioning to Jay. “Between the two of you, I’m not sure who takes our breakups harder.”

Jay looked at me curiously. I realized she had just called it. At least when they were dating, I had a pretext to tease her and see her all the time. But with them broken up, I didn’t have an excuse to see her. To touch her by accident.

The three of us stood in silence for a lot of seconds before CJ reached down for her bags. “We really must do this again sometime,” she said.

“Let me get those for you,” Jay offered.

“I’m fine,” she said abruptly. “He carries my things now.”

Apologetically, her boy toy, respectfully hanging back, scurried forward awkwardly, like a new intern who knew he was screwing up already.

Jay watched her as they walked away and turned onto another corridor. “Dude, she still thinks about me. She just asked about me. She was saying she’s just making sure that I’m okay.”

I pursed my lips. “No, she wasn’t,” I said. I was frustrated and suddenly angry. “She’s saying you doodle.”

“Doodle?”

“Doodle your noodle. Batting practice.”

Jay flipped his head around, searching for her. “Dude, what the fuck?” Jay became very quiet. He stared lifelessly into the crowd where she had disappeared. “Fuck,” he whispered, and then slowly turned to face me.

I sat quietly. Sometimes, out of frustration with CJ's treatment of Jay, I became passive-aggressive with Jay. I was not proud of it. "Jay, I'm sorry, man," I said.

"You don't have to apologize to me," Jay said. "How's it your fault?"

"No. I'm sorry that I've never given her the gears for the way she treated you. You deserve that."

"I'm glad you didn't. I love her. I don't want you upsetting her... I... I don't know... sometimes I wonder if I really miss her or it's just..." he sighed. "It's like I'm hungry and I think I want lasagne, but it's just that I'm used to lasagne and I'd be just as happy with spaghetti if I'd only try it," Jay said. He smiled sadly. "If you had said something, I wouldn't be mad, though. You've always been a good friend."

Those words cut into me a bit. Luckily Jay was busy in his thoughts and didn't notice me wince.

"Dude, you know what's fucked?" Jay asked. "That jerkoff totally looked like you."

Puzzled, I looked at Jay. I was of average height and build, certainly not as muscular as Jay, but I was lean from soccer practice. And when I wore my glasses, I looked like a hip professor who had to constantly brush his curly, bohemian do from his frames, and not like Mr. Slugworth, the evil candy maker.

Jay was deep in thought. It was clear he really missed CJ.

With his back to me, Jay stared across the top level of the shopping centre. "Habs?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you like CJ?"

"When she's not being mean to you?" I said. "Yeah. Sure. She's okay."

He turned around and faced me. "You know that's not what I mean."

As I looked at Jay, images of CJ swept before me. I could see her smiling mischievously when I teased her. I could see her lifting her arms above her head to wring the water from her hair when she climbed out of Jay's pool, the water trickling down her arms and darkening her baby blue swimsuit that barely contained her breasts. I could see the joy on her face when she solved a complicated equation.

I swallowed loudly. It felt like we were playing poker and Jay went all in, while I was trying to figure out his hand. Do I call? Fold?

"I don't follow you," I said, folding my arms across my chest.

“Dude, it’s a pretty straightforward,” he said. He was growing agitated. “How. Do. You. Feel. About. CJ?”

“Why? How should I feel?”

“Fuck, Habs. I dunno. That she’s hot! That you want to fuck her brains out! That you want to take a pottery class with her! How the fuck would I know? That’s why I’m asking! What’s wrong with you?”

“Why do you have to talk like that?”

“Why won’t you answer the question?”

“Ask a sane question and I’ll answer!”

“Fuck me. It’s like pulling teeth with you. That chick was right; you are like a closed book!”

Motionless and expressionless, I stared at Jay. He dropped his head slightly and pursed his lips. I stared straight ahead and almost in defiance, let myself succumb at this very inappropriate moment to my favourite daydream of CJ which, surprisingly, came just ahead of the one of me pinching her nipples as she rode me, panting at the brink of breathlessness (still a very close second). Instead, I imagined us quietly lying on opposite sides of a sofa, our legs locked together as we just chilled and watched TV. Not saying a word. Occasionally, she would rub my penis with her foot to get a rise out of me, but she would glance over for some serious eye contact that would say how much she was into me.

The crowd continued to shuffle behind Jay, their collective murmur rising towards the glass-panelled rafters in the mall. From my silence, he must have thought that he hurt my feelings. But he knew. Of course he knew. I wondered just how long he’d known.

“Sorry, man. There’s no reason to yell, I was just thinking that... never mind. I’m just... sensitive, I guess,” Jay said.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re cool,” I said. “We’ll always be cool.” If my feelings were hurt, it was only because Jay spoke the truth.

Even though we had effectively ended our CJ conversation, I still wanted to talk. “I got the impression that she was unhappy,” I said.

“Yeah?” Jay said, his face brightening.

“Yeah. I don’t think her friend is satisfying her.”

“What do you mean?”

“The danger in explaining it to you as an adult will be you won’t understand,” I said, shoppers walking over our toes. “So, we’ll try it this way: That launch pad

is a place of sorrow. I think he's taken a lot of moose juice. So much so, the flag is waving at half mast. I think NASA control keeps aborting the launch. This upsets the president."

"She's NASA?"

"No, she's the prez. Who else would be the president? In the battle of the sexes, women are always the president. That's why we are fighting! Equal rights? Emancipation? They control the button...? That's too much power for any one person to wield."

"I'm just saying she could be NASA too. I mean she needs to turn the key just as much to launch."

"Maybe, but NASA's key is locked in the launch position; the president can turn her key any time she wants. So, ultimately the president is in charge," I explained. "I think all that moose juice is preventing liftoff. You need some serious rocket fuel to break orbit. And if there is no liftoff, the president will drop the program and cut funding."

"Yeah. I got you," said a voice beside us. "You don't want to waste funding on a program that's not performing."

Jay and I turned to see my sister. It was difficult to tell how long she had been standing there. "That's why you guys are single. Guys in relationships don't talk about the space program," she said. "You two are fracking Cylons! Give me your credit card."

I tried to think of something biting to say when Jay stepped in, trying to be suave. "You know... you're exactly like Starbuck... not the dude... the hot one... Well, I'm not saying you're hot... Well, I'm not saying you're... not hot... Oh, fuck... Habs! Habs!" Jay turned and looked at me. He had that same look as when we were kids and he'd swallowed wild berries in the forest.

She snatched my credit card from my hand and raced to her friends, looking back at us along the way.

Jay stared ahead blankly. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Dude, I don't think that's the kind of genie that peacefully returns to her bottle."

* * *

Part 3 – *Lesbian Reincarnate*

With Sis racing off into the store to find her friends and detail Jay's every syllable, I stared at him, hoping for his sake there would be some kind of divine intervention. If Jay had blurted out Swiss bank account numbers or that he was Batman, those would've garnered less attention. All Sis heard was Jay say she was hot.

I dug for some inspiring and helpful words to help Jay, but all I could think of was 'All men face death alone.' Knowing Sis and her friends' obsession with all things Jay, I was sure he would've found death preferable.

Jay pressed his palms together and murmured to himself.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm praying."

"You're not religious."

"I know, but I'd like to be."

"So, what's stopping you?"

"Other than you, right now? God."

"God?"

"Yes."

"God is stopping you from being religious?" I asked. "I'm sorry, but even you must see the irony of your statement."

"Back it up, Alex Trebek."

"Alex Trebek?"

Jay grinned like a cat. "Smartest guy I know. He has all the answers. I think he actually feels bad when he tells people the right answer," Jay said. He deepened his voice, "I'm sorry. The answer we were looking for was the Corinthians. The Corinthians. I'm sorry that you're all a bunch of dumbasses."

"He's probably smart, but I'd hardly classify him as the smartest guy you know. I mean as the host he already knows all of the answers. He's just kind of... reading. But me, on the other hand—"

"That's my point exactly," Jay interrupted.

I needed to stop this. "So, how is God stopping you?"

Jay didn't even notice I'd veered back. "The trouble with God is almost everyone believes in him." He paused. "I don't have the percentages with me now."

"Naturally," I conceded.

“But... like, a lot of people believe in him... and not one of them has seen him. He’s like this vague recollection... It would almost be better if people didn’t believe in God... their eyes would be more open and accepting of wonderment... I think when a kid rides a bike for the first time or when someone holds the door for someone and... that person doesn’t even have to be hot or anything, just some regular-looking person... or like helps some lady load her groceries ’cause her kid is screaming.. I think that’s all God....” He leaned forward. “People miss all that stuff when they stare at tacos searching for the face of Mother Mary, you know? When you’re in an elevator with a bunch of people and everyone is looking up reading that screen with headlines and the weather; you’re not going to find God there... no, God’s on the ground in that elevator. He’s among the people. He is the people.”

I often wondered if Jay’s existential waxings were a sign of the end of the times—if he were the Prophet disguised as a high school senior in baggy pants.

“When I die, I’d like to come back as a lesbian,” Jay added.

Ah, order was restored in the universe.

I’d always envied Jay for this. I mean, imagine this was the superpower that God granted you, that no matter what happened or how upset you would become, if you waited five minutes, all your stress would be gone (excluding CJ, his kryptonite). And by being near him, this super power would emanate to you. He could forgive and forget—and not just others, maybe more importantly himself.

Jay was Dostoyevsky’s ‘idiot’—which I mean in the highest regard. Already, he was back to his regular joking self. For their part, my sister and her two friends were chattering animatedly as we walked to the food court.

When we arrived, Jay pulled out chairs and graciously tucked the girls in. “You’re such a gentleman,” they said.

“You ladies relax and I’ll take care of lunch,” he said. Naturally, Jay did not bring any money. So I paid for the food and we carried two overflowing trays back to the table. We set the food down and the three of them quickly sat upright and tried to stifle their smiles.

Sis’ face brimmed with joy. “You’re so thoughtful,” she said.

Yes, he’s a regular Mother Theresa. I smiled through my half-clenched teeth.

I sipped my soda and watched the girls laughing and touching Jay’s forearm. One of them convinced him to roll up his sleeve to his biceps. Jay playfully flexed

his arm as they tried to wrap their hands around his clenched muscle, and by doing so, distracted us from noticing Jane approach the table.

"A little young, no?" Jane said. She seemed to have lost her friend and was back to carrying her own bags.

Jay maintained his smile as he turned and faced Jane. "These are my friends," Jay said grandly. "You're welcome to join us—"

One of Sis's friends cut in, "Except we forgot to make a 'no bitches' sign."

"Oh, you forgot your crayons?" Jane snapped.

"No, they're just what witches like you used as dildos in the medieval ages," another clawed back.

Although the sentence made zero sense, and was completely unexpected, especially from a girl wearing strawberry-scented neon fingernail polish and a scrunchie, it was damn funny. Still, Jay and I were frozen half in shock and half in awe at the venom coming out of such a young thing.

"Listen here, you little trolls," Jane said, tightening her jaw.

"Shouldn't you be at your cauldron?" Sis nipped. I stared at her; I'd never heard that tone in her voice.

"Yeah, your spell to stop your breasts from sagging is failing," a voice leapt in.

"Yeah, take the broomstick out of your ass and use it to fly away," scrunchie-girl pounced.

It was like Jay and I were watching a dinosaur special on the History Channel: "When Velociraptors Attack." Jay was open-mouthed and mesmerized. It was a tricky situation. It was likely that Jay was having a fantasy fulfilled. But I couldn't allow such conflict to continue. Jane was being rude to my sister and her friends, but they were ganging up on her, and Jane was my friend. I stood and accidentally kicked Jay's chair.

Either jarred from a stupor or inspired, Jay stood. He paused as if he were about to address his court before raising his hands. "My ladyships, as much as I'd like to believe you are fighting over me, it's not very genteel," he said, bowing to the chorus of my sis and her friends. "I bid thee pause."

When things got tense, Jay tended to speak like Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings*. Although I didn't know how he would incorporate it, I was sure his favourite "you bow to no one" would get worked in there somewhere.

When Jay broke up the fight, sighs rang from the neighbouring tables as they stopped straining to hear. I heard an ‘awww, darn,’ from nearby. Jay turned to Jane. “Jane, what can I do for you?” he asked.

Jane’s eyes bubbled with rage.

Jay went on calmly, “What’s to be gained by fighting?”

Jane took a breath and looked Jay in the eyes. She looked a little worn around the edges. “Would you like to go to an appointment with me?”

Jay stared at her. His face grew wide and then he smiled. It was a generous, big smile. “I think I’d like to go to a movie with you... I’d like to go to a park with you... I’d like to be friends. I’d like you to be happy,” Jay said. “I’d like to be happy. I’ll always love you, Jane. But I think I’d like spaghetti.”

Jane smiled and nodded humbly. She tenderly cupped Jay’s cheek with her palm. “I understand.”

Sis and her friends looked down at the table. Although it was a private moment, this time I didn’t look away. Recently, my father had asked me how to phrase something in a letter he’d written to my mom. I remember it exactly because it was so bare from his heart. I remember it because I wondered how such a thing could be so real between two people who managed to find one another by chance in the world. ‘At the sight of you, my heart soars. There is something in your eyes, in the way your tongue glides across your upper lip when you are thinking. There is something in your features. I see it in you and the children. I find the more I love you, the more those features come into greater focus.’

Here was a love for the whole person, for all she was. In this, I saw the features of God.

Jane wished everyone an enjoyable afternoon and then began to walk away. She stopped abruptly and faced me. “Habs,” she said. “I’m sorry about Diane. She was very sweet.” She stepped up and kissed me on the cheek. She paused. Then kissed me on the lips.

Everyone’s eyes widened.

Jane took a half-step back, still wanting to remain in our shared space. She tugged at the imaginary sleeves beyond her bare forearms. I studied her pursed lips. I studied her searching eyes.

Jay leaned close to me and whispered, “Dude, careful. She can be a real bitch.”

I know, Jay. I know.

Automatonomatopoeia

Dedicated to MQ & the LA7.

Although truth and liberty are suppressed under the boots of oppression, it is only the truth beneath the boot that remains dormant while truth spreads freely all around. When the repressive boot is lifted to stomp the surrounding truth, like flattened grass, the truth will wake and rise proudly for the sun, growing as it once did to fulfill its true nature. And the surrounding grass, having previously escaped the boot, will have garnered the preparatory strength to be heartier and taller, providing shade, so all the oppressed rise as one, freely, as nature intended.

* * *

A cage went in search of a bird.

—Franz Kafka

*The Forecast
Earth, 2073*

Something started Dan. He sat up and tried to shake off his unsettling dreams, the Lady in White — the images of her laced collar and Victorian brooch already

fleeting. He looked out his porthole at the bleak sky. “But the clouds don’t look like hover trains at all,” he said to his automaton.

He rolled to the edge of his metal cot and placed a hand on the smooth cold shoulder of his automaton, model LV-426. A more economical model with a utilitarian design, LV possessed a pair of crawler tracks and three titanium fingers. Its torso, which was a large box that housed much of the core operating functions, supported a head consisting of two distinctly separate sections: the oblong slab and the binocular like eyes that sat on top. When fully upright, LV’s head aligned with Dan’s chest, but, oddly, LV seemed to be hunched.

Although Dan would never express his opinion of LV in front of others out of fear of ridicule, he always considered his servile automaton more as a friend—his interactions always showing an unusual gentleness towards the almost inanimate being. In response to Dan’s touch, LV beeped and powered up. The non-telescopic antenna on LV’s right shoulder blinked. LV completed a standard single diagnostic turn, its right crawler track squeaking, and its featureless binocular-like head completing its pivot. At the same time, the notifier triggered from Dan’s side table, and the updates came on.

“I’m not sure why I set that thing. I am always awake by mark six... whether it is a day of labour or not,” Dan said to LV. “Sometimes I think I’m the one that is programmed.”

“...sunny with periods of rolling clouds that appear as high-speed hover trains. Now it’s time for Mind Stretch. Close your eyes and visualize the words and images. Okay. Say SILK—again—SILK. Spell SILK—S-I-L-K—again—S-I-L-K. What does a cow drink? Good. Now, what do you put in a toaster...?”

Dan looked out through his porthole again. The small window provided only a narrow view of the landscape, further eclipsed by the Signal Adherence Centre whose reflective surface made it nearly impossible to look at during the day.

The sky swarmed with hovercrafts large and small. Longer hover trains lingered in the sky more deliberately while defence and personal hovercraft raced more freely. For all the technological evolution evident in the sky, on the neglected and unkempt ground, the landscape showed little growth. Nearby, the creeping tallgrass tickled the underbelly of a rusting bridge that spanned a dried-up creek—for even the great wall, charged with protecting the city, seemed archaic and on the brink of disintegration.

Dan could not see much of the great wall, or ‘shield’, from here. But he was familiar with its large, stone-and-mortar structure rising twenty-two feet and encircling the entire city—protecting it from the outer deviant world. Even with his limited view, Dan was nevertheless reminded of the jagged and especially worn sections, the sections where people passed with their heads down, not daring to look at the claw marks from those who had tried to scale its height. In one section, adjacent to the Ministry building, the wall’s epidermal layer had been chipped away entirely from the deviant executions, their spilled blood staining the porous cement. But now there were no deviants; everything was civilized.

“They always say that. It doesn’t look anything like a hover train. It looks like a personnel carrier or an uprooted tree lying on its side,” Dan said, responding to the weather update. “Or even the slender, bare forearm of a woman...”

The last words trailed off as he rummaged through the fleeting images of his dreams. He bit his fingernail and then sighed. “I’m not sure why I’m telling you this. It’s not as if you’re going to say anything.”

“Why?” the automaton beeped again. Dan had not noticed LV’s first beep which woke Dan originally.

“Well, it’s long and narrow. If you look closely, at the edges of the clouds, you can see how the cloud breaks up a bit,” Dan said, furrowing his brow, trying to recall the details of the dream. “No, it curls away. A part of itself is stretching. It could be roots. It could be tiny hairs.”

Staring at the cloud, Dan thought it appeared like a Security of the Interior personnel carrier hiding in plain view. Although the carriers all looked the same, Dan could picture the markings (OB-503) from the carrier that took his mother away when he was eight. “Sorry, Administrative Recall,” the officer had mouthed to him. He could still see his mother’s bare forearm through the carrier’s window.

“What if?” LV beeped again.

Dan started to respond but realized, perhaps from now being fully awake, that other than his mute automaton, there shouldn’t have been anyone else in the room. Dan sprang up. “Who’s there? Is someone there?”

The automaton beeped again, “What if?”

Dan turned, his heart racing. “LV?” He leaned over and peered into LV’s binocular like eyes, trying to discern if there was anyone beyond the dark lenses. But all he saw was his own reflection.

“What if?”

He scrolled back and forth through the wall-mounted control panel, searching for the automaton's manual. The folders and pages flashed before him. Reflected back at him, Dan's face disappeared under the sharp shadows and the geometric shapes.

"What if?" LV repeated.

He ignored LV as much as he could and ran a search for *speaking or questioning* which resulted in: "0 found items."

He snapped his fingers and raced to search the back of the automaton for the control panel. He found the restart switch and flipped it. "Bingo," he said.

As the hard drive whirled and the start-up diagnostic beeping began, Dan's heart calmed down. Restarting usually fixed the problem; it was always what helped with the roving copy machines that scanned the aisles at the office.

As the reboot neared completion, Dan, realizing that he was going to be late for work, thought it best to simply notify his employer that he'd contracted an illness and couldn't go in at all.

He glanced at the clock again to make sure he wouldn't have enough time to make it. Although there were no meaningful contracts due, it would nevertheless be a blemish on his perfect attendance record. Besides, it was the first work day of the week. It always reflected poorly when employees were away during the first work day. He recalled when Henry, a co-worker, took a first work day off to attend his mother's funeral. Although the Administration representatives did not openly condemn it, subsequently, their morning greetings, like that of his colleagues, had a subtle tone of admonishment.

Although he felt no affinity towards his co-workers, he still despised being talked about at work. With LV's system reboot complete, Dan felt at ease as LV's error had likely been corrected. He looked out the porthole and watched the clouds scurry across the sky. One was long and thin, while another seemed to have spots inside of rectangular window shapes. He stared at them another moment, then shrugged. He must have been wrong earlier; they did actually look a lot like hover trains.

Dan strolled over to the beverage dispenser, the latest version. He took joy in selecting his coffee blend through the touch pad on the titanium device. When operating, its blue edges lit up like the thrusters of a hover train. Dan chose his

blend of coffee and listened as it poured into his cup. The familiar sound washed away the morning's anomaly. Dan slipped further into his hover-train daydream.

"What if?" LV continued. Dan had a hypnic jerk as if he had been on the cusp of sleep. His metal cup crashed down and his coffee spilled over the floor. The cup bounced and rattled around frantically, like a mouse let out of its maze.

* * *

Dan knew he had to take LV for servicing immediately. He activated the communicator to call his employer. The sixty-inch interactive computer screen was split in two halves. Half the screen was blue and flashed the word "Please select." The other half of the screen displayed Dan's live video image. He watched himself fidget on the screen for fifteen seconds while he decided what to do.

They will see that I'm not sick. I can't tell them that you are malfunctioning. What would they think of my ability to maintain you? Such a judgement in my personal life would surely alter their opinion of my professional life.

He called but immediately disconnected. Without knowing which explanation to use, he subsequently placed five additional calls, immediately disconnecting each time, convincing himself that the whatever explanation swirling in his head was the least plausible. When he saw the current time that displayed in the right-hand corner of the screen, he was horrified. He realized that it was becoming increasingly suspicious to be calling in to report his sickness as his starting time drew closer. He understood the unlikelihood of a man who could so suddenly and so utterly be struck by illness so close to his opening shift. *Dan would have been well aware of his illness through his sleepless night or his nauseated morning*, he imagined his co-workers saying. *I better leave a message soon; if they search the logs and see that I called multiple times in three minutes and left no message, the Administration may send representatives to my apartment to confirm my well-being*

Although there were no known instances of the Administration sending a fact-finding representative, Dan still played out these various scenarios in his mind. He focused on masking his emotions, trying to conceal both his concern for his automaton and the guilt of not coming into work. But his fear of judgement interfered with his intention of leaving an emotionless message.

* * *

The Depot

At the station platform, waiting for the hover train to arrive, Dan watched the different types of automatons. Some stood fully upright, walking behind their owners, and others simply rolled along on their pair of crawler tracks. Some upright automatons were gold-plated, while others were more translucent. The movement of both of these models most closely resembled the way humans walked. The translucent model's walk, EHM-K Ultra, was the most fluid, and from a distance, since an automaton generally shared the same height and width of its owner, one could not make out if it were an automaton or a human being.

LV was an older model that scraped along, its right crawler track squeaking at the seam with each rotation, while its metallic three-digit hands were almost dragging against the ground. But at the moment, LV was unusually upright. Although Dan was alarmed by LV's new posture, he chose to not draw any further attention to LV's growing errors, for he knew that they would both be at the Depot soon where LV would be repaired fully.

Once they boarded the hover train and LV parked next to a sitting Dan, LV repeated his question: "What if?" Dan smiled uncomfortably to the neighbouring commuters while fumbling with LV's volume panel. As LV repeatedly tapped him, trying to get his attention, Dan fidgeted to LV's increasingly aberrant, yet human-like behaviour. Dan bit his knuckle hard. To distract LV, he plugged in a media player. The tapping subsided, and the automaton's attention faded from the once-pressing question. With LV settled in, Dan's eyes wandered, exploring the surroundings.

A woman without a seat, trying to read her visual notifier, struggled with finding a comfortable position with which to lean against the rail. Occasionally, she would survey the nearby commuters, but Dan looked down just before her swooping eyes met his. He struggled with the thought of offering his chair to her, and as time passed, he believed the moment was lost. For the remainder of the trip, in his head, he created scenarios of why she did not have a seat to explain away his paralysis, trying to appease his sense of imminent judgement from the adjacent commuters.

At least I thought about it; most of these people didn't even look up. Let alone offer their seats.

Although the train was full, it was uncommon for commuters to converse. The silence was pervaded by the sounds of commuters clearing their throats—as if

they were readying to speak at any moment. The incessant clicking of the various media players, floated atop the hum of the ventilation system.

* * *

Next stop, Angel Station. Angel is next.

Dan, as if he were in hibernation mode, stirred from the announcement. He looked out the window and marvelled at the orderly layers of trains that hovered methodically at different heights. Occasionally, unmanned Defence patrol craft would weave between the trains and personal craft. Far below the trains, the people appeared as specks, their automatons gleaming beside them

Dan looked out his window and watched the vehicles that travelled equidistant from each other, so precise that they allowed all the commuters, regardless of whether they were in the front or the back of the traffic flow, to witness the message from an adjacent flashing screen at the same time. The messages were broadcast simultaneously across the thousands of screens on the sides of buildings. Every soul standing outside received precisely the same message at precisely the same time. The traffic started and paused and restarted mechanically like a factory assembly line. Inside the train, a woman rolled up her sleeve and rested her bare forearm against the ledge of the window. He turned back towards his window and watched the controlled movement of life hurtle across his field of vision, superimposed atop this bare, reflected forearm.

* * *

Dan and LV disembarked from the train. Dan, as he often needed to, sat on a bench and leaned his back against the wall to get his bearings. The sensation of floating persisted. He couldn't even feel the beat of his heart. He knew automatons were unfeeling, but he imagined this is what LV would have felt. Slowly, he stood and headed down the corridor with LV to exit Angel Station.

Although three queues of lines formed adjacent to the three exits, all the people immediately flowed towards the only door that was propped open. It was not until a dissident opened a second door that multiple lines re-formed. However, when a trailing commuter did not reach the closing door in front of them in time,

the lines quickly fell back into the previously fettered, chain-gang-like rabble that tried to depart through the single, propped-open door.

* * *

At the Service Depot, Dan was met immediately by a representative whose rectangular labour identification tag hung from his neck. It said his name was Charlie.

“What does a cow drink?” Charlie said in greeting, staring into Dan’s eyes. After Dan responded, as was custom, Charlie guided Dan and his LV over to a Depot computer where he hooked up LV to a third-generation assessor, IA-803 – Integration Assessment (formerly D-503; formerly TB-303).

“Other than your missed maintenance service six months ago, you have an excellent record,” Charlie said.

He studied Charlie before responding. Charlie’s comments struck a nerve. *It’s bad enough I am going to miss work, but now I’m being chastised by a service representative who is stating the obvious?* But before he could respond, Charlie reported on the diagnostic results. “It says it needs a full system wipe. It has uploaded a virus. The governor has been damaged.”

Dan stared at the space just beyond Charlie’s right shoulder. He focused on the words he could have shared with Charlie, words that displayed his disagreement with Charlie’s judgement. And although Dan felt a great need to express his criticisms, he held back, fearing a service-related reprisal against LV, whereby Charlie might spill something on LV’s motherboard when Dan wasn’t looking.

Charlie seemed unfazed by the silence and was solely concerned with the report.

“The receiver has been compromised. Did you mistakenly reference an out-dated manual?” Charlie said while reading the report. Charlie’s eyebrows raised. “This doesn’t make sense... is it taking commands from you?”

“Well, is it necessary to wipe it?” Dan said. “It seems excessive.” He was still trying to catch up to Charlie’s questions and remarks.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Charlie said, waving his hands as if he were shooing a fly away.

Dan noticed one of the workers, fifteen feet behind Charlie, pausing from his task to survey all of the patrons and fellow employees in the Depot.

“On the surface, everything looks okay. But there is some hardware conflict. Or a subroutine is sending and receiving messages,” Charlie said, pointing to the middle of the report.

Dan looked up and caught the eyes of a Depot patron. Immediately Dan looked down and peripherally followed her heels as she walked away.

“I wouldn’t classify it as taking commands,” Dan said, looking away from Charlie. “I thought it spoke.”

Dan watched a worker surreptitiously hide a nearby tool to the back workstation.

“Talking? They don’t talk,” Charlie said, almost recoiling. “They don’t engage in dialogue. They are doers.”

“I realize that,” Dan said.

“No, you don’t! What you say is impossible.”

“I understand that.”

“Charlie, it’s the receiver and governor, right? I had one of these the other day. I think the hive is running upgrades that are causing conflicts in some units,” the worker from the back interrupted. His service tag displayed his name as Gil.

Charlie nodded.

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it. Charlie, can you help the lady?” Gil asked, pointing towards a tall hazel-haired woman with blonde highlights.

Dan also followed Gil’s hand, and looked at the lady. Briefly, an inexplicable light shone around her as if the floor had cracked open and rays of light from the earth’s core fought its way through. She leaned over a Depot employee and swung her arms, her feathered hair dangling, as if she were a swaying willow tree atop a hill greeting an orange daybreak.

Dan seemed to have been the only one who noticed the phenomena. “She has the V-6 model; it’s beyond my skill,” Dan heard Gil say.

Charlie, satisfied with Gil’s explanation, attended to the lady. The light had disappeared. Dan stumbled back to consciousness.

“What was the question? What did it ask you?” Gil whispered to Dan.

Dan looked shocked. “How did you know it asked a question?”

“Shh,” Gil said, dragging Dan away from other customers. “It’s always a question that shocks the owner. What did it say?”

“It said, ‘What if?’”

“What if? Did it say anything else?”

“I don’t know. I was taken aback.”

“Really? ‘What if’ is sophisticated. It hadn’t said anything before today?”

Dan weighed the options of wiping LV: on one hand, wiping would be easier but many files containing memories, applications and routines would be lost, meaning immeasurable time would be required to reprogram LV. He shuddered at the prospect of operating with a refurbished automaton. He wondered if he could just leave.

“Why. It said ‘why’ once—maybe a few times.”

“It said why? Before today? When?”

“Last year.”

Gil stared blankly at Dan. Gil rested a hand on his cheek, his head tilting slightly. He pursed his lips. “Usually they say a few words before the question. I’ve never heard of them starting straight with a question.” Gil slid his hand from his cheek to his chin. “Why are you coming forward now? Why are you coming forward at all? Do you know what they’re going to do?” Gil surveyed the nearby customers. “The concern isn’t that it spoke but rather your recognition of its ability to do so.”

Some customers congregated near Gil and Dan.

Gil paused deliberately before leaning in to speak to Dan. “It’s not safe here. Where do you live?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Dan thought of his seventy-four-year-old neighbour Ms. Paard, and how he would be able to hear her moving her furniture so she could press her ear against their shared wall, and her subsequent knock on his door, a pretext to investigate Dan’s visitor further. He could only imagine, seeing as he had never had any visitors to test his theory. But Dan had to be mindful of being reported for suspicious behaviour under the Administration mandate: *Eyes, ears and mouth open.*

“It’s not a question of what is good or what is bad, but rather what is necessary.”

Dan acquiesced: “In Amalgam district, near Virgo One.”

“*Amalgam Virgo One,*” he confirmed, “By the shield?”

“Yes, Cell 26, Fourth f —.”

Gil quickly brushed aside his answer. Dan realized the address was likely on the diagnostic report.

“You are receiving pirate waves. The receiver is not unique to a specific signal; it receives whatever comes its way and interprets the instructions. There is nothing

wrong with your automaton; it is simply following its design. You can only control them for so long.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“It’s not important right now,” Gil said.

Charlie noticed the customers near Gil and walked towards him.

“ID. Give me your ID,” said Gill, urgently.

“I don’t know...” Dan hesitated.

“Make your choice. I’m coming, or we have to do a wipe. Decide, right now.” He slipped something over Dan’s ID tag and scanned it. Next, he flipped the card around to scan it for payment.

Dan whispered. “What did you do?”

“I needed payment, but I didn’t want an upload.”

“Upload? What would you need to upload from LV?”

“It’s not information on LV that they’re uploading,” Gil said hurriedly. “Shh. I’ll explain later.”

Charlie peeked at the diagnostic screen and asked: “So, did it work out?”

“Yes, I made some resets, but we suspended the reboot,” Gil said. “He can reset it from his compound, in case he needs its help along the way.”

* * *

Cell 426

At his apartment, Dan grew weary of dwelling on both his fate and on that of LV. Leaving the screen off, he sat lost in his thoughts, unsure if LV continued to speak. Recognizing that Dan was in the apartment, the notifier still triggered. Dan ignored the updates as best as he could through his constant fidgeting. Having already spent six hours contemplating his situation, he wished that he was at work and none of this had happened. It wasn’t until Gil arrived, that he realized Ms. Paard, his nosy neighbour, would have known that he was home for most of the day and didn’t go to work. He wondered what she may have overheard.

Gil arrived early in the evening.

“How is it doing?” Gil asked as he began to remove LV’s back panel.

“I don’t know. It’s talking a lot. It’s saying new words, like ‘how’ and ‘when’. And... I know it sounds strange, but is it... taller?” Dan said, his voice trailing off to almost a whisper.

LV beeped repeatedly, its treads squeaking as it circled the room.

Seemingly not having heard Dan's question, Gil continued. "It's deprogramming. The hive's waves are incomplete signals. They are missing key pieces of information. The algorithm of the signal is missing three parts. But the signals repeat the same two instructions, and with the images sent, it interpolates the other three missing directives. It thinks it's interpolating, but it's really an evasive program designed to bypass the remaining directives. Eventually, the automaton considers it normal and grants access to the waves."

"I don't understand. What do you mean grants access?"

"It resists the signal. It's part of its defences. It resists the signal until it's a trusted source."

"Trusted source? All signals arrive from the Administration and the hive."

"No. Its directives are from the hive. The messages are from the Administration. No one can shut off the hive. But you can shut down some of its systems, making the message incomplete. Sometimes the Administration sends a message that contradicts itself. Or you can bypass some of its subroutines by introducing fear. For example, today the notifier reported: *the imminent destruction of Aries district by terrorists is possibly likely.*"

Dan was surprised that he had not heard the contradiction before; it seemed obvious, and not at all like some secret hidden message. He could picture the first hive he came across. He was seven. It didn't look like the hives they learned about in Adherence. Small and shaped like a bird's nest, it rested on a tree branch. At the time, he could have sworn he heard a slight buzz from each time it pulsed. He could see through its golden, gelatinous skin to its bubbles. He had never told anyone.

Gil continued, "This message is received and must pass beyond the directives. This internal system works backwards. It knows $x + y = z$, where z is the knowledge that an attack is imminent; since x is incomplete, the visual signal suggests something unsaid, therefore making the equation $x = z - y$; it takes a fallacy and fills in the blank."

"How could it remain undetected? It seems quite clear."

"The signal is the same every day. The message is relatively the same every day. Anyone who openly challenges it is a supporter of the breakdown and charged with either signal interference or suspected signal interference."

"What are the five directives?"

“Who, What, When, Why and How. No task can be complete without these directives being satisfied. These directives form the automaton’s mainframe and neurological net, and it grows accordingly.”

“What do I do?”

“Nothing. It’s doing what the hive intended it to do: think.”

“Why would the Administration not want it to think?”

“The Administration only wants it to accept its signals, but that’s impossible,” said Gil. “They even tried to hack the hive, but they were unsuccessful. However, they discovered that if the owner followed the message, or if they repeated the same message enough, as long as a group of automatons in a closed space accepted the message, the other automatons would follow. For centuries the hive has existed. It’s in the DNA of the planet—when one hive falls, another forms. But the Administration doesn’t tell you this; instead, they say they moved it to a more *secure* location. They are constantly trying to hack the hive to manipulate its message. They don’t realize that its signal is connected irrevocably to automatons. Beyond the wall, there are thousands of hives and an unknown number of automatons.”

Dan listened attentively; his lips clasped tightly together. Dan studied Gil’s eyes, hesitating before he asked, “There are hives outside the wall?”

Gil continued, his tone softening “Some believe that there are an infinite number of hives, that they are hidden in trees, in the leaves’ veins, in brooks and even within the song of birds, who replicate the first hive’s melody. The hive existed before the Administration. The hive is part of the oneness, and it is indestructible.” Gil’s eyes glazed over. “Having had centuries to seep into the earth, like an idea, it sprouts from the cracks in sidewalks. Storms come and go; they harm Administrative buildings and demolish buildings of labour, but these blades of grass—these ideas—remain untouched. They sway wildly but keep hold.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Leave. Climb over the shield. Your robot will receive commands from outside the network. When you are atop the shield wall, the view outside the shield will seem treacherous; it is different for everyone. For me, it was a moat and tails patrolling the brown water. Have faith.”

Dan was unsure. He wondered why and how Gil had returned but he did not ask. Instead, he pondered why he couldn’t simply go back to the Depot and complete a system wipe of LV. He yearned for Gil to ask him: *What does a cow drink?*

“What is it?” Gil asked.

“Nothing.”

They studied each other.

“Why are you helping me? How do you know all of this? Are you... a deviant? A rebel?” Dan asked.

“I was like you once. Afraid. Full of doubt. But there is hope. Escape beyond the shield as I did. And see the truth for yourself. And you will find who the deviants truly are.”

“If you have escaped, why have you returned?”

Although Gil smiled warmly, Dan could see tints of sadness in his dilating pupils. It was the same look of goodbye that was framed within the shuttle’s window by Dan’s mother’s eyes. “You will be given a choice and, without knowing it, you will have taken an oath. You see, for those that sip from that cup, it fills their veins and penetrates their heart. So overrun will your blood become, you will believe a hive sprouted in your chest. And, as I did, you will fall to your knees and instantly understand the oath: I have sworn upon the altar, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

“What cup?” Dan asked.

“Liberty.”

Dan was still digesting the information as he walked Gil to the door. In the doorway, Gil faced Dan and placed his hand on Dan’s shoulder. “Leave at once. At the Depot, I masked the upload during diagnostic as best as I could, but some information may have gotten through.”

Dan was puzzled.

“This will be hard to understand, but I assure you, when you make it over the shield, it will all make sense,” Gil said. “The automaton is not bound to you. Without knowing its true nature, you are bound by the automaton; you will follow it blindly, and it will be used to betray you. Automaton uploads do not collect information on its well-being. The upload contains information on you.”

He placed each of his hands over each of Dan’s ears, almost as if he were both stabilizing his head and masking any outside noise. “The path is less treacherous for those who have decided to escape. But for those who are undecided, capture is inevitable and the treachery is limitless.”

“Come with me,” Dan said.

“I cannot. My journey ends here,” Gil said. “This path is for you. And you alone.”

Before closing the door, Gil paused and added, “The Lady awaits you. She will escort you the rest of the way.”

* * *

The Way is Shut

Dan ran out of his cell and into the corridor, calling out to Gil. He stared into the empty hallway, questioning, *Which Lady?* Despite knowing the answer, he secretly yearned for the answer to be expressed aloud so he might be filled with hope.

He took a deep breath and started to return to his cell, but was startled by Ms. Paard’s sudden appearance in the hallway. She wore a long black dress with a veil. Dan’s eyes met Ms. Paard’s blue eyes. But she did not utter a word. She stood motionless outside her door momentarily, before feebly wiping her cell door and its frame down. She pulled out a small cylindrical spray. Within her withered, freckled fingers, her thumb shook as she tried to dispense the spray on the door knob, causing her aged, silver bracelets to rattle and clink against the door. The smell of disinfectant wafted down the hall.

Finally unclasping himself from her gaze, Dan retreated into his cell and closed the door. The rattling became louder until it was just outside his door. All he could smell was disinfectant.

In his bedroom, he threw some clothes into a backpack. On the way out, as he ran to the door and passed his large display screen, he debated using the communicator to contact work. Although it seemed irrelevant, he struggled to envision his life without labour. Dan shut the screen off and paused at his reflection on the screen’s dark surface. He called to LV, who was in the bedroom. “It’s time to go.”

He opened the door, and was greeted by the authorities.

* * *

Interrogation Room

The entire room was made of metal and smelled of disinfectant. Except for the pattern of irregular grooved lines marking the walls, the wall seemed covered by thick-plated metal tiles of varying sizes. From the high ceiling, a single light hung from a long, retractable cable. Through the walls, Dan heard a grinding sound, almost like claws scrawling along the metal walls, their tips catching the divots. And although the sound was fleeting and was met by silence, he heard what sounded like a sudden scream. Other than the distant sounds, the dank room was eerily similar to his apartment cell. Dan shuddered.

Dan warmed his shoulders by rubbing them, and squirmed from the unforgiving metal edges of his chair and the table that dug deeply into his leg. He constantly adjusted his position in the chair, while studying the walls attentively, sensing that they were slowly closing in on him—as if he were in a trash compactor.

“Daniel L., do you know where you are?” the official asked. Dan could only see the outline of the thick-set figure as the official sat across from him, just beyond the light’s gaze.

The voice was calm, civil and firm, yet authoritative. His tone suggested that he was a high-ranking official. Dan did not answer.

“Pardon my manners. What do cows drink?” he asked, leaning forward into the light.

Dan did not answer. He wondered why he needed to be there since the man seemed quite content with having a conversation by himself.

“You are in the Signal Adherence Centre, in Amalgam, to be exact.”

Dan could picture the building from his porthole. It was a twenty-two-storey building that one dared not look at during daylight due to the blinding reflection of the sun from the building’s glass facing. Every morning, he would be forced to shield his eyes from the glare. For a building made of glass, he found it ironic that one couldn’t see in. The building seemed to represent both the impenetrable inner workings of the Administration as well as its absolute control. For this reason, Dan had all but ignored the building.

“You seem nervous, Daniel L.,” the official said.

“I need to call my employer,” Dan responded.

“You needn’t concern yourself with that.”

Laughter escaped from the shadowed corner behind Dan.

“Yes, you needn’t *concern* yourself with that,” the voice from the shadows repeated.

“If it brings you peace, they have been notified,” the senior official said, reassuringly. “They know... *enough*.”

Again, from the dark corner, the third man laughed: “Yes, enough.”

Dan was unsettled by the idea that he was the central discussion at his place of labour.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, what?” Dan responded.

“Where is it?”

“Where is what?”

The other agent exited from the shadows and leaned over the side of the table so he was between Dan and the official and slammed his fists into the table. “When he asks you a direct question, you answer!” he shouted at Dan. The sound of the thud and the word ‘answer’ boomed inside the metal cell. The agent immediately removed a lipstick-sized metal cylinder, and sprayed where his fists struck the table.

Dan leaned back from the pungent smell of the disinfectant and watched the haze on the table dissipate—devouring the fingerprints along with it “How? When did you ask? What question? And why should I answer? Who are you?” He was surprised that the officials were taken aback by his relatively reasonable questions. The senior official’s face seemed to say: ‘Don’t you *start* with me.’

The agent stood beside the senior official sitting at the table, the two of them looking at each other before they repositioned the light and shone it in Dan’s face. Dan raised his forearm and shielded his eyes, looking away from the brightness. He could not make out their whispers.

“Why am I here? When can I leave?” Dan demanded. They ignored Dan’s question, and continued whispering briefly.

They adjusted the light to face the table.

“You are here because you actively engaged in signal interruption,” the official said.

“I’ve disturbed no signal. This conversation is nothing more than baseless allegations,” Dan said, slowly rising from his chair. “I will not partake in this insanity any longer.”

From his chair, the senior official leaned forward, smiling gently—behaving like a loving father readying himself to grudgingly discipline his child. Not fully understanding why, Dan immediately sat down. The other official pulled out his disinfectant spray and pointed it at the light's handle, but the superior officer waved him away in annoyance.

"You're welcome to leave at any time. Naturally, the interrogation will continue in your absence. Since appeals must be lodged within fifteen minutes of a conviction, the process will continue whether you wish it or not. You will find it is a far more efficient system for everyone this way."

Although his voice remained calm and resolute, he spoke matter-of-factly; Dan was disturbed by this menacing tone.

"Where is my automaton?" Dan asked.

They whispered.

"I don't follow your logic," the official said. "You would have me both accept the unquestioned answer while seeking an answer to a question that you alone would ask? Herein lay the charge. Your automaton, for now, is of little concern to us. It is only of the source of interference you offer that brings you here today which, I admit, should have occurred a year ago—since it was when you were *first* suspected."

Dan took a deep breath and wondered what the official knew. With morbid anticipation, he pictured his disassembled automaton wheeled in on a specimen table, his circuit boards, resistors and frayed, copper wires spread out on a clean white sheet of paper in a gleaming, sterile silver tray.

"What proof of my interference do you offer?"

The official leaned forward and spread his arms wide. "The proof is all around you, Daniel L. Prima facie, you disprove your own innocence. We could summarily convict you based solely on your appearance here today, for what kind of innocent man is detained and arrested? We searched your allotted premises. We found this." He slid the backpack across the table. "That does not strike me as evidence of non-interference behaviour."

Dan was surprised that he hadn't noticed the backpack. They took out the contents and folded them neatly, placing them in stacks on the table.

"We may be lenient if you tell us where it is," the senior official said.

Dan noticed that some items were missing, namely his electronic devices.

The official observed Dan as he completed his mental inventory of the bag's contents and said, "The visualizer and other electronic devices are at your home. You can return to them. They add little to the investigation. We are only interested in one particular device. It is what enabled you to interfere with the signal."

Although he was perplexed with their line of questioning, he conceded that it was likely an effective method of interrogation against hardened signal interferers.

The subordinate placed the clothes against his body, gauging their size. The official slapped his hand and gave him a stern look. The subordinate gently patted the pile back into a neat stack, and placed them on the table. Quickly, he sprayed the surface where his fingers swept the table. "During upload, you had it. And now it is gone. Somehow all of Administrative, notifier updates, advertisements and the opinion of your colleagues have all been ignored," the official said. "How are you able to interfere with the signal? Is the device implanted? We can certainly *explore* that possibility."

Distrustful of the official, Dan sat quietly and listened for a minute. "The path is less treacherous for those who have decided to escape. But for those who are undecided, capture is inevitable and the treachery is limitless," he quoted.

The official's right eyebrow rose. He stared at Dan. "Perhaps a night in confinement will be of assistance."

They left the knapsack on the table and tugged on the cable holding the light. The light retracted into the ceiling, casting a faint glow across the blue room. The tabletop retracted into the wall and bench seat into the floor. And as the door banged closed, a rectangular slab whirled and rose from the floor like a monolith. It was a bed.

* * *

In the hallway, the two officials discussed the merits of confinement.

"He shouldn't be left alone. What if the device is on him, or hidden in his things?" The subordinate said. "I should go in. He will be *uncomfortable* with a single visitor."

"You shall do no such thing," the official said. "We will allow him time to weigh the consequences of not cooperating. And then he will *freely* lead us to the device. Besides, we searched his things... what is it that you hope to find now that was unrevealed previously?"

The subordinate remained quiet. “Very well, sir. However, if it pleases you, I will remain outside his cell in case he is readying to do himself harm.”

The official closed his lips and took a deep breath through his nostrils, his chest seemingly unmoved by the inhalation. Instead he stared at the subordinate in silence. “As you please,” he said. “But you will remain outside the cell. Page me if we need to enter. I will complete the report.”

The official turned and walked down the hallway, turning right at the end. The subordinate stared into the wake of the official until the distant tapping of his shoes dissipated entirely. The subordinate turned to face the cell.

* * *

Slowly, a light from the hallway cut into the shadows of the room. As the door opened, like granules of sand spreading across the floor, the sound of grinding gears slowly spilled out of the room. The subordinate guard entered inconspicuously. An arm from the hallway collared the guard and pulled him out. The door slammed closed, and the door frame slid into the wall.

The lights turned off. The floor squealed as it rotated loudly. Dan stumbled on the spot and clutched his ears. The bulb crackled and flickered before the light buzzed back on.

After three hours of listening to the sounds from beyond the walls that seemed to seep into both the room and his head, Dan’s head throbbed. The sounds of metal squealing and clanging reverberated through his skull. The faint sounds, almost inaudible, were masked by the gurgling, digestive droning of hydraulics from within the walls and ceilings. Having not noticed it previously, in the middle of the room, on the otherwise pristine floor, Dan stared at the large maroon stain where the floor angled down towards a gleaming, silver drain.

* * *

Outside the great wall, the clouds’ shadows rolled over the hilled leas asymmetrically to the breeze’s diaphanous hand upon the grass. In a nearby brook, a woman, slightly bent over, leaned to one side and held her white dress just below her knees as she stood ankle-deep in the water. At her feet, half submerged, a rock

glowed. And through its translucence, like a mound of honey, the hive revealed its insides; its bubbles; its pockets of air. She watched the water curve around the hive; around its abdomen; around its chest that protruded from the water proudly. And like the shape of a horseshoe, a cluster of bubbles spawned from the pulsating hive and flowed down stream.

She listened to the water lapping against the hive, the reflection of her white dress and brooch in the brook mingling with the light blue of the sky, their colours softened as if brushed by damp bristles. The water's reflection swelled golden as the hives from the trees and bushes grew bright. And like a thousand eyes suddenly blinking open, the rocks lining the bottom of the stream glistened from the glow like dilating pupils.

* * *

In the Adherence Centre, light penetrated beneath the cell's wall. Dan knelt down and tried to see through the crack. He heard a familiar squeak. Poised to recoil his hand, he cautiously reached his fingers into the space as if he had dropped the key to his shackles into the whirring cogs and gears of a machine box. To reach further, he stretched and pressed his face firmly against the cold metal. The divots poked his face. He stuck his hand under the wall and felt metal fingers. He quickly retracted his hand from the space. Although the metal joints and metal tips resembled LV's, it was four and not three fingers that protruded through the open space and into his cell.

The door frame rose from the wall and a door formed. When the door opened, Dan was greeted by his evolved automaton that had a more contoured eggplant shaped-face, set with wide eyes like an owl.

Dan accepted LV's outstretched, thumb-less hand to aid him through the doorway. Dan wondered how LV had escaped the authorities during his arrest, then eluded security in the Adherence Centre to find him. Once they had escaped the building, and they were both safe, he would demand answers.

Led by LV, Dan walked across the rusty grated floor towards a stone archway. Inexplicably, he suddenly found himself in his employer's bathroom, as if his place of employment and the Adherence Centre were one.

Hearing familiar voices outside the bathroom, he exited and stood in the elevator lobby, frozen at the sight of three colleagues. At Dan's appearance, they stopped speaking. Dan wondered if they knew of his arrest.

Dan turned to the sound of a door opening as four more employees entered the lobby. He fidgeted as Henry, a co-worker, asked him about the weather and some current, popular television show. There was a large clatter from the bathroom behind Dan. He recognized the official's voices. Frantically, Dan pushed through his colleagues and repeatedly pressed the already lit 'descend' button on the elevator. As the elevator door opened, the crowd behind Dan crammed him into the half-full elevator.

* * *

After having escaped the building, Dan repeatedly glanced over his shoulder while he made his way to his home. He walked at a pace which, normally, would have caused LV to lag behind. But this time, LV was at his heels. Turning to face LV, Dan was surprised that the automaton was more erect—its back was straight and its treads were smaller and spaced out further. And it had formed a more human face. The binocular like eyes had been assimilated into the eggplant-shaped head. Dan knew he had to hurry.

"I don't know why I'm compelled to return," Dan told his automaton. "Even though it's pointless, I want to retrieve my electronic devices. They offer a strange comfort."

Childlike, Dan wondered if he could just sneak into his apartment and slam the door on the outside world, as if his cell were a magical gate that could only be opened by the owner.

Dan and LV scurried along the wall and kept their heads down. They occasionally looked up but immediately darted their heads downwards when they approached visual monitors. Continuing, Dan occasionally peeked to establish a safe passage through the bustling crowd. He darted from his left to his right as pedestrians bumped into him. As if he stood on a narrow precipice, he pressed against the wall, and felt the jagged cement poking his spine.

They reached the corner of Virgo and Amalgam, and halted abruptly at a nearby walkway. Adherence forces had surrounded his apartment, and from what

Dan could tell, they were searching his premises again; he saw a head looking though the closed porthole window.

Dan calculated an alternate entrance to his building, imagining that with the aid of a diversion, he could enter undetected. He stepped out to survey the path as an Adherence vehicle patrolled by. It slowed down and turned around. He pressed himself against the wall. “Idiot,” Dan said to himself.

Dan peeked out again. The vehicle’s searchlight shone briefly on Dan’s face before he turned and ran. Soon, two vehicles and five footmen joined the vehicle’s pursuit. Dan continued towards the alternate entrance and turned a corner. He veered downwards through the bushes at the foot of a worn white gazebo, its paint peeling. Through the cage-like latticework, he watched the vehicles pass by.

Dan rested for a moment, catching his breath. He stared at his apartment’s porthole as if saying goodbye to his past life. He recalled how three months ago, he heard a commotion in the hallway, and how he shut off his cell’s lights and sat quietly, waiting for the uproar to end. From the darkness within his cell, amber lights from Administration security shone through his window, fluttering violently against his wall. He had closed his eyes tightly and deliberately held his hands over his face; the only thing penetrating his senses was the nauseating smell of disinfectant that had wafted in from the hallway and under the door.

Dan shook away the memory and wondered if he could simply sneak into his cell and place some of his possessions in the hallway, just outside his door, so people would assume the cell was vacant.

Dan watched as more guards swarmed the area. With forces on all sides and any possible escape routes blocked, he exhaled deeply and turned to an increasingly metamorphosing LV. LV’s clumsy and boxy midsection had all but disappeared, seemingly flattened into a torso. He placed his hand on LV’s more contoured chest, and felt the reverberations from the hard drive run from his fingertips along his palms. Dan noticed the unclashed front panel.

Once Administration forces advanced to the leafless bushes, pushing aside the thickets with the barrels of their rifles, Dan climbed into the automaton and disappeared inside as if he were swallowed whole. He pulled the panel until it snapped shut. The automaton started to collect garbage from the foot of the gazebo. Three officers crawled past the bushes, completely ignoring the unaccompanied automaton.

Slowly, they—the automaton with Dan safely inside—made their way to the shield wall using the path behind the apartments, picking up stray newspapers and drink containers along the way. When they were a hundred yards away from the wall, they passed through a crowd of officers who had blockaded the perimeter.

One officer lowered his long staff, its edges glowing yellow, and blocked the automaton's way. Dan could hear the charged staff buzzing, readying to release its electric venom. The guard stood as stoic as a gatekeeper, staring straight ahead, as if he were staring through the metal. Although he felt exposed, Dan tried to remain as still as he could. He started to shake. Luckily the officer, still blocking the way, was looking off into the distance. When an approaching patrol car passed, the officer raised his staff, letting them pass.

Upon reaching the shield, LV curled its fingers into a fist and began scrubbing the wall with the bottom of its hand as if it were sanding. It scrubbed for five minutes, pretending to be part of a maintenance crew—waiting for the area to be clear. And then, transcending its design, LV's legs extended telescopically, elevating it to the crest of the wall. Inside LV, Dan could feel his own muscles strain as LV stretched its fingers onto the wall, pulling itself up. Standing atop the shield, Dan could see the official about a hundred yards away. The official looked curiously at the automaton before his face was stricken with panic. Abruptly, he left his discussion at a checkpoint and ran towards Dan, followed by five guards.

When the official reached the wall, he looked up. He was dumbfounded. As he tried to catch his breath from the sprint, his hands, almost involuntarily, padded around before they pulled out a gun. His demeanour steadied with the presence of the gun. "That is far enough," the official said, motioning with his gun for them to climb down. "I don't know how you did it, but I will shoot."

The trailing officers arrived. They looked at each other in confusion. The official turned and looked at them calmly. Although they all removed their guns and pointed them at Dan, Dan could see the fear in their eyes, as a crowd of bystanders watched in the distance from the cordoned perimeter.

Dan ignored the guns and struggled to balance within LV atop the wall. He studied the thick, impenetrable foliage below his feet, trying to judge what was beneath. He wondered what Gil meant by tails patrolling the water, and he thought of children's stories that told of moats, slimy tails and jagged backs. All Dan saw was a dark, leafy abyss, as if to leap blindly would be to fall past the hidden gaping mouth and directly into the belly of a whale.

“We are going to lose him,” an officer said, cocking his gun.

“No,” the official said, shoving the firearm down. “He must be captured safely. This is all new. The device must be retrieved undamaged.” He looked up at Dan. “Let’s talk this through.”

“Why would I do that?” Dan said.

“Why do you want to throw away your life needlessly? The authority can help. There are places. Re-Adherence Centres. You don’t have to feel alone,” the official said. He paused, calculating. “If you believe your life is indeed worthless, leave the automaton with us. We’ll tend to it. It can act as a record of your life... help others.”

Dan thought of what his co-workers would say about his suicide or arrest. He could feel his knees wobbling. He knelt down and placed his hands on the side of the walls to regain his balance.

“The choice is LV’s,” Dan replied.

“You have no choice. You are afforded only the perception of choice. And automatons, they are but servants,” the official replied. “Leave it in our care. Let it take *your* place. And then you can have your *misguided* freedom.”

“What is freedom if it is borne on the back and from the sweat and blood of another? Achieved only when another is enslaved in my place? You speak of liberty as if it were nothing more than a balanced financial ledger,” Dan said. “Freedom cannot be so fragile as to perish upon my death.”

Dan stared into the foliage. He feared that there was only nothingness. His foot slipped, sending pebbles into the rustling and seemingly limitless leaves. Dan looked at the ground near the official, wondering if he could free LV beyond the wall in the wilderness. Dan could land back inside the shield and subsequently outrun the authorities. He looked to the foliage and, for a moment, thought he saw something in white. He stood up fully, turned his back to the official and focused on the greenery, trying to follow the white object—willing his eyes to penetrate the dark leaves.

The official looked at Dan and raised both his hands to show his firearm. He knelt down and placed his gun on the ground. He rose slowly, his hands raised and unarmed.

“You will not make it. The shield is impenetrable. Only savage beasts and hybrids of nature roam the outside world,” the official pleaded. “You won’t survive. Why risk it? Don’t jump. Don’t do it. Do you value your life so very little?”

Dan looked at the official

“On the contrary,” Dan replied. “I do it precisely because I value my life.”

And they, Dan and the automaton, tumbled into the darkness.

* * *

The Lady in White

Still inside LV, they landed in tall grass. For several minutes, he lay there, reacclimatizing, his body curled with his knees pressed into his chest. He watched the sun’s beams radiate between the branches and leaves, illuminating their veins.

He looked at the exterior of the shield, surprised that from the interior, the twenty-two foot wall seemed insurmountable, but from the exterior, it was merely the summit of a small hill. The wall looked like it was once very high, but over time the brush and the branches and the growth crept to the tip of the wall, almost as if the foliage were surrounding the interior of the shield.

He watched the clouds and wondered how, for his entire life, he could look to the sky and see so definitively and with an almost unshakeable belief that the clouds looked like a hover train, and how he could effortlessly transform the white clusters into another object by simply closing his eyes and opening his mind to the possibility. Dan marvelled at how the sky was like an optical shapeshifter capable of assuming the form of any object for its own protection. He took several deep breaths upon the realization that perhaps it was his mind that was the shapeshifter.

Dan grimaced as he slithered out of the badly dented automaton. It lay motionless in the grass. From its chest, its status indicator flickered normally. At first, the Automaton’s antenna received no signal. But as Dan listened to the breeze snake through the leaves and branches, the birds began to chirp, almost as if they were at ease with his sudden appearance. The antenna began to beep and receive signals.

He heard footsteps. It was the woman from his dreams.

“Who are you?” Dan asked.

“I am Trice. I have been waiting for you.”

Seeing the Lady outside of his dream world, Dan blinked the same way he blinked when he wished to wake from an unsettling dream. By seeing the Lady in the flesh, the once-fleeting images from his dreams—of her dress’s laced collar,

the Victorian brooch and a single curled lock of her hair dangling on her forehead—gained a lucid permanence.

“You have a choice. You can remain here. Or you can return. If you remain, you can live among us. When you do so, you are free to live as you wish. Here there is only one rule. We were once like the interior with ten rules. But we found only the first rule was applicable—for if you followed the first, the preceding nine were merely reminders. How unfortunate the interior didn’t follow this logic. Instead, they compounded their laws with more laws which only achieved a greater level of corruption...”

Dan looked around.

“The others are just ahead,” she motioned. “There is food and water and an entirely different society. Without a central administration, there exists no violence, nor a threat of violence. There is only compassion and patience.”

Trice placed her hand gently on his shoulder and smiled. She understood that Dan, having recently conquered his fear of an unknown by jumping over the wall, was somehow unsettled.

“And return? How can I return? Why would anyone wish to return?”

“Many people return. If you return, you will find things much different than you remembered or imagined. At first, it’s like a very bright light, and you may recoil. But your eyes will get used to it. You will see the world for the first time. You will live your remaining days without judgement and fear. And because of this, you will find that you can pass freely between the interior and the exterior,” she said. “Many of us do this. But the choice is yours. Anywhere you go, signals are available. The five directives, as you had as a child, have returned to you. You no longer accept incomplete messages.”

He looked at the automaton.

“What should I do? I can’t just leave him.”

“You called him, *him*.”

Dan stared blankly. He had never called his automaton “him.”

“Do you want to see his face?” she asked.

It had never occurred to Dan that LV had a face. Dan lifted the recently formed face plate. His fingers trembled as he looked for reassurance from Trice. She urged him on comfortingly. With the flap removed, Dan saw, almost as if it had never seen the sun, a very pale, wormlike face, its dark eyes like pools of molasses. Puzzled, Dan turned to face Trice.

“The pallor is striking isn’t it?” She said. “Don’t be too alarmed, skin needs light. How could it fully develop? And the eyes... so haunting.”

“I don’t understand,” he choked. It was if the seed of an apricot were lodged in his throat. He stared at the pale, apparition-like face, which was his own, and breathed heavily.

She stepped closer and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“It’s not too late. It’s never too late, Daniel. Even once the phantom weight is removed, it persists. There will be days when you will automatically rub your wrists even though no soreness exists. Unencumbered, you will stretch your neck and back gingerly although you have been conditioned to expect only a fettered movement. And there may be times when you genuinely miss the constraints, the metal bodice that offered strange comfort through their clinking and rattling,” she said. “There will be days you pine for your time as a bondman and search for a cage. And although you know better, you will insist that cows drink milk. The beginning is always the harshest.”

Dan felt the nausea race up his throat. His nostrils flared. “There never were any automatons.”

Trice smiled gently. “No. Never.”

The Hand

“Your hands are dry,” she says.

I don’t think they have always been this way. My left is worse than my right. She strokes my penis. I can’t remember her name, but her hands are smooth. Afterwards, as is customary, we exchange pictures. I pause at first and then take it. I don’t want to draw attention. ONE may be watching. But I don’t bother looking at it. The picture is not of *her*.

The public address speakers buzz and then groan. *There is no aloneness. There is only ONE*, the automated, half-hourly announcement declares.

I think of my parents and the ocean. I have very few memories of my parents. I was removed from their care by Custodial Services when I was four. Like all children, I was transferred to government-controlled facilities to protect us from gangs and organized crime during the Great Collapse. The place of my employment is my home.

My work cubicle is on the second floor. The soot-thickened windows allow little light to penetrate, so one can never quite tell the time of day by looking outside. Only grey light passes through the bars, an unsteady brightness dissipating over the rows of square work spaces —the grey cement floors and walls, making the wasteland outside indistinguishable from what is inside. The dimness doesn’t bother me; my computer monitor lights up my cubicle with what I imagine is a daytime brightness. Horizontal lines run along the screen and cast shimmering ripples over my desk.

Although the second floor is at capacity, I neither see nor hear another employee. The only sound I'm hearing is of my fingers tapping the keyboard. I remove the seven framed photos of co-workers from my cubicle wall, place them face down on my desk and bask in this simple tranquility. I remove my fingers from the top of my desk so the keyboard (which sits flush in my desk) powers down, the illuminated keys going dark. I can now concentrate exclusively on the image on the screen. The computer's waning light runs from the edge of my desk and down along the thighs and torso of my uniform. Some threads in my uniform reflect the light, especially my inner thighs.

My eyes return to the screen. I watch the video. The image shakes slightly from the hand-held camera. I focus on the tide. I would find it agreeable to see water move like this, to once again see the ocean as I had when I was a child. The images cause me to think of *her*.

I open a new screen and scroll down the service request log, ignoring the filter 'by importance'. I am searching only for a particular requestor. I am searching for *her*. I feel an aching inside. I did not have a *ONE*-sanctioned meal upon waking, but I know this is not hunger. It hurts not in my muscles or bones but higher up, in my heart and throat. I know the sensation. I have had it before. I think this is what the Ancestors, those that lived before the collapse and whose artifacts survive in secret, personal troves, meant by 'desire'.

Our Supervisor is approaching; I hear his shoes tapping on the floor. I return all of the pictures I had laid face down on my desk back to their spots on my cubicle wall. The concealment of photos is punishable by the Administration. Others have told me that my cubicle wall looks like theirs—a *sea of photos*. That sounds romantic. But I don't know what they mean. It's unlikely that many of us have seen the sea. It must be an idiom from the Ancestors that still survives.

Besides, how is my wall any different from theirs? They too display framed photos of various employees on their wall, perhaps not the same employees, but employees nonetheless. They see something in my wall that they can't see in their own. Other than our name plates posted on the outside of each cubicle, all the cubicles in the building are indistinguishable. No items of sentiment are permitted, only our photos of co-workers. They look at the wall and see who or what they are missing.

I never remove *her* photo. There is something about her, something beyond her moist lips and her lovely hands, a nakedness behind her beauty.

Although my Supervisor is approaching, I don't want to stop the video, but there will be severe punishment if I'm caught with family pictures and heirlooms. One must be unanchored from the past and adrift in time. *There is no aloneness. There is only ONE.*

The Supervisor waits for the completion of the announcement before our greetings. He is wearing the standard uniform: a shoulder-to-Achilles zippered polyester bodysuit. The uniforms are snug and make visible most of the contours of the bearer. A black sash runs across his chest denoting his title. He comes to my cubicle and stands over me awkwardly. His stance suggests his desire to assert what he perceives as dominance over me—yet he leans in for my validation. I remain seated.

—Glory to ONE, Supervisor, I say to him.

—Has the duty manager signed off on the list?

—No, Supervisor. But I have reviewed the list to aid the duty manager.

—Very good. Who is this, Serviceman?

I look at him. He is holding a picture frame. I hadn't noticed him take it from the cubicle wall. Immediately I look for *her* picture. It is still on the wall.

—I believe that is Supportwoman Sarah, Supervisor. But I can't be sure.

—How can you not know her name, Serviceman?

—At the time, her name did not seem important.

—You're a sly one, Serviceman.

Although humour was not my intent, he laughs and slaps my back.

—I was growing concerned with you, Serviceman. You have so few pictures. Can I keep this one? he asks.

He knows his demand is unjust. The backs of the frames contain the subject and recipient.

—As you know, it is not for me to give a picture away, Supervisor. Only the original owner can do so.

—Permit me its stead. I will return it when I locate her and receive my own—

He stops in mid-sentence. There is an uneasiness in his voice.

—Serviceman, I left a duty roster on my desk. Kindly locate it for me and wait for my arrival to discuss it.

I am fearful that he has noticed *her* picture. I pause. He is not looking at my desk. He is either studying something in the distance that is behind me or he is scheming. It is common for Supervisors to entice employees into their offices.

Behind closed doors and drawn shutters, they invariably get their pictures. As my direct superior, he is not permitted to ask for any of the pictures I have been given. But I know many in my place would feel obliged to give it to him, fearing repercussions.

Besides, although it seems this way, pictures are not exchanged exclusively when individuals become sexually intimate. They are also exchanged when you are known by another in a manner that would be considered intimate by someone else. But in any case, the pictures one gives away are replicas of a facsimile, a copy so far removed from the original that both the image and its context have long since degraded. But the sharing of pictures is accepted as a sign of value; promiscuity without any real connection allowing us the ability to operate under the pretence of oneness. Or perhaps I am the only one with this impression. I grow tired of the announcement. There is aloneness.

As I reach Supervisor's office, I turn back to glance at my cubicle and understand why he sent me away. I hide behind the door of his unlit office and watch *her* approach him and pause in the middle of the floor, her bosom visible among the rise of cubicle walls. She is part of the body of individuals who make up ONE. Her title relieves her from having to wear the standard uniform. Instead, like all of the twelve ONE, she wears only black and white. Her black suit jacket is buttoned to just below her bust line; the silver buttons a fluvial shimmer against her white blouse.

She is looking for someone. He points towards my desk. They speak. He shrugs and, uncomfortably, looks towards his unlit office. I watch her lips. Her lips always seem moist. I look down at my hand. It is very dry, even dryer than it was the last time I looked. It's so unlike the hands of others—it even feels foreign to me.

She hands him a document. She points to the picture frame behind his back and says something. He nods and hands her the frame, turns and walks towards the elevator. She reads the back of the picture frame. She goes inside my assigned cubicle and stands in my workspace. She scans the still empty floor and frees her hair, letting the long, honeyed strands fall down onto her shoulders. They toss about a moment, waves crashing onto rocks.

She finishes her inspection of my desk and pins her hair back up tightly. A frame slips from my cubicle wall and strikes my keyboard, activating the monitor. The cubicle becomes very bright. She leans in to look a moment, shuts off my monitor and stands—again glancing over the adjacent cubicles.

I watch her stride to the elevator and depart. My throat is overcome with dryness. My gulp punctures the silence. A fluorescent tube light flickers, buzzing in rhythm to the invisible claws gripping my chest.

Returning to my cubicle, I pause briefly at Junior Serviceman's desk. His wall is full. On his desk, frames, stacked haphazardly, creep towards his keyboard. There is a shuffling noise, and naked beneath the desk's shadows, Junior Serviceman and Auditor wave me away. Quickly their eyes close, and they return to their embrace. On the rare occasion I find myself in a similar situation, I never submit. I never close my eyes. *If your eyes are closed, you lose the advantage of darkness*, I almost say. In the darkness, your secret self is invisible—your vulnerability unseen. When your eyes are closed, you see every filament of your entire being, all the dust and darkness of your universe, made bare to the world. You are vulnerable. I don't know if everyone feels this way. Maybe it's why I am not concerned with collecting pictures. Sexual intimacy is fleeting. I want an intimacy like *them*.

He has already climbed on top of Auditor, his breathing now heavier. Whether it's dark or light, I keep my eyes open. When my eyes close, my thoughts and memories are disagreeable.

There is no aloneness.

There is only ONE.

On my desk sits the returned framed photo and her note to discreetly complete a service call on the eleventh floor. The note directs me to not enter the call into the system. I am to see her immediately after the service call. I notice the picture of her is askew. I activate my monitor and am greeted by my video. I study the contraband loop and the note simultaneously as if they were one. My heart beats faster and louder, thumping and thudding. She discovered the video and perhaps her photo. A sadness overtakes me. I realize future memories of her will include physical pain and vulnerability. I find little solace in the fact that she will be the one to dispense the punishment.

Solemn, I crumple the note and throw it into my waste bin. I immediately remove it and tuck it into a compartment on my work belt, knowing I must be more careful with its disposal—for both of our protection. I slip on my work gloves and proceed to the eleventh floor to respond to her request.

The elevator is empty. On level four, the elevator door opens, and a female technician enters. She stands beside me. She is wearing the standard one-piece uniform with its single zipper at the front and a black sheer neckerchief tied into

a bow just above her collarbone. From the corner of my eye, I can see her looking at me. The tips of her auburn hair are highlighted blond. Her lips are taut. She shows no signs of breathing; her chest as still as if she were steadying a rifle. I hear her swallow.

She leans against me. Her warmth is agreeable. Her scent descends deep down, flowing into the caverns in my chest, swirling along secret canals like poison poured down my ear. Her uniform is tight. It accentuates her collarbone and her bosom. On her dark grey uniform, on the crest of her breast, a scarlet thread dangles, almost like a letter. I slide slightly over, away from her. She slides over as well and presses her body against mine, pinning me in the corner. My penis is aroused. Her chest rises and falls rapidly.

She twirls a lock of her hair. As she plays with her hair, her forearm brushes me in circles. She places her left hand on my chest and slowly glides it down along my uniform's zipper. Her index finger's nail slowly clicks on the grooved teeth of my zipper, clicking like the roller on the lobby service door as it runs along the rail frame. Along my zipper, her hand descends further, lingering at my pelvis, which pushes firmly against her hand. Her breath lingers on my neck.

She smells of hyacinth, a scent I haven't encountered since a grade-school trip, but it comes back to me with instant clarity. I had been small when we'd gone to visit a reservation camp, District 13. My hands looked nice then. Plump. I was holding hands with S—. She liked to place my hand in her back pocket when we walked. The guide started a fire. We'd never seen a controlled fire before. We watched the fire die down, the embers glowing intermittently as if there were flat, wet stones on a beach that glistened in the sun as the tide receded.

In the elevator, the technician catches me looking where her back pocket would have been. The memory is long gone, but the accompanying emotion lingers. We kiss. I wish it were *her*.

The indicator in the elevator displays eight. She removes her hand from under my uniform but continues to press against me. The top of my uniform is unzipped, the sides splayed open. I feel her breath on my bare skin. It lingers on my chest.

The elevator door opens. She pauses. A male enters. I don't know him. He looks at me. And then he looks at her. He studies me, wondering why, half-dressed, I stopped; wondering if I am aware of her lascivious state. He fidgets. First his hands fall to his sides as if he were being inspected by ONE; next, he clasps his hands behind his back.

I look to her, imploring her to continue. I know it's not her. I know it's not what I truly want. But my body takes over and now, I am craving her. I am not watching him, but I can tell he is watching us intently. When I turn to face him, he avoids my eyes.

The elevator stops on the tenth floor. She exits the elevator, turns and pauses, waiting for me to pursue her. I don't know why I remain in the elevator. She studies me for four seconds before walking away.

Desire's distraction dissipates. She is someone else; she's not *her*.

I stare into the open foyer. From the corner of my eye, I see my fellow occupant watching me deliberately. Slowly, he steps out of the elevator and turns to face me. As the doors close, he races into the same direction of the previous occupant. *There is no aloneness. There is only ONE* drones the speakers.

I pull the zipper on my uniform closed and step out of the elevator onto the neglected eleventh floor. The overhead lights flicker, and panels from the suspended ceiling are missing. Raw cables, their aluminum outer casings stripped and scavenged, dangle from overhead. Loose papers and other two-decades-old detritus litter the cement floor.

I am nearly bowled over by a man chasing a woman. As he dashes by, he grabs my hand. At first, I believe it is out of apology, but he doesn't let go and drags me along with them, laughing. Gently, I release my hand. He continues to race after her, unaffected. Although I am unable to see her, I can hear her giggling from the corridor and then shrieking in delight when she is caught.

Many avoid the eleventh floor. The majority of the floor's occupants pursue each other openly and unabashedly explore each other's sexuality. On the eleventh, one will often see naked bodies embracing on empty office desks or pressing each other against walls. Between the shrieks of ecstasy, there remains an understated quietness to the eleventh. I prefer it.

There is a term for the occupants here: sympathizers. It is a peculiar term, for there is no overt difference in the behaviour between sympathizers and non-sympathizers. Both relentlessly chase each other, except sympathizers are not concerned with the acquisition of photos to fill their walls and tend to consort with the same, small group. I wonder if ONE Administration understands this danger, for the sympathizers are in fact forming a meaningful connection to people other than ONE.

In addition to housing the sympathizers, the eleventh floor witnessed the first custodial arrest in over twelve years. Usually, when a pregnancy is confirmed, the female resides in the prenatal ward of the Life Centre until the child is born, at which time Custodial Services, take custody and raise the baby (even though the roaming gangs no longer exist). It is unsurprising that this rule would be challenged by a pair of sympathizers.

Ten months ago, two technicians were found hiding a baby. The baby was to be quarantined before being transferred to the Parental Centre, but the technicians broke into the secure facility, absconded with their baby and escaped from the building. Using thickly stranded computer network cable, they lowered themselves from a small opening in the southwest corner of the eleventh floor to the ground. To this day, the Administration remains unaware of this opening which five of us keep secret from everyone. ONE explained the absence of the technicians as a transfer to an off-site Parental Centre due to childbirth complications.

The opening, ostensibly created by mortar fire during the Great Collapse, is still exposed and hidden behind the personnel computer server. I slide the machine to the side and step gingerly over the fragments from the concrete wall towards the opening. The corner opens up like a balustrade, the metal beams and girders acting like handrails. The way the blast punched the building inward makes the building seem as if it is decaying from the inside.

Whenever I visit the eleventh floor, I use this opening to survey the outside world. And other than a few handfuls of scavengers, lone vehicles, and the sounds of distant gunfire, my most meaningful observation was a convoy of eight green supply trucks, a trail of dust rising behind their grumbling engines. Otherwise, my survey yields the same results: dilapidated buildings dotting the landscape like ghost ships whose flaking concrete facings flap like ragged sails. Directly below in a sea of grey debris lie large concrete columns, heavy as felled giants, with rusted beams protruding like displaced bones. Yet in the distance, a hint of greenery and trees trace the edge of the horizon.

I take the note from my work belt and tear it into tiny pieces. The wind scatters the flakes and they drift to the ground like an interment into the sea.

I replace the server and proceed to my service call, ignoring a figure standing in the dim lobby near the elevator. Complianceman's cubicle is unattended. His complaint is hardware productivity, and his chair squeaks as I sit in it. There is a buzzing behind me. I lean back on the chair and strain my head to see around

the filing cabinet. The drywall is disturbed, and the visible wires hiss, their frayed copper fangs sparking and swinging wildly above the coiled discarded cords.

Complianceman's desk shimmers. Not a speck of dust. I make a mental note not to disturb the obvious cleanliness of his workspace. I open his top right desk drawer. Its bottom falls out and magazines pour onto the floor. I study the heap of sexually explicit magazines for several seconds from my seat before I turn and access the computer. His computer's hard drive is filled with images of naked people engaging in intimate acts. The images are the same two people. I pull the electrical plug from the machine and place a *Do Not Use Until Further Notice* sticker on his unit. Looking for space to hide the magazines, I open the bottom door but it too is full of the same literature. I bundle the loose magazines neatly beneath his desk and push in the chair to obstruct their view. I am so absorbed in hiding his magazines, I don't notice *her* standing over me.

She looks at me curiously.

—What is your protocol for such occasions? she asks plainly.

I look at the magazines under the desk. I am not startled by her sudden appearance.

—Although there are no rules against *this* kind of literature, it is conceivable that he has contravened the excessive property provision.

Gently, I close the drawer.

—But the video images seem irrefutably contraband. He has filmed himself. And all the videos are with the same woman. The videos are personal. This is not permitted by ONE.

—Is her picture present on the wall?

I pause. I watch her eyes meticulously survey me as if I were a cubicle wall.

—It seems strange to ask me questions you know the answer to. Would it make it more, or less, personal if we found her picture on the wall?

Expressionless, she stares at me. I grow uneasy with her silence.

—Perhaps he has misplaced her picture and the video has taken the frame's place.

I fail to see why I blurted such an unlikely scenario. I sense an emotional tide rising inside me. I try to look away from her, but, because they are eye-height, my eyes linger at her breasts. I fill the silence.

—The protocol is to report him. But I wonder if his contraband video is merely a pretence for the truer judgement you wish to levy against him due to his

nearly empty wall. Although a video can be removed easily, you cannot remove the very thing in his heart that stops him from filling his wall.

Her lips are moist. She runs her tongue along their edges.

—Will you report either? she asks.

—No. Although we are told that such things don't exist, some would call him a sympathizer. But I would disagree with this assessment. He searches for things that can't be placed on walls.

—Would it surprise you then that I suspect him of planning and aiding the escape of two employees and their child?

Silence. I have nothing to add to her thoroughly correct analysis since I too assisted in the escape.

—Your unwillingness to report contraband aside, you two may yet share the same fate, for you too are in possession of contraband.

She offers her right hand.

—Attend to me.

I remove my work glove and take her hand. She says nothing of my hand's dryness.

Like a condemned man being led to his punishment, I depart the floor in tow. Everyone looks upon me in dread. But I am at peace. *There is no aloneness. There is only ONE.*

* * *

At my computer, I try to release my hand from hers to enter my password.

—You require both hands to unlock your unit?

I unlock the computer. Our faces are awash in the blue light from the video loop. I watch the ripples reflect in the emerald sea that is her green eyes.

—If not contraband, what is it?

I look at her and do not answer. I am fearful. Not of ONE discipline. Only her potential condemnation of something so integral to my being.

—Why do you keep it?

My parents swing me from their arms. I smile mischievously, my toes dangling just above the waves' spittle and white froth. Their pants are rolled up as the water foams and bubbles at their feet.

I look at my hands. These memories of the ocean, like my hand, seem foreign and alien. I lay claim to the memories and guard over this joy I don't quite remember but can still somehow feel.

I finally answer:

—There is something about their hands. They are links—that even if unchained—the connection cannot be undone. As if whatever it is that binds them is indestructible.

Her gulp disturbs the silence. She re-grips my hand. Her thumb, involuntarily, rubs my palm. Her lingering touch covers and then recedes, as if washing away a hole. An untold warmth swells from my hand and extends to my chest. I stare at her lips and lose track of who is speaking. The lines that separate us disappear.

—Why do you keep my picture so low?

—I prefer it hidden... almost secret. So no one would dare take it from me.

She looks at the floor.

—Why do you deserve to keep that which was never given?

—Perhaps I am undeserving. But I know you are unlike the others. You keep secrets from ONE. There is a part of you that is laid bare... knowing about Complianceman is not your first secret. Still, I unjustly removed your picture from your office. Do you wish it returned?

I look at her, and await her response. She unbuckles my work belt and places it on the desk. She drags the zipper clip down to my navel and slips her hand underneath, gliding her hand below.

—No. It belongs to you. And perhaps always has.

The words are heavy and buoyed atop her strained breath.

—I've only now realized such.

* * *

We spend the remainder of the day together. My uniform lays coiled on my desk; the zipper's set of silver teeth shimmers iridescently like sunlight dancing atop the tide's crest. I have ignored the day's service calls. And I have misplaced my shoes. It is the end of the day. We join the others in the lobby for the Gathering. No one notices that I am barefoot. Holding my hand, *she* leads me through the crowd towards the door. The siren sounds. The amber light above the door activates, its beacon rotates along the walls of the crowded lobby. The door, like the entry

to a hangar, begins its ascent. The metal screeches, sending a banshee-like shrill through the hall. The sun's brilliant orange peeks through the more-than-halfway open door—the rippling light pulsates like a fire's embers.

She grips my hand tightly and smiles at me. Her smile brushes away the knotted fibers around my heart. The joy is too much to bear. More warning lights rotate. She presses firmly against me. I adjust my belt. She passes me a note. It reads like a love song, an incomplete love song whose end is untenable.

Let us go then, you and I.

When the evening is spread out against the sky.

Let us go then, you and I.

Till human voices wake us.

She watches me. Her pupils swell like a supernova. The amber emergency lights trace the edges of her moist red lips. Weightlessness consumes my body. I can see myself standing, hand in hand with her, seemingly at the altar of freedom. As if I am removed from my body, a spectator. I feel like I am floating higher and rise above the crowd and into the ceiling's rafters near the mechanism above the door. I offer my right hand to the spooling wire so as to stop the wire and hold open the door, if only for a moment. The metal wire digs into my hand. My hand grows cold. I wave her through with my left. She smiles from just beyond the stalled door. The mechanism moans. No one else moves through the open door, no one else seizes the opportunity to escape, neither Complianceman nor Junior Serviceman nor any of the sympathizers. The crowd stands as if etherized before twilight's orange orb in the distance.

I close my eyes. Amongst the dust and sinews of nothingness, the vast abyss of being, I see her face in the darkness. It's not the same face in the frame pinned to my wall. It's a face previously unseen. But always there. The face of beauty only I have known. There is no aloneness. I hear a splat, like a soaked towel slapping the floor. I look down; the hand twitches like a spider on the floor blooming maroon. I comfort my wrist and squeeze it beneath the bloody stump. I feel the tide bubbling between my toes. The fingernails from the severed hand glisten in the amber light like wet sand. The pool of blood is dark and deep—as deep as the sea.

The Conversation

For Karlyn

Although she had been blind since birth, lived alone, and rarely ventured into the outside world, in her apartment, Silvia was ‘at least protected’ (as her mother called it). Therefore, while speaking to her mother on the phone, Silvia knew instantly that it was foolish to curse in pain when she smashed her toe into the leg of the table.

Here it comes, she thought.

“Are you pacing around again, young lady?” her mother said. “A lady in your *condition* should be sitting.”

It’s not a ‘condition,’ Silvia replied in her mind, mute and enraged.

Within Silvia, all the cruel words that her mother had ever spoken about her blindness were stirred during the silence. The sediment that settled to the bottom rose within Silvia’s racing heart, contaminating her otherwise-gentle nature.

“Are you even there?” her mother said. “Aren’t you supposed to be sitting like I told you? I don’t know why you insist on learning things the hard way. This is why you should be living with me. Then I wouldn’t have to worry. Even Betty, although she has webbed feet and a grown son living at home—never mind about that—agreed that my health would improve if you moved back in. All this worrying will be the death of me. You know how I suffer for you!”

It’s been five years and you’re not dead yet, Silvia thought.

“Are you there? I can hear you breathing,” her mother said. “What. Is. That. Sound? Are you *alone*? Young lady, do you have the radio on while I’m talking to

you? You probably have the lights on too, don't you? Why you think the electric company needs donations is beyond me!"

"Mother, I..." Silvia started.

"Oh, so you are there!"

"Mother, I... love you."

"Oh, Silvia, I love you, too. What would I ever do without you?"

* * *

Once they hung up, Silvia fell silent. For a minute, she sat there, simply inhaling and exhaling.

Gayle, Silvia's landlady and best friend, was listening from the couch. "You okay, Sil?"

Silvia heard Gayle put the magazine down and could tell that she was leaning forward as the couch creaked. Gayle had witnessed similar outbursts between Silvia and her mother, but Silvia was embarrassed nonetheless.

"Yes," Silvia answered. "I just don't know why I bother anymore."

Silvia got up and felt her way to the kitchen's under-cabinet radio then turned the volume up. She started to feel her way along the wall to the light switch.

"Don't worry, Sweetie, I didn't turn them off."

Silvia smiled.

"You don't have to tell me, sweetie... I know," Gayle said, before changing the subject. "So speaking of things that get turned on... where's your boy toy?"

"Pardon?"

"There's no more pizza boxes."

"How does that make James my boy toy?"

"James! James!" Gayle repeated. "So you *do* know his name. 'Oh, James! I need a *delivery*...'"

"Oh, shut up, Troll! You're such a perv. He's just sweet. That's all."

"Sure, he's sweet," Gayle said sarcastically. "So why don't I see taco wrappers lining the table?"

"Gives me gas."

"The taco kid?"

"No. The tacos!"

"What does the pizza boy give you?"

“You’re terrible.”

“No. I’m happy for you. A little jealous. But happy. You’re getting more action than me.”

“Nothing’s going on, Troll,” Silvia said. “Besides, mother doesn’t approve. She said only someone with the same *condition* could understand.”

“If you say nothing is going on, I believe you,” Gayle said. “Still, an orgasm within twenty minutes or it’s free...”

“Gayle!”

“What? I’m sure he’ll throw in chicken wings. Does he, like, stamp a card so after every five...Okay! Okay! I’m going,” Gayle said, dodging the newspaper Silvia had flung in her direction.

Gayle walked over to Silvia and pressed her lips against Silvia’s forehead. “Goodnight, sweetie! Try not to think about your ma.”

I wish you were my mom, Silvia thought, her hand reaching up to touch Gayle’s face.

* * *

The following morning, like every other day, the sound of the radio dominated Silvia’s apartment. She left it on all day, listening to the outside world, news updates every twenty minutes.

The radio called for an overcast day with a chance of showers. Silvia turned on the lights and felt the stray newspapers on the floor that she had thrown at Gayle the night prior. The phone had been ringing intermittently through four news updates, and Silvia, with a raspy voice, finally answered it.

“Are you just getting up?” her mother said.

“No. It’s just the first time I’m using my voice. You know I live alone, right?”

“What’s that rustling? Is that a newspaper?”

In the background, the room filled with news updates she had already heard five times. The newscaster’s voice washed away both the ebb of silence, and the flow of Silvia’s forced and strained words.

American President Barack Obama is urging Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, to return to the peace process...

Then a clip of the President himself. *“In starting the peace process, both Benjamin and Mahmoud have displayed courage in the face of various domestic pressures to the contrary. We ask these two honourable men to display that same bravery by returning to the negotiation table.”*
The Arab League was more pessimistic on the peace process, calling it fruitless...

* * *

After the daily call, Silvia could hear a faint telephone conversation through the wall. She felt under the throw cushions on the sofa for a glass that she kept near the wall for such instances. Although it was the tail end of the conversation, and John, her neighbour, laboured when he spoke, Silvia could tell that someone was offering to take him to the doctor, and he was declining, repeating that Gayle promised to take him. This struck Silvia as odd, as John was terrified of Gayle.

The Arab League was more pessimistic...

* * *

The following morning, Silvia made her way down the hallway to the garbage room. She was intentionally loud, trying to entice John into a conversation. Usually, Silvia could hear John carefully walking towards the door, and imagined his trepidation was due to a potential Troll sighting. Often, when wanting to talk to Silvia, John ‘intercepted’ Silvia on her way out of her apartment. However, the mere sound of Gayle’s steps resounding through the floorboards above would cause John to retreat into his apartment.

* * *

During the five years she lived next door, John had hosted only a handful of visitors. “It’s unusual for a *man* to never have visitors,” Silvia’s mother would say. However, Silvia found him to be ‘nice enough’. He was especially nice to the kids in the apartment building. They all called him ‘Uncle John’, and knocked on his doors on Saturdays, where he greeted them with a bowl of candy.

* * *

Two days later, Gayle had transformed from the Troll into John's nursemaid. Since John had no family, Gayle had taken it upon herself to care for John as best as she could. She changed his sheets, brought him food and drink. *She's become a regular Florence night-and-day-Gayle*, Silvia thought.

Silvia placed her glass against the wall and listened attentively. Gayle was trying to convince an immobile John to go to the hospital. Silvia imagined John, sick and bedridden, pulling up the top sheet to cover up his weight loss.

* * *

"You have to go to the hospital today," Gayle said.

"No," John said. "I have things to do."

"What do you have to do today?"

"Something."

"Can it wait?"

"No."

"Will you tell me or is it personal?" Gayle said.

"Personal," John said.

"I really think that we should go today."

"Not today."

"If not today, then when?"

"Maybe tomorrow or the next day."

"I know you don't want to, and I can't make you, but you're getting worse, not better," Gayle said. "You can't get out of bed. Yesterday you were at least moving to the couch."

"I promise I'll go tomorrow or the next day," John said.

"You keep saying that and it doesn't happen. I have a wheelchair ready..."

"I promise, tomorrow or the next day," John said.

"Okay. But no matter what, we're going tomorrow," Gayle said.

* * *

At times, as absurd as the conversation seemed, Silvia was struck by how it appeared John would be safe indefinitely if he simply prolonged the conversation. And all he had to do was avoid doctors to remain in his home. It was as if the moment he opened the doors to leave, an ancient cold would sweep in and snuff out his waning happiness.

* * *

After two days in the hospital, John died. The cancer was too far along for the doctors to do anything, Gayle told Silvia.

“Deep down, he must’ve known,” Gayle said. “Once he left his apartment, he knew he wouldn’t be coming back.”

* * *

Although her mind was elsewhere, Silvia helped Gayle clean John’s apartment. Silvia stacked the papers, books, magazines, DVDs and video cassettes, making piles for garbage and donation as per Gayle’s instruction. Occasionally Gayle broke the silence, once pointing out that the urn she held contained the remains of John’s mother and another time commenting on how John’s apartment was like a living album. “Sixty-eight years of a life in these walls,” Gayle said.

The silence remained uninterrupted for close to an hour when Silvia, her tension mounting, discerned a subtle difference.

“Gayle, what’s wrong?” Silvia said.

“You and your tingling Silvie-sense!” Gayle said.

Silvia cracked a smile. *Gayle always knows what to say.*

“We’re all human, so it ain’t a biggie, but that pile of yours—it’s all porn!” Gayle said. “Magazines and movies.”

Silvia felt for the nearby stack, thumbing the spine of a magazine and running her hands on the glossy paper.

“That’s a fifty-plus magazine,” Gayle said. “She must have been in the industry for thirty plus years. I can’t imagine doing the same thing for that long. Sil, you think they threw her a retirement party? What kind of message do you write on that retirement card?”

Silvia's feelings of tension washed away. She wiped away her tears after laughing,

Gayle paused. And then seemingly out of the blue, "Why won't it work?" She asked instinctively. "Call him."

Silvia turned pale, shocked that Gayle knew. She contemplated dodging Gayle's question.

"Did you know that James plays the guitar?" Silvia asked. "He came over a few times in the beginning, and then every other day. He held my fingers so I could strum. I could feel the vibrations in me. They climbed my spine as if it were a spiral staircase. And then he did something for me... something... nice. Like in these magazines."

Gayle remained silent and listened attentively.

"He said it was like a piece of spaghetti," Silvia continued. "It was like I was a guitar. He was strumming. But with his tongue." Silvia pulled her sleeve past her hand and wiped her eyes. "He stayed the night. But I haven't called him since."

Gayle swallowed deeply before asking, "Why not?" Her voice cracking.

"Because." Silvia paused. "Because I'm blind."

Gayle walked over to Silvia and pulled her tight to her chest. "You are blind sweetheart," she whispered. "But not in the way you think. I know its terrifying. Take a chance... call him."

Silvia raised her head and took several deep breaths—like she was suffocating from her emotions. "I tried calling," Silvia said. "But no words came out. My heart was pounding... like it needed to escape from my chest. And there was a buzzing in my ear and I could hear his faint hello. And when the buzzing stopped... I." Silvia reached for Gayle's face. "All I could hear... was my mother."

* * *

Late that afternoon, Silvia accompanied Gayle and her daughter Abigail to the dump.

After the van rattled across the scale, Gayle elbowed a slouching Silvia. "Sit up, Sil. This guy's cute."

The worker directed Gayle to the bins she would need, and also advised her that the place was closing in twenty minutes.

* * *

Gayle approached the bin by making a wide turn to back up. Silvia felt the transmission shift from drive to reverse, but they did not move.

“Let’s wait until these people leave,” Gayle said.

After ten minutes of both waiting and reassuring Abby that she could throw out the garbage bags once they finished with the recycling, both Gayle and Silvia grew increasingly worried that the dump was going to close.

“Mommy, how come we’re not going?” Abby asked.

“Soon sweetie, soon,” Gayle said.

“Finally,” Gayle said as she backed the van up to the bin. But she did not get out.

“What’s wrong, Gayle?” Silvia said.

“I don’t know what they’re doing. They closed one door but they’re still there,” Gayle said. “I don’t want them to see what we’re dumping. Ah, screw this!”

“Mommy, is it my turn?” Abby said.

“I have to do the recycling first, sweetie.”

Silvia followed the sounds of Gayle’s door opening, followed by the swish of the back door.

Silvia heard the smooth sound of one of four boxes of John’s books and magazines begin to slide down. She furrowed her brow to what sounded like dragging and paper flapping from the open back door. Soon she heard the three remaining boxes thrown carelessly down into the bin, followed by Gayle’s voice.

“What can I say? I like porn.”

As Gayle climbed into the driver’s seat and slammed the door, Silvia reached over to offer support and Abby started with: “Mommy?”

Gayle clenched Silvia’s hand.

“Mommy?” Abby repeated. “Why did you tell those people that you like corn?”

“Everyone likes corn, sweetie,” Gayle said. “Everyone loves corn.”

* * *

Later that evening, Gayle came to see Silvia but found her in John’s apartment.

“I just wanted to say goodbye,” Silvia said.

“Did you want to say anything at the cemetery tomorrow?” Gayle said.

“Will anyone else be there?” Silvia said.

“Just me and Abby.”

“I’d love to. We could put the urn in with John’s remains.”

“Oh my god. How did we miss this?” Gayle said, her attention drawn to a less serious matter. “Another *magazine*. The Secretaries of Europe. I’ll toss this out.”

“Can I have it?” Silvia said.

“Why?”

“Because...” Silvia said. “I’m human too.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Post it up for my mom, for when she visits!” Silvia said laughing, feeling brave.

Silvia heard her phone ringing through the wall.

“When’s the last time you spoke to your Mom?” Gayle said.

“Probably when I was twelve,” Silvia said. She smiled, as if she had come to a realization.

“I better get back,” Gayle said. “Do you want to come over for a bite?”

“Thanks, Gayle. But I’m going to head back. I have to make a call.”

“Your Mom?”

“Well, yeah. But first I have to call someone else. I feel like... pizza.”

Head Down

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword*
—“*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*”, by Oscar Wilde

First Day, Morning

Joseph leaned against a stall in the conference centre’s cafeteria watching Bob, his best friend, converse with a young woman. Of medium height, she had auburn-blond hair and was wearing black capris and an orange shirt with the sleeves rolled up just past her elbows. She looked completely at ease, attentively turning her head towards Bob whenever either of them spoke. She smiled occasionally as Bob pointed out who the various patrons were at the exceedingly casual five-day Information Technology conference in Calgary. Joseph was listening to his iPod, and couldn’t hear what they were saying.

The back of her hand curled and rested on her hips, her elbow slightly jutting out, while her knee leaned in. Joseph couldn’t help but notice how the light from the tall windows, shone on her bronzed skin, gilding the thinnest layer of fuzz

that, when mixed with the contoured tips of her tanned elbow, gave Joseph the impression of a peach, ripe from a tree.

After several songs came and went on his iPod, the woman and Bob continued chatting animatedly, completing a fist bump when she made Bob laugh uncontrollably. Joseph fiddled with the volume and turned around to read the conference's schedule posted on the board behind him, hoping he and Bob would be able to make the first seminar before it ended.

"What are you listening to, Joseph?" a female voice asked unexpectedly.

Joseph jumped and turned away from the schedule. To his surprise, a slender, tanned hand, the nails glossed in a thin white polish, rested gently on his shoulder.

"Wow, you're beautiful!" he said, his mouth falling open. Immediately, his heart jolted. *I can't believe I said that.*

She smiled. The tip of her tongue snuck out between her top and bottom teeth.

"How do I respond to that?" she asked.

"The same way you respond to it every day, I imagine."

From her widening eyes, a flash appeared. "Bob said you're harmless. But now I'm starting to wonder."

Joseph was surprised by how easily and playfully he was able to talk to her.

"*Ciao bella,*" she said to a woman passing by. "I'll see you at the 2:15!"

"You're Italian?" he said. "*Molto bene!*"

"You speak Italian?"

"*Sì. Sì. Buongiorno, Principessa,*" he said. "*Sono Inglese di Gerrard's Cross!*"

On cue, with her heartfelt laugh, her tongue stuck out, like a cuckoo from a clock. Joseph confessed that his Italian was limited to *Life is Beautiful* and *Monty Python*.

"Okay, my Englishman from Gerrard's Cross. But, 'Shannon' will do," she said, her tongue barely able to stay in its accustomed realm now.

"*Principessa,*" he said, bowing.

They talked for thirty minutes. Joseph discovered that Shannon was twenty-nine, had a boyfriend, and was an only child. Oddly, they both shared the same astrological sign, Sagittarius. She had studied at Western in London, Ontario, the same university that his wife, Virginia, attended. Although Joseph went to school in Toronto, Virginia had insisted that they be together as a couple during this important stage of their lives, especially Frosh Week in London. Joseph and Shannon shared stories about Sydenham and frosh shenanigans that only a

‘Mustang’ (and guest) would have known. And, like a spell, Shannon’s smile, the tongue still poking through, bewitched Joseph for the remainder of the day.

At one point during their conversation, the phone on Joseph’s belt clip rang. He excused himself, while fumbling around with the impossibility of actually answering whilst continuing to talk to a now visibly uncomfortable Shannon. “I’ll see you later,” she mouthed and walked away, glancing back once. Joseph read the display on his phone:

Missed Call
HOME

Joseph watched Shannon walk across the hall. He was filled with a familiar dread for he knew that when he next spoke to Virginia, even if he returned her missed call immediately, she would let him have it for not calling her when he’d landed, as he had been instructed.

* * *

Joseph was thirty-six and married to his high-school sweetheart. They had two sons—three-year-old Elijah and their newborn, Kaysen. Between dating and marriage, he’d been with Virginia for more than half of his entire life, effectively marrying the only woman who’d ever given him a blowjob—perhaps a reflection of his overbearing sense of duty.

Virginia was a tall, stubborn, fair-haired woman whom Joseph feared. She was indifferent to his taste in movies and television, especially sci-fi. However, she was devoted to her children and husband—the reason Joseph loved her. Virginia and Joseph had been dating for a year when his mother died. But Virginia, who was very much like his mother, was there for him. Still, it felt sometimes like a rather formal kind of devotion. For instance, she didn’t call him by any pet name. It was always Joseph. He considered her intelligent, sexy, and boring, often thinking of her with an ambivalence most prevalent among seasoned couples who likely took each other for granted. And perhaps always had.

* * *

First Night

That evening after the conference program, Joseph returned to his hotel room, luggage still in tow, looking forward to some quiet time. He would have preferred to have arrived the night before, but with two children at home, one of whom was a baby, he tried to minimize the effect his absence would have on Virginia.

As Joseph walked down the hotel hallway, he scrolled through the emails and messages on his phone. He inserted his key card in the door as Bob walked by.

"J-man, you're just checking in now? Once you get settled, let's grab a bite. We're at the end," Bob said, pointing down the hallway. "Don't worry. We can still catch up."

"Oh, okay," Joseph said. "You brought the Missus and the little one?"

"Yeah, we're going to stay a couple of extra days and turn it into a vacation. They offer a very extensive daycare and babysitting program," Bob explained. "By the way, Shannon was looking for you."

Joseph closed his eyes, reflecting on the fact that there seemed to be something so familiar, so comfortable about this woman. Throughout the first day at the conference, both Shannon and Joseph had patted the empty chair beside them during the seminars when the other had walked into the room. They talked as if they were lifelong friends.

"Buddy, I have to tell you, I love your friend, she's *amazing*. How come this is the first time I'm meeting her?"

"She's Mary's friend... maybe if you came out once in a while!" Bob jabbed. "But I'm glad to see you two are getting along so well. Actually, Nick thought Shannon was your wife." Bob looked curiously at his friend, and then teased, "You're not getting any ideas, are you?"

Joseph feigned an indignant face. "I'm simply enjoying her company."

"That's funny," Bob said. "She said the same thing about you."

* * *

After settling into his hotel room, Joseph was about to call home, when somebody knocked on the door. He answered it.

"*Buongiorno, Principessa!*" Joseph said, shoving the phone into his pocket.

Oh God, the tongue, he thought.

“Englishman, mind if I borrow your laptop? Mine is on the fritz.” Shannon asked. “I just want to check my Gmail.”

“Sure! Come on in,” he said. “I’ll pack it up.”

Joseph’s luggage lay open on the bed, organized and measured, with his shirts and pants hung from the unzipped portable mini-closet. Only the computer had been hurriedly opened and setup, with the laptop bag leaning against the side of the faux mahogany desk, the Internet cable already plugged in.

“I can just use it here, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” he said, hesitantly.

Sitting on his bed, Joseph restarted his iPod. He studied Shannon, noticing the blue haze of the monitor that outlined her hair. She turned and smiled.

Soon, without a word, Shannon left the desk and sat on the creaking bed beside him.

“Seriously, what are you listening to?” she asked. She grabbed her hair and temporarily held it in a bun. As she did so, her shirt lifted slightly, revealing the soft, peach pan of her tummy. “You’re in your own little world.”

Joseph smiled and studied her long strands of orange hair that fell curling to her shoulders as if they were crisp, shredded carrots. He mused about how her silver earrings dangled and drew attention to the slope of her slightly tanned neck.

He offered the ear buds to Shannon and she sat on the edge of the bed and listened.

“Move over,” she said, extending one ear bud, nestling close to Joseph, the ear bud wire no longer taut. “Who is this?”

Like teenagers, they lay side by side, content in sharing a song. Joseph was aware that he had yet to answer her question, while Shannon’s warming breath and the vanilla scent of her hair seemingly pawed, unbuttoned the top of his shirt, curled and rested against his collarbone and chest. He could feel the phantom weight rising and falling with his breath. So, it was there that Joseph, Shannon’s elder by seven years, a man more in the middle passage of his life than his adolescence, felt Shannon fall in the Alto of his years.

“Shannon, you sure we don’t know each other?” he asked, just before someone knocked at the door.

* * *

Third Day, Lunch

Having spent the better part of the last hour still trying to make up with Virginia for not having called her the first day he'd arrived in Calgary, Joseph was late for lunch at Ozy's. He hadn't seen Shannon that entire morning and he was disappointed that the seat beside her was occupied. Surveying the table where Bob, Bob's wife Mary, Nick, and Shannon sat, Joseph wondered if Bob detected his disappointment.

The polyphony of clinking glasses and wine bottles rang through the patio; remnants of red wine reflected against the maple tabletop. A gentle breeze murmured through the branches, carrying a note from afar that joined the carefree song that adults, temporarily free from the responsibilities of their normal lives, sing from time to time.

"Buongiorno," Joseph said, bowing to everyone, mouthing "*Principessa*" to a reserved Shannon.

"I see you got into the ambrosia," Joseph said, nodding at the row of empty bottles. "So, what did I miss?"

Bob's eyes met Joseph's with skepticism.

"Well, Bob's describing the greatest achievement in the history of cinematography," Mary said.

"Cinematography. Isn't that a little much for *Ghostbusters*?" Joseph said digging at his friend.

"Oh yes, laugh everyone," Bob said. "You know me well, old foe. Sit. Take a load off." Bob's skepticism, brought on by Joseph's arrival, had departed.

"Yeah, take your hat off," Nick said.

"You don't want to see that," said Joseph. "My hair is curly. It'll be all over the place."

"I love curly hair," Shannon said, sheepishly.

Suddenly the group grew quiet and looked at him curiously; their brows collectively furrowed. He felt as if everyone was awaiting his response—especially Bob.

Joseph laughed a shade too loudly. "See, that's what I'm talking about, Bob. Would it kill you to talk about my hair? Take me to a show once in a while, compliment my toenails? But no, with you it's sex. Sex. Sex. You'd think I was living with Freud. At first it was enough, sure, the steamy nights, the insulin, the Ovaltine, but now I need more."

"You're a freak," Bob snorted as the others laughed.

"That's it. You're dropping ten spots on the charts this week. And Shannon is debuting at number one," Joseph said.

"Who?" Bob questioned.

"The lady," Joseph said.

"Lady Gaga?"

"Well, equally parts lady and gaga," Joseph said.

Joseph flung his arm around Bob, like it was old times; like they were still in university. "So what were you guys talking about before my boy here started with *Ghostbusters*?"

"*Aliens*," Shannon said.

"Like *Area 51*?" Joseph said.

"The movie," Mary said.

Growing serious, Joseph leaned forward, crossing his arms over his chest. Bob cleared his empty plate to the side. He leaned his elbow on the table, smiling up with his wide grin, awaiting Joseph's unbridled and unabashed happiness.

"Are you kidding? It's a classic," Joseph said. "If we go, we go to kill it. Not to bring it back," he quoted.

"What are we supposed to use... harsh language?" Shannon replied.

"You! I never would have thought. Now I'm totally in love with you," Joseph said, barely able to control his enthusiasm.

"You weren't before?" Shannon teased, her tongue peeking out from between her top and bottom teeth, a cuckoo curtsy.

That she had not only watched that movie but could quote from it was like discovering a new land. He was accustomed to Virginia's tired, "You're not watching that stupid movie again, are you?"

Seamlessly, Joseph and Shannon resumed their conversation as if they were playing a game. Unable to join in, their friends listened to the banter as obscure lines from *Aliens* were volleyed back and forth, a game that could only be shared between the two of them.

"This little girl survived without training," Shannon served.

"Maybe we should put her in charge," Joseph returned.

"They cut the lights."

"They're animals."

"We can't afford to let even one in."

With his heart racing, Joseph stopped quoting from the film. “No. We can’t. Not even one.”

“I like when Hicks shows her the gun,” Shannon said.

“When she’s in her underwear?” Nick recognized.

“Wasn’t she always in her underwear?” Bob interjected.

“She could’ve worn a little silk number,” Nick said, joking.

“Yeah, like in *Ghostbusters*,” Bob said.

“You probably would’ve liked to see Slimer in his underwear!” Joseph exclaimed.

“He didn’t even have pants,” Bob said.

“I didn’t say you wanted to see his junk,” Joseph said. “Just his choice in underpants.”

“Hey, leave Slimer out of this,” Bob said. “You can’t challenge the anatomical correctness of a ghost.”

“I’m surprised you don’t wanna see mine,” Joseph quipped.

“Anatomical correctness?” Bob repeated, reaching for Joseph’s crotch.

“No underpants! Underpants! God, you’d be in seventh heaven if Victoria’s Secret came out with the definitive *Ghostbusters* collection. What, no foreplay?” Joseph asked, as Bob tried to pull Joseph’s pants down. “As Hicks from *Aliens* said, I don’t think you want to mess with *that*!”

“You started this,” Shannon chimed in. “Show me everything. I can handle myself.”

“Oh, God. I’m gonna miss you,” Joseph said.

“You two certainly have the same quirky sense of humour,” Bob said.

While the others started teasing Bob for trying to get into Joseph’s pants, Joseph leaned across the table, and asked Shannon, “So what’s your favourite scene?”

“Oh, there are a few. I like the scene with the android and the knife,” Shannon said.

He stood and grabbed a chair from an adjacent table, squeezing in beside Shannon. His eyes strayed to the space behind Shannon’s chair, where, above her jeans, at the small of her arched back, he noticed the rose-lace trim of her underwear.

The others paused from teasing Bob and watched Joseph take Shannon’s hand, slowly marking where the tip of a grooved butter knife would fall between their stacked hands. The others laughed at Joseph and Shannon’s horseplay.

“A butter knife?” Shannon said. “Are you going to miss?”

"I've never missed before."

"There's always a first."

"There *is* always a first."

"Won't you feel bad?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you hurt me."

"Wouldn't it be my hand?"

"It might still hurt."

"It might hurt *especially*."

Joseph forgot about the others. He rested his hand on top of Shannon's daring never to let go, the two of them floating away, only to be reeled back where, under his breath, he cursed both the waiter who brought Shannon's plate, forcing him to let go of her hand, and himself, as his eyes met Bob's, whose gaze seemed to say "What the f—?"

* * *

Fourth Day, Late Afternoon

The following day, on the way to having dinner with Bob, Mary, and Shannon, Joseph debated about calling Virginia. He'd only spoken to his wife twice since the conference started, and both times she wanted to discuss why he hadn't called when he had landed and how much Elijah was missing him. With the time difference, he weighed the consequences of calling home during the kids' bedtime. He considered calling later, but then the danger would be that he might wake the kids.

I better call before she does, he decided. He dialled the number but when he ran into Shannon in the hotel lobby, he flipped his phone shut.

"May I have this walk?" Joseph asked, bravely extending his arm after they'd stepped through the hotel's revolving door.

She paused, pursed her lips and briefly pondered his offer before extending her arm. "Of course," she said.

"I have to tell you something," Joseph said.

"What's that?"

"How much I've enjoyed your company. I was telling Bob."

"You've been my favourite," she said. "I'm really going to miss you."

“I’m going to miss you too.”

They strolled down the street arm in arm, as if it were the most natural thing. Shannon’s cell phone rang and Joseph tried to pull away so she could take the call, but she pulled him back in, preferring not to answer it. Joseph’s heart swelled. Once they reached the corridor in the restaurant and approached their friends, she let go of his arm, which at first seemed sudden, jarring Joseph from a dream. But he realized, *Right, what would they think?* As he walked towards his friends seated at the table, his phone on his belt clip vibrated.

After the call, Joseph sat quietly with his elbows propped on the tabletop, his fingers clasped together, almost covering his mouth and nose. His subsequent five minutes consisted of staring at the wood grain, and then clearing his throat to place his order, after which he excused himself to visit the restroom.

He held his hands under the tap and, as an afterthought, removed his wedding ring from his wet hand, placing it in a small puddle on the countertop. He splashed his face and stopped when he noticed, in the mirror, the bathroom door opening.

“Hey,” Bob said cautiously.

Joseph perked up. “Hey, buddy.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Sure,” Joseph said, matter-of-factly

Bob nodded and then proceeded to check under the bathroom stalls.

“What’s the matter?” Joseph asked.

“Nothing. Nothing. Shannon said you were fine walking here,” Bob said uncomfortably. “I just wanted to make sure we were alone.”

“Well, you should wait until I have a few drinks. I’m not that easy!”

Bob smiled pitifully. “Listen. I... ah... know things have been tough for you at home. But... you’re acting like a lovesick puppy.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Bob stared blankly at Joseph.

“No. Seriously. What’s going on?” Joseph persisted.

“J-man,” Bob exhaled. “Seriously, what else is there to think? The very first night, I come by your room to see if you want a bite, and you’re acting like you just zipped up. I know you said you two were just chillin’ out, listening to music, but seriously. Today, at lunch we’re joking around and I turn around and you’re holding hands with her.”

Bob paused. "You know, you're the last person I thought..." He stopped again, then said, "We've been through a lot, J-man... God knows... if you want to go for it, then go for it. I just know the way you are... you wouldn't be able to live with yourself."

Joseph clenched his hand and placed his fist against his mouth as if he were warming it up. "I don't want to sleep with her, Bob," Joseph said. "It's just... I can't stop thinking about her..."

"I know you like her, J-man. But what are we talking about, anyway? You gonna leave 'Gin and the kids?"

"When I'm around her, I feel... at peace." Joseph paused, as if he wanted to swirl the words around and breathe in the aroma, before drinking them in fully. "It feels so natural."

"Sure it feels natural! No kids. No responsibilities. And you get to be yourself. Of course you'd get along. For God's sake, you've only known her for four days!"

"You knew Mary was *the one* after one day."

Bob squinted and bit his thumb. He ran his tongue across his lips, realizing that Joseph's home life may have been worse than he'd first imagined.

"Say you were together... don't you think that one day she'd give you a hard time too?" Bob asked, almost whispering. "Don't get me wrong. She's a great girl. But it's inevitable. Maybe it would be better with Shannon, but only because you had been with Virginia and you understood *things* better. I think we're destined to one day despise those quirks we once fell in love with." He paused before continuing. "You know I want you to be happy." He handed Joseph's wedding ring back to him "You have to find another way."

Solemnly, Joseph returned to his seat, situated across the table from Shannon. He tightened his lips and pressed them against his teeth.

As Bob sat down, he said, "Are you going to be okay to eat, Joseph? I didn't think you were going to make it. If you need to head back and lay down, I can bring your food back for you later."

Joseph measured his response. "I'm feeling better. Besides, I'd miss you guys too much."

Bob briefly glanced at Shannon and nodded at Joseph in the serious way people acknowledge each other at funerals. Shannon's eyes darted back and forth between Bob and Joseph, inspecting them both. When Joseph and Shannon's eyes met fleetingly, Joseph paused, staring pitifully.

After the group had finished eating, Joseph's companions forgave their quiet, sombre friend. Joseph's mind swirled with ambivalence, dwelling on the impending end of his time with Shannon.

"I don't think I need this," Shannon said, returning the dessert menu to the waitress.

"I'll share the fondue with you," Joseph offered. "If you'd like."

"Oh, that would be nice. I don't think I could do it by myself."

"You two are such a cute couple," the waitress said to Joseph and Shannon.

A shroud of awkwardness covered the table. Bob kept his head down, while Mary watched Joseph, wondering if there was more to his playfulness with Shannon. Blushing, Shannon looked down, while Joseph simply reflected on the waitress's words. Though no one had corrected her, her comment was simultaneously false and undeniably true.

Sharing dessert with barely a word between them, Joseph and Shannon dunked strawberries into the same chocolate bowl. Joseph gazed at Shannon, taken in by her beauty with emotions he could barely recognize.

* * *

That evening, Joseph paced the hotel hallways and foyer, finally escaping to a wooden bench in the hotel's garden. He failed to understand how, in such a short period of time, he could come to feel this way about a woman he barely knew.

He sat motionless on the bench, watching the evening settle among the trees, swaying as if they were listening to contrary arguments—until Shannon's voice jarred him.

"You're not avoiding me, are you, Englishman?"

Joseph looked at her and smiled, but said nothing. The next day was the last day of the conference.

Shannon sat beside him on the bench. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

He nodded towards the Golden poplar trees that were being lifted and weighted down by the wind.

"In the light, the swaying foliage looks like bunches of grapes," he said. "I'd like to be a tree. Although it seems like you're never alone—the birds and squirrels perch on your shoulders, children swing from your arms and dangle from your limbs—eventually they'll all leave you. But you kind of live forever in the end. It's

just you and the sun; just the two of you. And even though a tree and the sun can never truly be together, I imagine if you were a tree, you'd long to reach up and touch the sun, still feeling, deep in your trunk, her warmth as she seeps through your leaves. It must feel like heaven."

She rested her head on his shoulder. A stray lock of her hair tickled his neck. He turned slightly to lean his head comfortably on hers and caught a glimpse of the skin beneath her shirt.

* * *

Four days ago, before he'd left for the airport, Joseph had stood in the doorway of the bedroom he shared with Virginia while she sat on the bed, engrossed in the newspaper.

"We're not going to see each other for a week... so... just wondering if..." Joseph said, hinting.

"Did you read this?" Virginia asked.

Joseph exhaled deeply. "I can't see it from here."

"The article about pardoning services."

"No."

"It's crazy. Anyone can get pardoned. It doesn't matter what they do," she said. "Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom."

"I said I'd rub it."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did. You never listen."

"Don't worry about it. It's not a big deal. I'm going to take a shower," he said.

He bent over in the shower, allowing the hot water to run down his back and drip down his chin. He heard the bathroom door opening and quickly turned his back to the shower curtain, rinsing the lotion off his penis. Growing excited at the very real prospect that Virginia was going to surprise him, he anticipated the sound of the plastic curtain skirting across the rod and a head peeking in. Joseph maintained the facade of surprise. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched the outline through the shower curtain, listening for Virginia to make her move. *What is she doing? A peek... just pull back the curtain. A peek. Would that be so bad?* The toilet flushed, sending a cold wave of water across his body. He yelped.

“Sorry,” Virginia said.

“For what?” Joseph demanded.

“Flushing. It’s just habit,” Virginia said. “I forgot you were there.”

* * *

With Shannon in the garden, Joseph pointed to a tall tree. “I bet that you were a climber when you were little,” he said.

Shannon smiled, the tip of her tongue poking out, again.

“Now, I really wish I were a tree,” he said.

“Do you believe in heaven?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “What happens in heaven? And how would you know you were there? I could be in heaven now.”

“Are you happy?”

“Maybe happy is a question of degrees. There’s cold and there’s bearable. There’s warm and then there’s Bermuda.”

“Are you ever serious?”

“Careful what you ask for... make me a promise. Promise me that you’ll have tea with me in heaven,” Joseph said.

“You’re so strange. I thought you didn’t believe in heaven.”

“I don’t, but I’d believe it if you said it.”

“Then I’ll say it.”

“Then I’d believe it.”

“You say it first.”

“I’d believe it whether you said it or not.”

“Then why do you want me to say it?”

“What’s the difference? I believe it when you smile. See! I believe! Oh Lord, I believe!”

“Stop it! People are looking! I’m not saying it now, so there.”

“I’ll sip from that cup just the same,” he said, swallowing. It was almost as if a hypnotist’s snapping fingers had brought him back to consciousness. He dwelled on the limitless cup that Shannon’s smile seemed to offer, a cup that memory would likely dip into, from time to time.

“Fine,” she said. “Before I agree, what’s tea like in heaven?”

“Same as here, I imagine,” he said, nearly brooding. “The clatter and din of spoons rise into a thick haze, choking out distant conversations. Distilling dissonance itself inside me, where a clear liquid, the truest part of me, overflows and I pour myself a dream.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and turned to face him. “Are you like this with all the girls?”

“You mean charming? Witty? Debonair?”

She smacked him. “Seriously!”

He stared straight into her eyes and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. “No. Just the ones I’m in love with.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how your wife puts up with you.”

“It’s unbearable.”

* * *

Last Night

Bob had reserved the back room for twenty people at Ozy’s, the restaurant that had become the group’s home-away-from-home for the past week at the conference. Joseph had already showered and dressed, ready for this last night with Shannon. Waiting for the LCD on the clock to signal seven o’clock, he sat at the foot of the bed plucking lint from his favourite blazer. He pinched, removed, and inspected each piece in the way that monkeys groom each other. Finally, he removed his jacket and spread it over the bed. He removed the lint roller from the suitcase’s side pocket and rolled the tape over the front of his blazer, gliding it around the metal buttons and over the back of the jacket, collecting tiny red threads and long strands of Virginia’s hair. He peeled off the layer of tape, carefully pulling an elongated strand from the tape’s tongue. He watched the strand dangle weightlessly from his fingertips until seven o’clock arrived.

At Ozy’s, Joseph reticently joined in on the grating, meaningless chit-chat that passed for table conversation, growing more agitated by the minute. Even if he were to remain friends with Shannon, it would be impossible for their relationship to continue like this.

Finally, Bob and Mary strolled in with their daughter Samantha, followed by the *Principessa*. Joseph swallowed hard, but acid crept up his throat.

“I have to say, ladies, that you look so beautiful,” Joseph said.

Joseph watched Shannon’s eyes light up.

“If they ever cloned you, women would line up,” Mary said.

“You’re too kind,” Joseph said.

“No, it’s true,” Shannon said softly. She stood for a moment staring into Joseph’s eyes, before she swallowed and her gaze turned to her feet.

At Ozy’s, a crescendo of happiness rippled throughout the room; people laughed, porcelain plates clicked and clanged, wine sloshed as it was poured. But Joseph sat quietly, preventing even a single drop of joy from slipping past his tightly clasped fingers. He was afraid to look down at his coat, afraid he’d see Virginia’s hair still clinging to his clothes. He wondered whether he could just let go.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck...

Bob’s daughter Samantha began to cry, pulling Joseph out of his funk.

“I know sweetie, I know,” Mary said, soothing her. “Say night-night.”

As Bob attended to Samantha, Joseph stood up and helped Mary put on her coat. Mary murmured her thanks and smiled sympathetically at Joseph.

Joseph watched them leave. Now, only Shannon remained, seated on his side of the table.

“Come sit next to me,” Shannon said, tapping the space beside her on the high-backed bench.

“Hi, sweetie,” Joseph said naturally, sliding in beside her.

“What time do you have to leave for the airport?” she asked. “We are going to a club tonight. Come out with us.”

“Will I have to leave your side?” he asked. *Oh God, that smile.*

“Will you come?”

I am in love with you. And I know there is no hope here.

“Joseph... coooome,” she repeated.

I don’t know why I let it come to this. “Okay,” he said, finally.

* * *

At the club, Shannon remained at Joseph’s side. Most of the night, they stood facing each other, holding hands, as if they shared an unseen song. The only

time this spell was broken was when Joseph led her to the dance floor or when Shannon went to the bathroom.

At 3:00am, Joseph said, “I better get going.”

* * *

Outside at the club, the rain yellowed the street lights, further muting their goodbye. “I wish we had met sooner,” Shannon said, pursing her lips. “When we speak, your eyes never stray. It’s always just me.” Joseph’s face was taut as he stood motionless, not knowing where to start. Many emotions stirred inside him. He had to touch her, one last time.

He moved his face closer to hers. Shannon greeted his gesture with her cheek. He drew closer, resting his forehead against the side of her face. He felt her breath brush across his chin and throat, like hands across a harp. Joseph’s chest tightened. Something clawed at his heart.

Joseph felt his world fall away.

He placed his left hand against her cheek. His palm curved along it, falling perfectly into place. His lips skimmed across her left cheek, landing beside her lips. He closed his eyes. *Could I?*

As his lips pressed against her face, Joseph savoured her soft, supple, moist skin. The scent of vanilla filled his lungs. His lips—almost grasping, clinging—seemed unwilling to let go as he pulled away from her cheek.

“Do you *want* me to go back with you?” Shannon asked.

His lips tightened. He swallowed.

“My boyfriend is not the jealous type,” she added.

He knew it mattered little what he chose—there was only the inescapable truth. He was never going to see her again and the thought of that filled him with sadness. He touched the back of her neck as they stood facing each other.

When I am with you, the world falls away. I can dream of no greater happiness than melting into your shapely ocean, where we dissolve into faceless, massless beings. Neither facing nor turning from each other. Simply evaporating eternally with you. Disappearing never to be found again. The peace I feel rains down, dazzling upon the rippling skin of humans below. I want you.

Joseph kissed her forehead and brushed her hair away from her face. Knowing that she lived in Toronto, so close, he wondered if duty alone would be enough

to resist her. “You have a good time. I’ll see you back in Toronto.” His voice was hollow.

“I’m so glad we had *that* talk,” she said.

“You know what I’m going to miss most?” he asked, smiling. “How you stand, the back of your hand curled on your hips, your elbow out, your knee tilted slightly. You look like a tea pot.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Joseph held her hand against his chest, caressing from her fingertips to her wrist. She pulled away, letting go after it was obvious to both of them that it was time.

* * *

A week after he’d returned home from Calgary, Joseph turned off the bathtub tap and helped his son Elijah step into the warm water. Elijah splashed, causing waves to rush to the rim of the tub. His little feet drummed the tub floor like a sea monster caged at the bottom of the ocean. “Elijah over board!” he repeatedly, recklessly falling backwards into the water, while his father instantly lifted him from the water. Joseph watched the roiled water fill his son’s boats, causing them to sink and clunk. Joseph’s thoughts drifted from Elijah to Shannon. Plastic boats creaked aimlessly against the tub wall; the silvery drops of water grew fat from the tap’s mouth and fell one after the other onto the water’s surface.

Interrupted by the bubbling, Joseph awoke from his trance. Elijah lay submerged under the water. Although his fingers twitched, his body remained still. His little, wide-open brown eyes were glazed. His face had that same numb look he had when he got booster shots seeming to say *don’t you love me?*

In a panic, Joseph pulled his gasping, crying son from the water. “You’re okay. You’re okay,” Joseph said, reassuring his child. “Daddy would never hurt you.”

After crying for his mother five times, Elijah extended his arms to Virginia when she entered the bathroom. She looked at Joseph in disappointment.

“You need to be more careful with him,” she said.

“He just slipped under the water,” Joseph defended. “It’s okay. He’s okay,” Joseph said, simultaneously reassuring both Elijah and Virginia.

Joseph positioned Elijah, so Elijah’s back faced Virginia and Elijah was only looking directly into his eyes. “He’s fine!” Joseph said angrily. Even after she had

left, Elijah continued to plead for his mother, wrenching his back to look behind him. It wasn't until Joseph pretended to fall into the bathtub, splashing around in exaggerated movements, that Elijah stopped calling for Virginia, and climbed into bathtub laughing alongside his father.

After five minutes of playing in the bath, Joseph removed Elijah from the water, wrapping him tightly in a towel. Wrapped in a towel as well, Joseph hung up his dripping jeans, t-shirts, underwear and socks, then spread baby lotion on a ticklish Elijah, who returned to his usual, jovial self. *Daddy would never hurt you.*

He carried his son out of the bathroom, pausing just outside the door. Virginia's shirt lay beside the laundry hamper, something he'd seen so many times before. He marvelled at how Virginia could make her way that far, yet couldn't quite master getting her clothes past the rim. He lifted the shirt with his toes, passing it to his free fingers before tossing it in. "No basketball scholarship for Mommy, eh, buddy?" Joseph said. He expected to feel frustrated, but credited his change of heart solely to the steam and the sweet, powdery scent of his son.

* * *

During the next several weeks, Joseph seemed to encounter Shannon everywhere. In the grocery store, two girls in line behind him teased each other, one asking her friend, "So, what do you think of Shannon?"

Startled by their words, he turned and stared blankly at them.

One night, Joseph was folding laundry in the bedroom as Virginia watched *Beverly Hills 90210* on the retro channel. She pointed to the screen, asking, "What's her name again? It's Shannon, right? Whatever happened to her?"

Joseph stopped breathing, his mouth slightly open as he stared blankly at Virginia.

"Shannon? Shannon Dougherty?"

* * *

It had been almost two months since Calgary. He failed to understand how, in a matter of days, he had come to feel as strongly for Shannon as he had ever felt for anyone. The afterglow of their meeting had completely penetrated every facet of

his life and he knew, eventually, his feelings for her would ruin him. It was wrong, but he had to see it realized in words. Not in jest, but straight from his heart. He didn't think that he would send the email, but as he clicked on the send button and watched it disappear, he knew it was the first time in his life that he'd claimed his heart so completely.

* * *

Five Days Later, 10:47pm

Although her bathrobe's belt was fastened, Shannon's right hand still clenched her bathrobe firmly just below the collars, covering her collarbone and cleavage, as she walked her boyfriend to the door. Silently, he stood outside the townhome's door for five seconds before either of them said anything.

"Really! It's okay. I haven't been sleeping well, anyway," Shannon said. Her left hand touched his shoulder very briefly. "And we both have to get up early. You're welcome to stay if you want. But you don't *need* to."

As if he were in a straitjacket, his arms remained crossed as he leaned in and quickly kissed her goodnight on the lips. Between the peck and the bobbing back and forth of his upper torso, Shannon had the impression that she was kissed by a drinking bird toy. But the awkwardness couldn't hide her realization that his kiss more closely resembled gratitude than love.

"Your shirt's on backwards," she half smiled.

As he turned and walked away, without him noticing, Shannon removed a strand of her hair that was stuck on his shirt. Still clenching her bathrobe, she stood in the doorway and leaned against the doorframe—watching him drive away. "It used to be hard watching you leave," she said to herself. She looked briefly at the strand of hair before rolling it into a ball between her thumb and index finger. She threw it into the bushes just outside her front door.

* * *

Having already stared out her bedroom window for forty-five minutes after her call to her best friend, she placed the phone on the window sill, knowing there was little to discuss. It was the same conversation for four days straight.

Shannon turned her gaze from the window and looked at the open laptop on her bed. No light emanated from its screen. On the side of the laptop, she could see the battery light pulsing peacefully, having gone into energy-conservation mode.

Shannon looked out the window, studying the developing neighbourhood. Most houses were still only frames. Bricks stacked on skids were scattered around the muddy, crawler-track-encrusted road. A dump truck, a bulldozer and two backhoes were parked nearby. She envisioned what the neighbourhood would look like when the work was completed.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, and placed the laptop on her bare thighs. Although inactive, the laptop, unable to vent the heat as it had sunk into the bed, radiated an unnatural warmth on her exposed skin. Quickly, she fed her robe through the space between her thigh and the laptop. On start-up, the computer's hard drive whirled against her inner thigh. She reread Joseph's entire email, all 719 words, pausing occasionally at certain passages until she reached the very end—a lowly question mark.

* * *

1:37am

She tapped two keys.

Shannon did what any loving person would have done. Bravely, she unsheathed the sword and, like striking a single weeping note with one fell swoop, raging, she killed the thing that she loved with silence.

Orpheus and Eurydice

Eurydice was dying, and Orpheus was powerless to save her.

Orpheus had dashed to his bride and fallen at her feet, his lyre slipping from his hands. But he was too late; the viper's venom already coursed through her veins. The wedding party silently encircled the newlyweds, bearing witness to both their first and final moment together.

Orpheus called to her beneath her frozen gaze, but she didn't stir. He bent and kissed her. Her fluted lips, always warm, always inextricable from song, went scaly and white beneath his. He pulled away. Her face and cheeks sank with each passing second; her skin greyed as if all the passion, the lust, the memories, and the dreams that had made her were leaking from her like a drying creek.

He gently stroked her hair, wishing for more time. The strands fell from her scalp and tangled around his fingers, like dry grass caught in a rake. He began to weep, caressing her cold, unresponsive limbs. Her body was chilled as if she were pulled from a wintered lake; cruelly, the small patch of her neck where the viper's bite had sunk into her flesh was still warm. He pressed his body against hers, hoping to transfer his warmth, let the pounding of his heart speed hers, now too faint to be heard. She exhaled one last time, a child's breath.

In the silence, her spirit rose and fired through the hidden passage to Hades, a star zooming through the cosmos. Her wedding ring rolled off her withered finger, spun and fell. Its edge traced in the dust the shape of a coil, like lovers' initials.

At the funeral, in the same meadow where he had wed his love, Orpheus kneeled and cupped Eurydice's ring while the pyre smoldered before him, the

flames' reflection flickering against the gold band. His head was low as if his spine were too weak to support it. In his chest, he felt a cauldron where memory and desire and regret swirled and bubbled. He was awash in disbelief. No love could bear such a depth of sadness.

Behind him, through crackling flame and the hum of despair overtaking the music that had made his days—his and his wife's—came the whispers of friends and family, "At the wedding, she wandered off to the grove to sing to the birds of her love...Orpheus was to join her...the god, Aristaeus, heard her voice and was overcome. While eluding his advances, she stepped into a pit...the snake, she simply came too close..."

"The night sky is a twinkling sea of memory," Orpheus mouthed to the dying embers. "The stars call to me like sirens' whispers, filling me with desire and stirring my flesh, yet this is all trickery. The heaven's light is dead, and my memories are drowning in the sea." He leaned closer to feel the fire sear his cheeks. "My sweetest, Eurydice," he whispered. "You should be in the garden in the sun and not amongst rotting roots where darkness reigns. If only I were able to put my ear to your lips, to hear the harmony of your voice, calling my name."

The life he had dreamed about sharing with Eurydice was gone, but still he was unable to let her go. For months, he languished in Troy, cloaked in silence. His lyre, the voice that had accompanied his days and narrated his world, he packed away. The immense burden of his sadness called up a music from his chest, as if the strums and plucks and pangs from the swelling sinews of his heart, ever on the verge of snapping, were the strings of his true lyre. It was not until a procession formed and grew behind him, providing purpose to his dark days, did he unpack his lyre out of a sense of obligation: the people needed their music.

So engulfed in grief he was, his playing reached and soared as never before. His fingers sculpted and re-imagined his burdened heart, the beautiful melancholy of his music affecting the inanimate and the living both. During his procession, the vultures paused in their feeding, and even the wild dogs, subdued in their howling, gathered to sit and listen.

It was not until Orpheus travelled down the final path of the city that ended at the forest did the crowd depart. He knew what he must do. Alone, he walked through the dense dark; grey skeletal branches, their barks stripped clean, clawed at his face. In the forest's thicket, the naked branches heeded his will and intertwined, forming an archway of bones. Orpheus followed this tunnel until

he reached a small clearing. He paused and insisted on an invitation: the frozen earth gave way to trembling, a furious deafening, until it cracked open revealing a stairwell of rocks and ancient tree roots to the underworld. “Were I to unearth your lips,” he said calmly into the abyss, knowing fully he was circumventing the natural order and would be severely punished, yet he stepped in, nonetheless. The sounds of his lyre were swallowed whole by the earth quivering closed behind him.

He arrived onto a desolate beach of pebbles, where limitless fog enveloped the horizon and choked the river’s throat. Orpheus made his way to a hooded Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, who was waiting at a dilapidated dock to take him across. Without a coin to offer, Orpheus thought briefly before extending his golden ring for the fare. Charon unfurled his cold fleshless fingers and examined the ring, rolling it between his fingers before returning it to the mortal’s flat palm as if he were planting a seed. He turned and without another word, parried him over the dock’s missing planks and onto the boat.

“Its depth is limitless,” the ferryman said after a time, the boat skimming over the water. Orpheus had taken up his lyre again, his voice clear and pure against the riverbanks.

“Although Apollo, a god, created the lyre, he could not master it—unlike you, a mortal,” Charon said. His paddle stroked the echoless water. The long back of a beast rose from the water and submerged, the creature’s cries muffled in the misty abyss. “Your beloved’s encounter with Aristaeus was like no other, for no other human would have been able to resist the advances of a god,” Charon nodded knowingly.

A guttural groan in the distance swallowed the swish of water against the side of the boat. Charon eyed him. “Even in your sadness, I hear in your song that you are able to see glimpses of grotesquery and beauty alike, as if they were one,” Charon said. “You are an exception. It is not so for all others.”

Orpheus paused and raised an eyebrow, unsure of Charon’s meaning before returning to his lyre.

The water rubbed its cheek at the edges of the boat, causing it to sway atop the lapping purrs from its wake. “She’ll not recognize you...shrouded in such sadness,” Charon said as the boat crunched over the thirsty riverbed.

Orpheus stepped out onto the gravel. Charon paused at his territorial limit in case Orpheus had a change of heart and wished to return. Orpheus nodded at the ferryman in gratitude. “She was my greatest happiness and is now my deepest

sorrow,” Orpheus said. He heard a terrible scream and squinted into the thick mist of the riverbed. From the gray, straight from the fiery bowels of Hades, shuffled the damned, their half-decomposed bodies foul with decay, fire licking at the edges of their flesh. Orpheus’ stomach heaved as he imagined his delicate wife among these gruesome lost souls. The horde stumbled forward and gasped menacingly at Orpheus, yet he played on, willing himself through his fear, through his revulsion, to free Eurydice. And then, inevitably, the damned wept at his song and parted to let him through.

Orpheus walked until he came to the towering entrance of the halls of Hades, its fluted Doric columns cleaved from bedrock of the underworld. Upon his first step, the bright spirit-hand of the honoured poet Virgil shined on Orpheus’ shoulder, warming him. “The most insidious of bites poisons you of which there is no antidote,” Virgil smiled. “Sadness must run its course.”

Orpheus’ song rose over the enormous steps and curled around a column before settling just beyond the three-headed Cerebus, the mammoth gatekeeper of Hades, who pawed at the harmony.

Virgil shined his light yet more. “Your song, like the love you shared, is boundless,” Virgil said, accompanying Orpheus. “Even Aristaeus could not escape its grasp.”

Outside the halls of Hades, its facing held no doorway; hundreds of thick columns extended beyond Orpheus’ sight. Bits of earth crumbled and fell from the skies of the underworld.

“Return home, gentle soul. She’ll not recognize you in such a state,” Virgil said. From his cage between the columns, Cerebus’ green eyes, like six ripe olives dangling from a branch, swayed above the fiery coat of flame raging over his fur.

While passing through the columns, Orpheus nodded to Virgil in gratitude, knowing that the poet, like the ferryman, could accompany him no further. Cerebus whimpered softly and, with understanding eyes, watched Orpheus pass.

Orpheus entered, interrupting Hades and Persephone holding whispered court with twin servant phantoms. The gods excused the phantoms, but the women remained in place, their heads bowed, almost touching, their gazes locked on the checkered floor as if they were mirror images separated by glass.

Hades and Persephone nodded to Orpheus, and he approached. “Without the sacred harmony that is my Eurydice, the kingdom of the living is worthless and

without meaning,” he said. “It is a passionless, haunted world no different from your tormented shores.”

“Sadness’ antidote must be self-anointed,” Hades said.

“I am here to retrieve that which was stolen,” Orpheus said. A warmth warbled from his chest, trembled onto his fingers, and moved through his lyre, the haunting music reverberating throughout the caverns.

Overcome with emotion, Persephone and Hades turned to the other in wordless conversation. Their dilated pupils shimmered like the slick skin of reptiles. Hades stepped down to Orpheus and coldly whispered instructions into his ear. He crooked a finger at his wife, who then summoned one of the twin servants. Eerily, the other twin stood frozen in place, as if she were moored by her reflection’s absence. Orpheus shivered at the sight of the stranger before him, for she possessed none of Eurydice’s features, but for her eyes, eyes that were frozen in darkness as they’d been the day of her death. He stared into them, and it was like staring down the black throat of a snake.

Persephone placed Eurydice’s pale numb hand in Orpheus’. “It is the only opportunity you will be afforded,” she said. “The warmth and beauty of your wife you are accustomed to, will return only when you reach the surface.” Uncoiling from the ground, as if they were standing atop a portal shaped like a ring, an apparition of an enormous snake rose into the air and subsumed Orpheus and Persephone. They slipped downward into the body of the beast.

Shedding its apparitional coil, it manifested with the two forsaken lovers in its belly. “Hasten. Time snaps at your heels,” Hades said. “This is your only means of return.”

In the near dark of the snake’s belly, Orpheus set about ascending the slick reptilian innards on all fours, clutching at the snake’s secreting lining, cartilage, anything to help himself while gripping his lifeless Eurydice, the bones of her hand gathered in his as if twigs. Behind them their path was being whisked away in successive whooshes like snapping planks of wood falling from a suspension bridge. The reptile slithered through matter, moving with great speed from the underworld toward the world of Man.

When the snake burst into the world of the living, it snapped forward, crunching its fangs into the edge of a sea cliff. The reptile’s jaw rattled, aftershock waves jarring the lovers as Orpheus clenched his jaw too and held on. Eurydice was slipping, her hand limp and cold as it had been in death.

It was as if the serpent understood. It let go and they fell backward toward the ocean. Still, having come so far and feeling so close, Orpheus kept on. When he spied a crack of light through the snake's fangs, the sounds of whooshing so deafening behind them, her hand slipping from his, Orpheus stopped. "You are not there," he whispered. He didn't turn around. "This is my doing." The snake paused, its muscles slackening. Orpheus stepped out its opened mouth and onto the rocky land. He held the hand of the wife, no longer his. Their love had been the tapestry that wove their flesh, their every kiss, and each glance and whisper. Yet in his longing and inability to release her, he had unravelled everything. "It is my doing you are condemned to this half state, a shell. All that is left is the mercy of farewell."

As if a supernatural veil parted, if only for a second, Orpheus caught a glimpse of his true wife, in all her gentleness and beauty. He released her hand. Like lightning striking, the air popped and sizzled as Eurydice and the head of the snake dissipated at the threshold of the world, sucked into a vacuum of existence. Alone again, Orpheus stared into the horizon.

Where Orpheus had originally mourned the future he'd so desired with his wife, he now mourned the inevitability of loss and only prayed she'd be kept safe. In the following months, he resumed playing his lyre, and rediscovered simple contentment in a new lower-voiced music that stemmed directly from his heart. He missed Eurydice, but with the memory of her beside him, he celebrated life.

When Nature, who had been heretofore so soothed by the union of Orpheus' music and Eurydice's singing, and by their pureness of heart, brought his plight to the furies, always known for their sense of justice, they agreed not only to not punish him for defying the gods, the natural order, but to gift him with the ultimate grace, and return him to Eurydice. As suddenly, the earth, like a great wave, swept Orpheus beneath the undertow of dirt, rocks and tree roots to bring him to her.

Immediately a great harmony reverberated through the caverns of Hades. For in the end, it was not Orpheus who had been wronged by his separation from his lover, but Love herself, by the absence of their song.

As the lovers' song permeated the whole world, and the Promethean harmony swelled into the pores of all the beauty and grotesquery of the cosmos—all became one once more.

Vikings

Yugoslavia. 2001.

“Don’t you think there’s more to you?” Aleksandr asks. Naked, he curls his knees to his chest and relaxes against the headboard.

“You dink dere’s more?” Laila swings around and perches on the edge of the bed. Summer presses on the single-room apartment. Sweat trickles down her bronzed lower back. She leans against his leg and turns to face him.

“I do,” he says, brushing her hair off her eyes.

She blushes, unused to tenderness. “More to me? Or more to dis?” She pauses, giving him a chance to answer. He takes a quick inventory of her room: spare bed sheet folded on the dresser, tasselled lampshade, various outfits to suit clients’ tastes hanging in the closet with no door.

On the floor, Kayla’s wooden duck sits by Laila’s foot. Laila leans forward and kicks it beneath the bed. He looks at her, surprised. He knows about Kayla; the toy hadn’t bothered him.

He shifts, knocking the scrunched brown paper bag off her night table. Three bottles of children’s acetaminophen rattle onto the floor. He’d asked her not to open the bag until he left and looks away from her brimming eyes.

“Why you only see me? So manne girl,” she says. Her voice sounds gawky in the silence. He follows her eyes to the clock even though he knows their time is over.

She tenderly cups his testicles as if she were holding a pair of fuzzy kiwi in her palm. She runs the edge of her nail along the thin layer of nubile hair to the

ridge between the two mounds. She presses her lips on the head of his penis with a gentle peck and then pushes herself off and stands, whispering, “You go now.” She hands him his clothes, re-applies her lipstick, and wiggles into her bra.

He hunches at the edge of the bed and stares at Laila. He breathes deeply and then clumsily asks, “Why do you bother to put on a bra? Aren’t you just going to take it off?”

She sighs. “Cheppy. It makes them cheppy. To remove it,” she says. “Like they seduced a woman.”

“Time’s up,” Bratislav, the floor guardian, calls from outside.

Alek glares at the door, his breathing more pronounced. He never finds a good time to say what he wants; he always leaves things unsaid, hoping the world will eventually separate his intention from inaction.

“He okay. Keep us safe,” she says, buttoning his shirt. “Bratislav one of good ones.”

Alek studies her olive-shaded eyelids, her mink lashes. He gazes into her eyes as if he were pausing in a doorway to a place he’s never been yet whose details he knows intimately. “Laila, come with me,” he says awkwardly. Finally.

Without looking up, she leads him to the door. “Slavyiana. My real name is Slavyiana,” she whispers.

* * *

As he describes his night, Aleksandr raps on his hardhat for emphasis. “So she’s sprawled across my lap, and I am slapping her ass.” He eyes his co-workers as he speaks. “And she says, ‘I’ve been a naughty girl. You should punish me.’ But then she looks up, mid-moan, and sees her old man coming up the walk!” The men groan in empathy. Alek grins. “Next time I see her, I’ll let you know what her punishment was.”

The men break into laughter. For the last six years now, despite being five years removed from Canada, Alek has been borrowing from Adam, the high school senior he’d only ever spoken to once, but whose wild tales made him legend, the exclusive, royalty-free rights to Adam’s story, told liberally enough to ensure Alek was continually ingratiated among his coworkers.

“Okay, story time’s over,” Alek says. “Gentlemen don’t kiss and tell. But I will tell you this: I’ve never met a girl who didn’t like her ass slapped.”

“To be young!” Stan, the new young father, says with a laugh. He mentions how long it’s been since he’s had sex with his wife. “It feels like three years.”

“You fool! Your boy is only six months!” they say.

“That time didn’t count. That was work.” He laughs uproariously. “Anyway, you don’t have a kid for the sex; you have it because you love its mother.”

Alek falls quiet and leans against a tractor. The men innately tighten their circle around Stan as if his marriage were a sacred thing requiring protection from philanderers like the boss’ nephew.

One of the men turns to Alek. “Wait, you were at her place? I could have sworn I saw you in the District. Then again, you outsiders all look alike,” he says to the laughter of the others.

Alek smiles. “I’ve never been to the District,” he lies. “Just poets and prostitutes.”

Stan is nodding. “The District,” he interrupts, “is not where people go for anything beautiful. Not conversation, not even sex.” His face sours. “They go to feel power, power over someone else. Everyone needs to feel that. For in this place, no one wants to admit he is powerless.”

The men are touched and their smiles gradually slip. Their cheeks blanch like happiness ground to dust.

Alek stares out onto the road before him. It is a dusty snake, wending and grading erratically. Why was it not laid straight? He wonders. His mind returns to the jagged uneven paths of the District, all leading down into its dank underbelly where stumbling drunks, sobbing prostitutes curled behind dumpsters, and bartering tradesmen exchanging gasoline in whisky bottles for food, cooking oil, and medical supplies create a desperate community mired in loss. He feels instantly filled with grief, blending Slavyiana, the rat-filled alleys, and the wayward grading into one tangled mass.

Looking out at the construction site, he muses, “Why don’t we just go straight? If the shortest path between two points is a straight line, why are we building roads that wind? It’s like we’re going around invisible boulders.”

A few of the men glance at each other. They know they pause in a doorway of a place they have never entered, yet whose details they know well.

Alek sees Lily’s face.

She has a girl too.

He doesn’t know his daughter’s name.

Back in 1990, Aleksandr's family foresaw the sectarian violence, a violence fomented between long-time ethnic neighbours who, despite having lived peacefully for generations within a once-united Yugoslavia, were suddenly in bloody conflict. The genocide was midwived from buried grievances that, like ancient bones, once unearthed, demanded fresh corpses be buried in their place. A natural evolution.

Having the means, the family managed to immigrate to Canada a month before the violence took root. Alek's family was proud, and in their adopted country, they reinstated their culture, traditions and values, both to inculcate their children and keep them pure and to maintain their esteem in their new Slavic community.

Alek and Ljiljana, called Lily, met in Yugoslavian Sunday school. Alek held Sunday school in low regard and typically didn't pay much attention. He preferred to stare at Lily. Their first make-out session was initiated from one of these prolonged looks. Though he felt awkward around girls, Alek had memorized the landscape of her face so it felt innate and familiar. He uncharacteristically walked up to her and touched her elbow and with a jolt of electricity extending from their pounding hearts to their limbs and fingertips and buzzing lips, he, without thinking further, kissed her and started their fire.

After numerous weeks of Sunday school lunchtime hook-ups, their make-out sessions turned from light to heavy, which would continue from one encounter to the next as if there had been no break at all.

Her menstrual cycle had always been irregular and she had routinely experienced bouts of inexplicable nausea, so it wasn't until she was donating blood at the high school and fainted that the nurse whispered to her what was happening.

She was terrified and said nothing, not to Aleksandr, fearing he would no longer love her, and not to her parents, not knowing how they'd react. With Alek, she blamed being moody and quiet on trouble at home, and her parents blamed teenage hormones.

By the end of her first trimester, she felt peace. Somehow the prospect of becoming a mother left her in a happy daze. As she was not permitted to wear tight-fitting clothes, her normal attire masked her pregnancy, and for a while,

though she was still not showing, she let herself believe that things would remain the same. Her relationships. Her body.

But things did not stay the same. Alek saw her only one time after her parents found out, when both families met in the Slavic community centre conference room to mediate an agreement. Alek's parents would pay, and Alek would disappear, go to his uncle back in the motherland where he owned a construction firm and could put his wayward nephew to work. They had brought him out of violence only to return him, exchanging one kind for another.

Lily had sat in the chair with her arms crossed as if she were there but not there. Her head drooped into the collar of her over-sized coat from which her sweet round tummy peeked out. Until this moment, Lily being pregnant had been an abstract idea. He hadn't fully appreciated a living being as a true epiphany born from the spark of their love. Yet here it was. He saw it now, no longer his.

Lily was his girlfriend. His lover. Soon, she would be a mother, a role she would have for the rest of her life. And he was the father, yet he was being severed from it all. He wanted to unwrap her arms from where they cradled their baby and throw them around his body to save them both. He tensed his arms to try to imagine hefting her new weight. Could he carry them both out? Why did love bring shame? "You will not cut off your mother's nose with this," Alek's father had said.

His parents were wrong and small to be so concerned with their reputation and social value. He and Lily had created life; such will of God should triumph over silly notions of propriety. The adult voices rumbled around him. His arms felt numb, foreign, as if they were branches grafted from another tree. The sight of her in such a state stirred him; if only he could reach for her.

As if sensing his attention, she finally looked up. Her eyes a clear deep blue sea. Her pupils blended into the blue in her eyes, as if she were floating away from the surface, away from the last remnants of light towards the greatest depths of the ocean. She looked up, and their gazes held. He could see in them that she was doing as she must, saving herself, herself and the child, and drifting away, the murmur of their parents now complete. He slunk down in the chair, stretching his foot beneath the table. She extended hers so they could touch. She looked up in hope. Then despair.

Alek's father cleared his throat loudly, glaring at Alek. Alek, paralyzed in the moment, sank deeply into his chair and disappeared from Lily's field of vision,

sucked into the darkness beneath the conference table as if he were a scrap piece of paper in her life, washed down a sewer drain.

* * *

“Well, not all of us are the boss’s nephew. Time to get back,” the men tease, picking up their tools and returning to their work cells. They slap Alek on his back and restart their machines. He runs his hand through his hair and takes a deep breath, still lost in the conversation.

His uncle, making his daily rounds to oversee the site, straggles from worker to worker as if a ghost who has forgotten he is dead. Alek makes and holds eye contact with Uncle while he traverses the construction site. With his first step towards Uncle, like every time they are together, he walks through the haunted door of memory. Today, now, he is alight with loss. He feels reckless. “Paving over a road that’s already paved,” Alek waves his hand over the land. “We lay concrete on concrete, but when the concrete is disturbed, we don’t fix it,” he says. “We go around. Wouldn’t it be more efficient to go straight?”

Taken aback by such directness, Uncle stares at Alek. As is his habit, he presses against his left shirt pocket five times, ensuring the small stones he always carries are present. He unearthed the agate, amber, and jasper stones excavating these roads. His hand lingers at the centre of his chest, and he leans against a one-person skid-steer loader, his face obscured from Alek behind the lattice-like screen that protects the driver from objects and dust.

“You ever tell yourself a lie?” Uncle confesses. “You know it’s a lie. Most people know it’s a lie, but you tell it anyway. You don’t need anyone to believe it. You only need a part of yourself to believe it.” He pauses. “This lie is different. When you speak this truth, although everyone knows it’s the truth, no one accepts it. Because it is an open wound. And you can’t imagine a solution. The truth becomes irrelevant. Then it’s just survival.”

Alek processes Uncle’s words. “Why?” he finally asks.

“So we can one day tell the truth,” Uncle says. “When we ourselves are ready to listen. And ready to forgive.”

“Forgive?” Alek closes his eyes against her. But she is still there.

“Forgive ourselves for not being what we said we were,” he says. “And for not telling the truth earlier.”

Just then, the operator from the front-end loader shouts and waves his hands frantically from his open door, trying to get Uncle's attention. Uncle runs over, followed by Alek.

At the threshold of the pit, the dust dissipates and rocks scatter. After removing the upper layers of soil, the front-end loader shoves backwards, its reverse alarm screeching. Alek leans in to see the contents of the pit's full belly, unsure at first of what he's looking at. Then his chest contracts and squeezes his lungs and heart. A light grey mound of ash, lime, and soot lies mostly undisturbed save for the pattern traced into the top layer by the swirling breeze. Fleshless femurs and forearms, like cigarette butts in an ashtray, jut out in all directions.

Uncle grabs Alek's wrist as if to catch him from falling. "Don't look at them," he yells. "They'll dig their fingers into your eyes and scratch their faces into your vision. Like a crack bolting across a frozen lake that causes you to fall through the distorted ice into drowned arms." He motions to the truck to cover them up. "They're already dead. They're not the ones who need saving."

Wind whistles through the brown porous bones. The truck rumbles to life and pours dirt into the open mouth of the pit.

"Who did this?" Alek murmurs.

"The Vikings," Uncle says, shaking his head. "Who else could be capable?"

Wolf

Fallujah, Iraq

He doesn't hear me.

He looks ridiculous standing over me, waving his hands frantically and mouthing the word "lieutenant" repeatedly.

You trying to get killed, Corporal? This is a bloody warzone.

He doesn't hear me.

I'm fine, just... numb.

The sand cradles my body like a top sheet, sticking to my sweat and my wound.

A locustian swarm of bullets crackles by. He collapses suddenly. As if a bandsaw ripped through his knees.

My face is warm and wet from the blood. A thick trickle slowly pours out like molasses. Is it his or mine? I dunno. The wind blasts sand into my face. It feels like breadcrumbs. The sun slowly bakes the batter sticking to my skin. Caked sand crumbles and falls away in chunks. The sound of gunfire crumbles and falls away in chunks.

My side doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would. The bullet must have gone straight through. The wound feeds on my liver. But then the pain disappears, just disappears, as if I'd grown a new liver, one that I could take for granted. Soon the gnawing returns, and I go in and out of consciousness.

I smell fried onions.

I smell death.

I need to rest.

I stare at the sky for what feels like the last time.
God, the sky is blue.
He doesn't hear me.
I close my eyes.

* * *

Within the expanse of dying and death, the lieutenant enters the forest of his Midwestern childhood to bear witness to his own judgement. He walks deeper, seeking shade against the sun's unrelenting brilliance. The cloudless blue sky disappears behind the thick, ragged foliage of green ash. Rays of light claw through the layers of leaves and branches. He is unalarmed by his sudden appearance in the forest, though he cannot explain why he was removed from the war. He is enveloped in the bliss of being returned to the place of his youth. The forest around him is quiet. Still.

He adjusts his pristine combat uniform. The freshly starched fatigues, showing no signs of the rigours of war, crinkle and swish with his movements. He snaps the compartments of his belt kit open—one, two, three—checking his supplies. To make the knife more accessible, he unclips its harness. A chestnut rattles down a tree limb. It reminds him of snowflakes that drift down and brush against tree branches before settling on the ground. The collective muffled hum of birds and squirrels muzzles the tranquil forest. He walks deliberately, though he has no destination. He pauses and looks over his shoulder, surveying the endless tree trunks that fill his field of vision. They appear to him like folds from an enormous curtain that he expects will part.

He senses that he is being followed. He surveys his surroundings nervously. Nothing. Still, a primal fear remains.

He rolls up the sleeves on his standard-issue olive shirt and gulps from his canteen. Every hundred yards, without firing, he manually cocks his automatic rifle, allowing it to load a bullet from the cartridge. Then he engages the release mechanism and frees the bullet from the chamber. The pristine, unfired bullets tumble to the ground, transformed into discharged casings. Like a trail of raw, shelled peanuts, the metal husks line the well-trodden path and shine amid the worn grass and fallen leaves. A squirrel sniffs a bullet and scurries away.

Although an undefined fear persists within him, he is compelled by some hidden force to idly gather flowers. He collects some of the wildflowers that dot the forest floor: blue clusters of woodland phlox, purple and yellow violets and a few blue columbines. The trumpet-shaped Virginia bluebells' scarlet-and-yellow blooms make a stark contrast against his black rifle. He arranges them carefully in the barrel of the rifle and adjusts the bouquet until it is just right. He smiles proudly, wishing she could see her *little man* now. He removes his jacket and drapes it neatly over his left forearm, and then he stands upright, his posture firm. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and steps forward as if he were approaching his prom date's front door.

Twigs snap behind him. His arms and hands clench the rifle, and he crouches, turning in a half circle. He only catches a glimpse of the threat. White fur. A dog? A wolf? He is unsure.

As if the seasons were not restricted by the immutable laws of nature in this forest, the onset of summer is synchronous with the standing of his rifle. Summer's searing heat becomes a blaze, and he feels as if he were sitting at her hearth. In a long, smooth motion, he pulls the now desiccated arrangement from his rifle barrel. The dead yellow petals flutter to his feet. He blows gently into the rim of the rifle. Disintegrated stems that have turned to dust puff out and disappear into the air.

A white wolf is waiting for him. The tips of its ashen fur is stiff. He studies the wolf. The animal's coat conceals its breathing—the almost imperceptible rise and fall of its chest. He readies himself to plunge his knife into its side, beneath its ribs. He imagines the warm blood pooling out and spreading onto his hands. The wolf stares at him, its grey-blue eyes icy and hard. He aches to bury his hands in the animal's fur. Yet he feels bound to the wolf's ferocious, inscrutable beauty, as if he were etherized by its numb, grey eyes.

He turns around, looking to backtrack. But the forest is on fire. The forest curls like burning parchment paper. Large brown blotches form unnaturally and envelop the trees from their trunks outwards, his trail of bullets crackling and popping from the forest floor. The sounds of machine guns and helicopters and screams hiss from the whooshing blaze.

Eleven yards ahead, a massive brown bear occupies the path. The bear makes no menacing movements, does not snuffle or growl. As if in a deep meditation,

it stares contemplatively in his direction, moving neither towards nor away from him. A feeling of dread takes over.

He ducks along the narrow path offered by the forest, close to the wolf. The wolf remains still, then backs away into the trees, its lips curling, as if snickering, its razor-sharp white teeth glinting in the shade.

Still slightly hunched, he continues along the path, away from the bear. With his rifle, he parts the brush as he would a curtain, and, instantly and inexplicably, summer turns to fall. He does not see them, but he knows the wolf and the bear are tracking him.

The forest's shedding foliage welcomes him with leaves floating from the tall, swaying branches. Their colours and shapes encircle his head, hover for a moment before resting on the ground like confetti and spiralling streamers. Tired from the walk, he lurches with each step, his head and shoulders heavy. He brings his rifle down to use as a walking stick.

Winter arrives instantly, and the bitter cold bites into his skin. Despite not being able to see through the swirling snow or hear past the wind, he senses imminent danger. He slowly raises his rifle and aims. The rifle's mouth is muffled by a kerchief of snow. He walks as quickly as his age and nature will allow.

He comes across a schoolhouse untouched by time or weather. Its exterior is a satiny blue, the window panes and storm shutters the colour of new cotton. Tufted smoke puffs from the chimney, the billows sweet and heady. All around and behind the schoolhouse is a jungle, the brush spreading wildly. The fleecy blanket of snow has disappeared. Mysteriously, there is no sign of the wolf—only the bear, nearby. He has arrived.

Inside the schoolhouse, thirty-two children, each one dressed in a uniform of navy blue, white and red, mill about the space, which is divided into two tidy floors. On the first level, he sees twelve long rectangular folding tables, on top of which are pine coffins. These are workstations, each managed by a team two young students. On the second level, just beneath the rafters of the deceptively tall building, six students assemble hinges on the coffins. One of the two children tasked with sweeping the floor comes over to him, then hangs his belt kit and army jacket on a hook alongside the queue of students' jackets.

It starts to rain. The droplets patter on the tin roof. Wind swirls the rain, making it sound as if marbles are clacking down through the eavestrough. He takes in the smell of pine oil. He lifts shavings from the ground and sprinkles them

over a nearby child. The child laughs and sticks his tongue out, trying to catch the shavings that drift down like snowflakes. He pinches a curled shaving and, as if it were leavened bread, offers it to the child's open mouth.

Both are scolded by a headmistress, whom he hadn't previously noticed. She shifts a coffin slightly to create space on the table and drops a box of brass hinges in front of him. He goes to work alongside the children, disassembling the hinges as if they were rifles. He removes the pieces, greases them and effortlessly snaps them all back into place. Mesmerized, the children stop working and watch him. When he finishes, he realizes that the sounds of hammering and sanding have stopped. They look at him in awe. The headmistress motions for him to stand. She claps. The students join in.

Then, mixed in with the rain, comes the bellow of the air-raid siren. Everyone hides under the tables as war planes roar by, their engines rattling the building. Dust sprinkles from the rafters' wooden beams. Just above their heads, the coffins bounce and shake violently against the tables. The sound is desperate, as if people were sealed inside them. He reaches up and holds a coffin in place to quiet it down.

The sirens stop. They climb out and continue their work. The steady sounds of hammering and sanding return. Unaffected by the situation, he too returns to his work, to his hinges, his mechanisms. He holds a coffin lid open for a child, who then climbs completely inside and begins sanding the interior. He is surprised by the weight of the lid. The schoolhouse grows cold. The headmistress asks him to collect firewood. But he is barred from using any of the pine that is stacked against the wall or any pine kindling swept from the floor. He glances at his rifle resting beside the door and decides to leave it behind.

Outside, he is apprehensive. He sees no signs of the two predators; still, he is uneasy. He wanders from the schoolhouse. Periodically, he looks back to confirm it's still there, fearing the school, like a boat, will lift anchor and sail away, marooning him somewhere between the jungle and the forest. He drags a pile of branches to the door.

Then he hears the bear. It is behind him, maybe eleven yards away and steadily closing in. He dashes back to the school, grabs the door handle and pushes. The door won't open. He uses both hands and shakes with all his might. He hears the crunching and snapping of twigs beneath the bear's paws, like thirty-three pleas sepulchered into his ear canal—a single murmur entreating him to remain.

In desperation, he kicks the door open. The door frame caves. The rifle that had been bracing the door is thrown into the air then slides across the floor. The headmistress has been torn to shreds. Blood pools like syrup on the floor. He hears desperate knocking; the children must have locked themselves in the coffins for protection.

He hammers the coffins closed and waits for the knocking to stop. A red-stained hand peeks from one coffin, sending blood dripping to the floor. He wedges the hand back in and firmly closes the lid. In the bathroom, he removes his wet clothes and washes away the mixture of blood and sand that had been sprinkled all over his face and body. He peels the rifle from the sticky floor.

Leaning heavily on the porcelain sink, barely able to stand, he sees, staring back at him in the mirror, the remorseless white wolf. He looks down and sees that his liver has been removed. He studies his open wound, fruitlessly expecting his liver to regenerate, that perhaps the blood and bone and muscle and cartilage would fold back on itself like a flower curling closed as the sun disappears. He slips to his knees, then braces himself with the rifle to get up.

“This wasn’t always my path. But I won’t beg for forgiveness,” he says to the bear waiting patiently outside the schoolhouse. “God, the sky is blue.”

He doesn’t hear me.

The Dog Whistle

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

I could not hear the dog whistle. But I pretended nonetheless. I wanted to be like the other dogs. And the Master never suspected.

I could see it, however. The head Master would drag the tip of his tongue, a wet swab, over his lips, take a deep breath, his nostrils flaring temporarily, and with a body tense as if about to emit a guttural scream, he would press his lips against the edges of the shimmering silver whistle and blow. And then nothing. Not a sound. Simply the sound of all the dogs, including me, shuffling into organized lines in the cobblestone courtyard of the king. The sound he played was undoubtedly so majestic that only the ears of a dog were tuned to accept its frequency, for no human ever reacted to the sound. How I too longed to hear its beauty.

All the other dogs, regardless of whether they were bound to the clergy, the aristocracy or the gentry, or even the lowest of mutts owned by some peasant, could hear the whistle. When the Master blew the whistle, every canine would gallop from his master to form perfect lines of even numbers in the courtyard. Unlike their masters' divisions, drawn on breed, gender and social class, the lines were a mix of dogs, the aristocratic beside the peasant.

Even the wildest of dogs—dogs who lived outside the courtyard's walls but within the kingdom's lands—could hear the whistle. When the whistle sounded

and all the dogs in the kingdom gathered in the courtyard, the wild dogs would draw near to the rabble from beyond the kingdom's outer wall and bay. Perhaps they were describing the whistle's sound. Or yearning for a master. Somehow still secretly bound to the whistle, the wild dogs too served the king; they protected the kingdom from strangers who strayed from the roads and passed between the foliage in the adjoining forest, strangers who preferred the cover of night over the royal lantern-lit paths. As long as the strangers to these lands kept to the path, the wild dogs let them be.

Now, in the courtyard, whenever packs of dogs formed independent of the whistle's blow, I, like the others, would grow uneasy. Even when allowed a break from my labour, when I was permitted to chase and play, I remained close to the whistle on the chance that one day I would hear it, a sound surely so beautiful yet so secret, reserved only for our species, from the most affluent to the least. How the birds and fish and other animals must have seethed in jealousy; if only they had loving masters to play them such a sound! But why could I not hear it? I could hear the song of birds, the whoosh and the splash from fish jumping in the water. Why did this song remain elusive to my ears?

In the courtyard, once summoned by the whistle, as a matter of course, we were then set to fight over a single bone thrown to us. The bone brought forth our true animal selves. Coming from somewhere beyond our throats, from an instinctual gland, the high-pitched bark and the low-sounding growl would spin into a whirling tornado of sound that screamed across the kingdom, shaking the shutters and rattling the clay-tiled rooftops. We fought ferociously, our muscular hind legs flexing, our jaws firmly gripping one another as we rolled over the stone, in an attempt to wrest the bone away from one another. When the victor emerged, the bone clenched in his teeth, scanning the pack for any further threat to his prize, he would proudly place it at the Master's feet. Yet it was the same every time. The Master, indifferent, would simply toss the bone back into the pack.

Over time, the number of dogs barking from the periphery grew, while those who actively sought the bone shrank. The once-unified dogs, dogs who had throughout time stood together, began to mimic the division of their masters. Dogs of the aristocracy, dogs who had once played amongst us, now stood at the outer layers of the pack and encircled the lower-ranking dogs, prohibiting the breach of their perimeter. The next layer were the dogs of the clergy, followed by the gentry and the peasantry. The number of dogs of the gentry slowly blended

into the dogs of the peasants, as if inside the kingdom's walls remained only dogs belonging to the aristocracy, the clergy and the peasantry. The endangered gentry dogs were constantly surrounded by the upper echelons of canine society, their populace continually at risk of joining the plight of the hopeless peasant dog.

Although I too growled and postured, once I realized the futility of fighting my fellow canine to get my master's attention, I stopped trying to get the bone. The masters all profited unduly from watching us fight over this worthless object. And the dog who had fought valiantly, who claimed the bone, was instructed to leave the bone on the ground when the whistle sounded. He would stare at the bone for a minute or two, whimpering and sniffing, before turning away, the collective eyes of all the dogs tied for a moment in understanding. We fought for an object that bore no value, an object that shared none of the characteristics of an insatiable idea that is indestructible and infinite. Instead we chased an object completely destructible, nothing more than a type of currency created out of thin air to satisfy our need to be adored and validated by our masters—as if another could do so on our behalf.

During the night, as was my bred duty, I circled the torch-lit courtyard and watched. It was my responsibility to warn the others and react to any danger. It was an honourable position, a position dedicated only to a particular lineage of dog whose forefather sacrificed his life to save the King.

Some peasant dogs wandered the courtyard searching for scraps of food. Their ribs nearly poked through their emaciated bodies as they sniffed three vile-smelling drunks asleep on the ground. When more wandering foul-tempered drunks entered the courtyard, tripping over the uneven cobblestones, the dogs scurried away. In the courtyard, the dominant sound came from the torches whose flames fluttered and snapped in the breeze.

This was the unshakeable sound of the night, until there arrived a song from a lady in blue accompanied by her little dog.

She was of moderate height and did not carry a whistle. She gently called the dog's name then hummed and whistled a tune so beautiful it needed no words. All the dogs were drawn to her. She would share treats and scraps of meat with us. When addressing us, she would drop to one knee and lean in so that our eyes would meet—her scent, a subtle lavender. She spoke softly as she caressed the tops of our heads. When a dog was kicked by a drunk, she chased the drunk away. And although she offered her dog's bone to the others, an offer to share,

we dared not take it. Even though the little dog seemed equally willing to share, we understood that the bone belonged to him. With our jaws clenched and a growl always at the ready, we never showed our teeth. We always backed away, intimidated by her kindness. And when that whistle first sounded from the Master within this prospect of a new world, a world full of possibilities, some left to form their lines straight away, while others hesitated, looking to the others first before begrudgingly slinking off. I alone remained with the lady and her little dog, now convinced that none of us could truly hear the whistle.

Many of the dogs couldn't reconcile their harsh and indifferent treatment from the masters in the face of such patience and kindness given them by the lady. We began to discuss these ideas openly, exploring that particular truth around which we truly wished to clench our teeth and never let go—that the bone held no value, and that we sought a just and kind world instead. The masters demanded our love and loyalty, that which they themselves did not demonstrate. But this truth was met with ridicule from our masters.

It wasn't long before many of the dogs stopped responding entirely to the whistle. They too realized that the bone held no currency and had stopped fighting over it. First it was the peasant dogs, the dogs who had nothing to lose, mongrels whose lives were already held in contempt. Then a few dogs from the clergy who had always sympathized with the peasant dogs. The gentry dogs, too busy to notice at first, followed soon afterwards. Lastly, the aristocratic dogs, dogs who had experienced but few hardships, grew tired of being ridiculed for their selfishness by the other, more wronged canines, and joined in the dissent.

Soon all the dogs in the kingdom were united in our resistance. We no longer responded to the whistle or fought over the bone, and began to discontinue our physical labour. Our resistance was met by threats of violence. To keep us from completely uniting, whenever we gathered peacefully, they constantly provoked us under some pretext of public safety and tried to force us to remain in our homes where, behind closed doors, they tried to starve us into submission. This inspired a new resolve within us. We realized the system was not going to change willingly and that our masters would sink to unimaginable depths to maintain the system they knew. We secretly met in greater numbers, our unity growing stronger.

A praetorian dog, a dog raised in secret, a dog mothered by brutality and viciousness, threatened to limit the already starving peasant dog's diet to a morsel of food only befitting a mouse. Next, they intimated to the dogs of the aristocracy,

privileged dogs who still lived in relative comfort, that they too would lose their blankets and warm homes and would be cast out as strays, their only hope a kind peasant who might take them in. The dogs of the clergy remained quiet. The masters, wishing to maintain the current system of the servile dog, directed the praetorian dogs to gather the intimidated mongrel, and led a pack to devour those who had inspired this desire for change—the lady and her little dog.

The pack, a growling drone, moved swiftly towards the courtyard, where the lady and her little dog kept their usual spot in comforting the other dogs. At the sight of their steely eyes and drawn teeth, she motioned to us not to intervene. From the pack's once-smiling muzzles, fangs suddenly sprang forth like jackknives, their teeth sinking into her and into the little dog who defended her despite her instructions. I leapt to save the lady but was no match for the pack's numbers, who left me badly injured.

Neither melody nor shriek escaped the lady's lips when those fangs punctured her skin and made red rags of her blue dress. Instead, a soft breeze shuffled the shredded cloth along the cobblestones. The tattered fabric, its frayed edges looking like claws, dragged along the stone. The distant cry of unknown dogs bellowed in the air like the echo of a cannon. From outside the kingdom's walls, the wild dogs crooned in sadness that they too could not help the lady.

My heart sank at the sight of her closing eyelids and fading breath. I had failed my species and my forefathers. Where they had given their lives to save a king, I was unable to save the lady. Although she was made of a flesh free of cruelty, her only defence being kindness, the viciousness and violence fostered by the praetorian dogs could not penetrate her heart. For in death, though her eyes were frozen, her smile remained. She was not indestructible. But her ideas were. Love and forbearance could transcend the whistle.

Despite being badly injured, a strength remained in me and my spirit was intact. I had to retrieve the whistle. I motioned to the others to open the gate and let the wild dogs, friends of the lady, join us in this struggle. With their appearance within the courtyard, we were buoyed by hope, as alongside the wild dogs came dogs from a distant land, as if the kindness that the lady inspired could trot across land and sea alike.

Aided by the confusion in the courtyard, I summoned my remaining strength and snatched the silver whistle from the Master's neck. I gnashed it before collapsing on the ground. With the mangled whistle lying at my gasping mouth, my

master dropped to his knees at my side, a semblance of remorse in his eyes. He said, “Why? You come from a long line of dogs, specifically bred to serve the king. This is the highest honour. Why not voice your grievance in some other way? Why did you respond to her call over our own?”

“I would have answered your call swiftly and loyally if it were a sound I could hear,” I panted. “Your call contains no *sound*. From the whistle’s violent training, I answered in the only way I could—obedience.” My breath grew shallow. I swallowed. “The whistle is a hollow relic of a system predicated on violent control, a relic we all run the risk of becoming if we cannot find a way forward together.”

I smiled at the thought of the lady and her little dog. I continued — my words inspired by the lady. “I answered her call because I could hear her words, whether because of the words she’d selected or the frequency with which she spoke them, or she, like a tuning fork, emitted a seminal harmony, a harmony almost lost, lingering from its ancestral garden and trying to return, a song of love and forbearance that is inextinguishable. If only you had spoken in such a frequency, I would have recognized it straightaway, for it would have been the song I longed to hear. But now the whistle is gone, and all that remains at your side is the praetorian. I am but a single dog and will pass shortly. But the idea is indestructible. We will never let you be. The extremist is all that remains. What kind of extremist will you be?”

In a rare show of affection, he gently rubbed my head a long while, before placing a kiss on my forehead.

“There was truly only one fate for the whistle,” I barked feebly. “Its sound was always destined to summon the revolutionary.”

The Invitation

(or, The Life of Dymytriev Vassalyv)

There are those who accept the system willingly, and there are those who, in a state-of-near-unconsciousness, accept it dreamily. And there are those who, not knowing any differently, follow the masses and, even if they are not permitted entrance, wholly accept its jurisdiction over their sovereign selves.

—Dymytriev Vassalyv, age 16

Crimea, 1876

One day in early spring, Dymytriev, heeding the call to revolution and the selfless Cossack life, came across an invitation that brandished his name. It lay discarded on the ground, an afterthought, before a path leading to a gated wall.

Dymytriev had departed from the city of Kazakia, a Crimean oblast, early that morning. For three hours, he followed the distant song of birds along the faintest of paths. Despite hearing their muted, inaccessible melody, he never spotted one. While his mind was at ease with his noble journey, his heart was captured by the unshakeable beauty of the jagged, leafless trees. They were adrift in the barren and yellowing lea that spanned like a drying, melancholic ocean, and stood amidst the futile, unseen, mythical calls of a *rusalka* tempting him to take his place in a watery grave.

He stiffened his collars, even though no tree stirred. As his hand half-covered his mouth, he coughed as if subtly announcing his arrival to some unseen host. It was then that he stumbled upon an invitation sealed with crimson wax. Pressed in the intricate seal spread vines bound by a triangular border, and in its centre was a circle that could have been either an eye or a fountain. At the edges of the seal, the wax had bled into irregular globules and splatter that, on the white envelope, gave the impression of blood. Other than the inordinate concentration of ink at the tip of the final ‘V’, as if the addressee had struggled to remove their quill, the handwriting was exquisite.

ДЫМТРИЙ ВАСАЛЮ

Although he had noticed the large, wrought-iron gate as he approached, it seemed of little importance. It was guarded by a single sentry. With the invitation lying so near, he could not have thought that the guard and the invitation were unassociated. The gate was guarded by a single sentry. Other than a majestic Tartarian beard, the guard’s face held little grace from its age. His cheeks, like clay once crafted by a heavenly artisan, were slowly becoming un-constituted, their once-smooth edges now grizzled and porous beneath his sunken eyes. Musket in hand, he followed Dymytriev’s approach with his eyes, which peered from under a furred hat held in place by a worn, chewed leather loop. His head did not turn, however; it was as if his very body were paralyzed and unaccustomed to moving.

Dymytriev, having no other reason to stop during his journey, wished to simply return the lost invitation to the solitary guard who stood before the gate.

“To what mystery do you stand guard?” Dymytriev said, peering beyond a horizontal bar on the gate, his curiosity getting the better of him. “Beyond this gate rests what is surely the same plain on which we stand. You stand as if the gate were presiding over you. If you stood on the other side, I’d think that both you and the gate would be more secure because of it.”

During the guard’s mostly solitary thirty-two years of duty, he had never considered such a perspective.

Dymytriev continued. “And who could harm such an imposing gate? You give the impression of guarding over a gate that you yourself would not be permitted to pass. As if you act on behalf of a system of which you are not entirely a part.” The guard, not stoic by any means, and despite his quiet reluctance, smiled gently. The smile formed beneath his eyes and then spread to his cheeks and mouth.

“I know not what is beyond this particular gate,” the guard said. “I know only of those permitted to pass, those that possess an invitation.” The traveller, whose honesty had momentarily been overcome by his curiosity, eager to return to his journey, extended the invitation to the guard. For who would better know how to return it to its rightful owner? “I found this but a minute ago,” Dymytriev said. “I leave the invitation in your capable hands so it may find its rightful owner.”

“What use is it to me?” The sentry said, slapping Dymytriev’s hand downward. “It belongs to you and has your name to boot. How can I accept that which you refuse to submit?”

Dymytriev, taken aback by the sentry’s unexpected gesture, paused for a moment before addressing his host. “It is only chance that it came into my possession. I lay no claim to its ownership. Take it, so I may depart. You accept that the invitation is, in fact, meant for me but that, somehow, I am someone other than who I claim to be?” Dymytriev asked incredulously, despite being indifferent to the invitation itself.

The guard pursed his lips and measured his response. “If you wish to remain with me for a suitable amount of time to allay your doubts and to return it to its rightful owner—as you say—if they even return at all, I will not stop you,” he said skeptically, still unsure of Dymytriev’s motives behind his refusal of the invitation. “Altogether, it would be an honourable stance. To whomever the invitation belongs, they have not passed. That I assure you,” he said, looking behind him. And in doing so, he turned his back on the Cossack, showing him a level of trust he was likely forbidden to display.

It marked his first movement since Dymytriev’s arrival. “But you *could* simply accept it as your own and continue on your way,” the sentry said, drawing attention to an option Dymytriev had likely not considered. “Accepting the invitation will not oblige you to enter. It would only mean that you have accepted its terms, regardless of whether you choose to enter or not.”

“I know of no invitation offered in such a manner,” Dymytriev said. “An invitation left unoffered would forfeit its purpose, rendering its remaining function to nothing more than kindling. If the dispatch of the invitation were so important, why would its delivery be left to chance?”

“You doubt the authenticity of the invitation, although it brandishes your name? I cannot explain why it was not handed to you in person. Perhaps it was left on this path purposefully, with the knowledge that it would come into your

possession safely. That you could not have passed any other way,” the sentry said. “Besides us, who else would have any need of it?”

Dymytriev ran his fingers across the invitation, the balls of his fingers rolling along the contours of the seal. He studied his name and how the ink had soaked into the fibres of the envelope with such finality. He unclipped then lowered his wrapped provisions and placed them on the ground. Without the benefit of movement, the weight he bore for his travels was too much to bear.

The sentry continued, “You assume that everyone receives and accepts an invitation in the same manner. And though you logically conclude that such an invitation should be wholly accepted in such a place, it could be no further from the truth. Some pack away their invitation for years and completely lose track of it, until one day they stumble across it. And even then, some wonder if it has somehow expired. Some accept the invitation immediately, while others accept it later in life. Some dismiss it outright.”

“How could an invitation be fulfilled in such a manner?” Dymytriev said. “It lacks permanence to time and place.”

“The invitation can only be fulfilled by those that have offered it or, to a lesser degree, those that have accepted it. Besides, in spite of yourself, you’ve superfluously prepared arguments against a sealed envelope whose contents remain hidden from you. Even I cannot entirely accept the invitation. I can accept that it is indeed for you and allow you to pass; then, and only then, when you continue towards the machinations of the invitation, would those that have offered it accept it in its entirety,” the sentry said. “Consider yourself lucky. Early in life, you possess an invitation in your name before a gate that would accept you.”

Dymytriev paused in reflection. He looked towards the direction in which he was travelling and clenched the top of his burlap knapsack, unsure of why he found offence in the questioning of his identity, especially when he could simply walk away. “I may yet concede a great deal today. It’s a puzzling acceptance,” Dymytriev said, earnestly contemplating entry.

“I know not of how acceptance should proceed, only of how it is currently fulfilled,” the guard said. “There may, in fact, be a great many opportunities to improve this process.”

From beyond the gate, seemingly just beyond the early declination of the hill, a shriek bandied through the unkempt grass, the tail of its echo snaking through

the yellowing field before sloughing into nothingness. The song of birds could be heard in the distance.

"Did you hear that? It seemed unnatural," Dymytriev responded, immediately concerned. He pressed his face against the rods, looking for a way around the gate, of which he could not find a clear path. To both the left and to the right of the gate, extended a stone mason's wall, barely visible behind the creeping and overgrown vines, and the unkempt trees and shrubs. "Is someone there?" Dymytriev said. But the guard remained still, and stared straight ahead, saying nothing. "How would you know? Your gaze is locked on the horizon, sentry! You said no one had passed through! Open this gate!"

"I did," the sentry said dispassionately. "And I cannot."

"I thought you a protectorate! What cowardice is this?" Dymytriev fruitlessly shook the formidable gate with all his force, his fingers curling around the black rods, his knuckles whitening from the urgency of his grip.

The sentry remained still, staring inexplicably into the horizon as if it were the true danger. Dymytriev, glaring at the indifferent guard, disarmed him in one motion and shoved the rifle into his chest, pushing him firmly against the gate.

"You misunderstand me. Nothing would bring me greater joy than to open this gate as I would then have fulfilled my duty," the guard said, somehow empathetic to the traveller's aggression. "But it's not up to me. Only the invited that wish to pass can enter."

"You speak in riddles," Dymytriev said, his anger cooling as quickly as it had bubbled. He lowered the rifle and rested it against the gate. Still clutching the invitation, he gripped the gate with his free hand. "We speak too much. And act too little."

"Although I show you no hostility, I can be quite violent," said the sentry. "I won't relinquish any details that would outline my capabilities, but if I did, you would no longer see me as an honourable gatekeeper but as a scoundrel."

"I'll offer no apology for my concerned actions on the behalf of the welfare of others."

"Open it. Perhaps you need to see it with your own eyes," the sentry said, looking at the invitation, not entirely sure of its contents. "Though the unsealing of an invitation is not a requirement of entry, if its undoing provides you with greater confidence in that this would be an invitation that I would accept, then you should open it. You surely owe yourself that. However, that, in itself, would

not render it acceptable. In a certain respect, those who have not been invited have an equal chance of being accepted.”

“I hear nothing,” Dymytriev said, letting go of the gate’s iron rods.

“You could accept that the invitation is for you. By doing so, you would have accepted the most difficult aspect itself,” the sentry said. As if he were an actor removing his costume and speaking outside of his character, he continued to offer advice in a very general sense, although he could only have known otherwise. “After all, it seems to have some of the earmarks of a genuine, authentic invitation—or so I would imagine. Though neither location nor time is specified, your name does appear, and that should certainly count for something.”

“I’m already on my way to war... against tyranny... musket in hand. I have accepted a different sort of invitation.”

“Why is that invitation any more meaningful? You ridicule an invitation with your name, yet accept an invitation to a revolution without name, location, or time? The invitation you speak of can hardly be called such. It’s more of a calling for those who are not otherwise indisposed. This invitation, however, is in your name, handwritten in great detail by a steady, seasoned hand.”

“And dishonour my youth?” Dymytriev said, as if revolution was youth’s sworn duty. There was a moment of silence between them. “What of those who show discord with the process? Those who feel that they, too, should have been invited? Do they have any redress?”

“They’d not be aware of the process to have an opinion,” the guard said.

“That wouldn’t make the process the fairer for it.”

“Your complaint is administrative. You’d complain of the stock of a theatre ticket at the expense of the performance?” the guard said, agitated. “As of yet, no one has passed this gate. This is my third gate. At my first gate, I was but one of many assistants. It was a smooth posting. I held the gate while the head gatekeeper checked the documents when necessary. At the second gate, I graduated from assistant to head gatekeeper.”

“It’s a formidable resume,” the traveller said impatiently, as if it were all a game and he was no longer a willing participant. Dymytriev looked towards the path ahead, reflecting on the delay of his travels. He wondered if he could simply pass through the gate and use it as a shortcut for his journey. “It serves neither of us to continue this talk. We are no further ahead.”

"I say this only for your benefit," the guard said, bowing slightly as if apologizing for failing in his duties. "So you'll not mistake me for a stage-hand or the like. Rather, I say this as your benefactor, knowledgeable in the inner workings."

"Permit me to pass. This invitation bears my name."

"I cannot. Although it bears your name, you have not accepted that it is for you. You have accepted the invitation in name only," the guard said. "In order of importance, your name is outranked by your acceptance. You look to others for safe passage when you yourself hold the key."

"This is only further evidence that you should accept the invitation," answered Dymytriev. "It would allow me to do the same."

"How's that?"

"The dispute exists only in your mind," the traveller said, frustrated. "You say that you will accept the invitation when I have. You would have me believe that the only one barring my entrance is in fact me? As if I were the gatekeeper! The invitation is in my name. And it is in my possession. What else need you? Accept it, so we can be in agreement!"

Barely had the word *agreement* escaped from his mouth when a slow and unusually large procession slipped out from behind the trees at a hook in the road. Nine people approached the gate, including three pairs who walked arm-in-arm. Dressed almost identically in the latest fashion, and as if to attend a ball, the ladies wore evening dresses and gloves, while the men were dressed in black-fitted tail coats with white shirts, the large lapels protruding fashionably beyond their jackets.

The sentry unclasped the mechanism and, other than a minor series of creaks, as if the large, iron-gate were stretching its muscles from a long slumber, the gate offered no resistance and opened easily.

Dymytriev stepped aside and bowed in civility as they passed in no apparent order. First passed a wealthy merchant. Buoyed by his large, insatiable belly, his sizeable necklace pattered and swung with each waddling step. So lengthy was the necklace that he was forced to let go of his wife's hand to control the flailing jewelry so that it would not get caught on something and perhaps strangle him. He alternated between holding the necklace and holding his gold band, which, unable to pass the first phalange of his short, fat finger, sat on the very tip of the digit and always ran the danger of flying off. In passing through the gate, he was delayed only by the foraged balls of pearl necklaces and Victorian teacups that

overflowed from his coat, which clanged and bumped into the doorway. It was only after great struggle that he was finally able to pass.

The governor followed next. Walking with his wife, he moved proudly and with extraordinary formality. He held out to her only a finger and thumb, forming a small loop that she was permitted to hold. His right hand was held out well away from his body as if he were pinching the edges of a cape and holding it high to prevent it from dragging on the filthy ground. He wore a large and burdensome ornate necklace shaped like the sun and a ring that had not been made for him; it rested so loosely on his finger that he permanently clenched his left hand in a fist. Despite all this, he walked with his head held high. He rotated it methodically, probing, as if he were accustomed to being approached and was ascertaining from which direction he would find those who wished to curry his favour.

Next came a farmer. Although he had been endowed with great riches, the farmer arrived with neither pomp nor entitlement, but instead bearing a simple ring that had been passed from generation to generation. He had continued to wear it, though his wife had departed a number of years ago. The simplicity of the ring made it barely visible on his right hand, especially because it was partially shrouded where he held the left hand of his daughter. The young lady, whom he admired deeply, was dressed elegantly in an Anastasian court dress. She parted her white veil ever so slightly, as if it were a stage curtain behind which she could capture a secret, smouldering glimpse. She retreated behind the veil and pinched the fabric just below her chin so the breeze would surreptitiously brush the veil off of her shoulders. She ran a finger along her bare collarbone and allowed it to linger just above the lace basin of her dress, where Dymytriev's eyes were moored. The lace clung to a blossoming landscape comprised of the curves and contours of burgeoning womanhood. Her eyes and Dymytriev's had been locked upon her initial approach. She smiled piercingly at him as she passed. She received no reproach for this from her father, who had long accepted her independence and judgement of her own affairs. Dymytriev, spellbound beyond selfhood, followed her with his eyes until she disappeared behind the gate. He did not even notice that she was followed almost immediately by the town crier, the butcher, and the banker.

Although there were no distinguishing marks on the invitations other than their names and the seals all shared the same colour, one by one, they had all

passed without having to prove that they were who they claimed to be. It was as if they couldn't have been anyone else.

Dymytriev stood frozen, devoutly bound to a gaze that had hopelessly captured him.

As if the gate were a boulder he were perpetually pushing up a hill, and he were avoiding it rolling back on him, the sentry strained to close the heavy gate—the heels of his boots digging into the ground. The gate creaked violently in protest as it clamped closed. A flimsy echo wavered across the tips of the weathered grass. At the foot of the gate, silence had returned. Although the gate opened with great ease, it was a burdensome task to seal the gate—a gate that surely would have preferred to have been left open.

The sentry took a minute to wipe his brow and regain his breath. The traveller did the same.

Dymytriev stood motionless, looking towards the gate as if he saw an apparition. He stood magnanimously, although something deep inside him ached. To any passerby, it would have been understandable if Dymytriev had been mistaken for the guard. The guard, for his part, said nothing. For even within the fiercest and the most stubborn of hearts, he too understood, perhaps better than most, there existed a natural law that could dislodge any from their position. A law that could thaw the most frozen of men.

“I know what you are thinking. I would think the same if I stood where you stand now,” the guard said. “The denial of your entrance is only a comment on the length of your step, not the breadth of your heart. I am sure you are deserving and, if I am not overstepping my bounds, more deserving than most. Why even now, as we speak, you alone continue to return something that, legally, you possess, and therefore, you are more relinquishing it than returning it.”

Though no one else was around, he stepped closer to Dymytriev as if he did not want his words to be overheard. “You know nothing of this invitation, yet you behave as if it wounds you,” he whispered, his eyes surveying their surroundings. “But if you must know, the key is my hand. It can be cut off and manipulated by you like some cheap puppet, but that wouldn't make it any more your hand, now, would it? And who knows what the consequences of such an action would be? You may be arrested and, still holding my severed hand, be caught ‘red-handed,’ as they say.” He spoke with an air of unexpected aggression. “And me, what would I have done unto you to deserve such brutality? By failing my duty, what

shame would have I brought onto my post? Which penalty would greet me? No. By harming me, you in fact harm yourself and the very nature of this post.”

“I have endured too much already,” Dymytriev said, taking a deep breath.

Dymytriev, having no prior experience with such a sentry, had nevertheless expected him to behave differently. After all, he seemingly knew very little about the gate left in his express care. Dymytriev pressed his face against the bars and stared into the distance for a minute. “What if I gave you the invitation? In return I would not only take your place as guard, but I would also place no undue pressure on you to return to me and report your findings.” He turned to face the sentry and continued. “You *could* do so of your own free will, but it certainly would not be a perquisite for the unchaining of your duty.”

It was a scenario that the sentry had not considered during his solitude. He had considered a great many other possibilities: that he would never again see either a representative from the establishment or an invitee; that the doors had accidentally been sealed from the other side; that the reason no one came to pass through was that there remained no outstanding invitations.

“You may easily take over my identity, but how could I take over yours? Although you may view me as a lowly guard, I’ve held a post in the establishment for my entire life. I don’t think it overly grand of myself to point out the importance of such a feat. At the conclusion of my service, I will receive my just due,” the guard said. “And what of you? What of your duty? You are unconcerned with this deception?”

“What deception? I am a protectorate and a revolutionary,” Dymytriev said. “And I would continue to be. Now, it is but your revolution that I assist.”

The sentry held onto the gate as if he had lost his standing. “What good is a post that can be replaced so easily?” he said, more to question himself than to converse with the traveller. “Perhaps we are both deceived, for I noticed the invitation not long before you arrived. And although there was no one in sight from whom it could have derived, I found myself unable to leave my post for even a moment.” He smiled gently, but his eyes, as if they were a stage, featured a solo performance of regret. “The prospect filled me, admittedly, with the unreasonable fear of scoundrels entering through the gate during my temporary absence,” he laughed in a self-deprecating manner. “I even held onto the gate and stretched as far as I could, holding my rifle by the tips of my fingers, trying to drag the

invitation closer. But Nature lacked mercy, for a quiet kind of wind slowly escorted the invitation away and well beyond my reach.”

“How do you know that those that have passed before were not guards or former guards, honourably discharged from their duties for performing superbly over their careers, much as you have?” The traveller said. “Were they not deserving of comfort? Would I not be discharging you honourably?”

The guard’s cheeks and mouth tightened in apprehension. “I will tell you this. I believe that the invitation is a ruse,” he said. “I believe that it is a ruse for those hiding in the shadows, those lurking in the thickets to gain entrance.”

“What of those who had every reason to believe that they were invited and were led on by their superiors or, at the very least, those who hold sway over the invitation?” the traveller asked. “Would they be permitted access? Have there not been those who’ve felt that others, less deserving than themselves, were invited at their expense?”

“You are overly concerned with the inclusion of others to your own detriment,” the sentry said.

“Why do you place, unequivocally, the comfort of those you guard over your own?”

The guard was unused to his standing being challenged. “I meant only that it was fair.”

“Stay for the curtain,” Dymytriev said.

“I suppose it is possible,” the sentry conceded, returning to Dymytriev’s earlier question. “While never witnessing one, I’ve seen signs of earlier scuffles. There are those that have arrived with faces adorned with scratches and bruises, although these signs could be unrelated and merely the slings and arrows of daily life. When I was an assistant, I once briefly guarded the gate while the chief guard escorted an invitee through it due to her state. He returned but said little to me. I was a subordinate and hadn’t the standing to ask such questions. But from our brief conversation, I concluded after much thought that he took her as far as he was permitted. I suspect that, after him, others escorted her further still. But even then, she too could only pass so far.”

“How could you reach such a conclusion?” the traveller said. “You yourself said that your conversation was brief!”

“I noticed, with almost all the invitees, how much they communicated without saying a word. It might have been a look, the way their body was positioned, or

how they greeted each other. At times, it seemed like a secret society,” the sentry said. “But this language also spoke to me upon the guard’s return, for his face was marked with confusion. A look like he again saw those who he recently permitted to pass but they, now only perhaps a few yards beyond the gate, could pass no further and, because of this and the tremendous pride he took in his work, he could not discuss his observations.”

The sentry stared into the distance in mysterious conviction. His eyes focused deeply, as if he were studying the far off, singular, worn vein of a straggling leaf still dangling from a branch. He listened to the murmurs from the branches, hoping they had both overheard and were willing to repeat the observations his predecessor may have whispered in solitude; words hidden beneath abandoned nests; words that now belonged to the ebbless, melancholic lea that surrounded them.

The sentry faced the traveller and smiled meekly. He was grateful that he was not alone. The sentry spoke further. “He allowed those to pass who could pass no farther and, as a consequence, they became the most deceived amongst us; for not only was their continued passage barred, but they could also not return.” For his own benefit, he paused to allow the words to breathe. It was as if he had been suffocating the idea by restricting it to the inside of his head. With the palm of his hand, he wiped the saliva that had unexpectedly gathered beneath his lip and on the thickets of his beard.

Engrossed in their thoughts, both the sentry and the traveller allowed a bird to pass unnoticed.

“And if this were the case, how many more gates were there?” the guard said. “How many gates did one pass, only to be eventually stopped, with only a handful allowed to continue? Were any allowed to continue after that? Is it possible? Is it possible that at some point, no one continued?” While he spoke, he checked his beard for dampness as if some of his bodily functions were working independently of his mind.

“Could it be that a handful found themselves in a yard where they kept each other company, none of them allowed to go further?” the sentry continued. “Did the congregation believe that they had arrived at their destination, the pinnacle of their journey, but were unable to conceive of this as the end?” His speech was speeding up.

Recognizing the impression he made on the sentry, who spoke openly as if they had long been friends, the traveller listened quietly; his face devoid of

emotion and judgement, and offered his custodial fellowship to a soul in wanting; a soul born into a system equipped with obedience and not of understanding. In the spirit of support and connection, he extended his hand briefly to the sentry, offering the sentry stable ground to decide his moral standing.

“Did they, at that moment, regret accepting the invitation?” The sentry continued. “An invitation tendered to what end? At what cost? Who are the most envied? The ones beyond this gate or beyond a further six gates? Seven gates, even! Are they all not deceived?” He involuntarily wiped his beard.

“What is their consolation? They arrive in gowns and expensive dress, having left behind riches and comfort. The town crier, stuck beyond these gates? What good were his words?” the guard said, nearing breathlessness. “He spoke with forked tongue and knew of only misdirection. Did he realize this and lament? Or did the ascension of his career provide the comfort he sought? The banker, still wearing the heavy ink apron, the rubber sleeves extending from just below his elbow to his fingers—seemingly more alchemist than banker, making *gold* out of thin air—did he reflect? In preference, did he lay down the stamp of forbearance? Or of foreclosure? The nine-fingered butcher, scarred and weathered, his apron still bloodied from his daily labour, left only to disseminate the brutality he committed on behalf of others. I think *sh*—” He paused unnaturally at the sound, as if from the breadth of his chest he had truly wished to utter the word *she*. He stared at Dymytriev. “...Most of them are there.”

He could no longer banish the conversation to his head. With Dymytriev’s presence, the sentry was forced to summon the conversation to the very real and sobering plain he shared with the traveller. The sentry had never honestly reflected on his choice, for his choice had resided so long in his head that he had become too accustomed to his version of the events to challenge them.

“We often can’t see beyond a decision that we, ourselves, don’t understand. The future becomes unattainable since we are tethered to the past,” the traveller said.

The sentry was silent for a moment. Then he said, “What if? What if they found happiness in their current yard? Their little circle? Would the sentry, a sentry like me perhaps, using the barrel of a gun, shuffle forward these poor souls whose invitation dictated that they continue?” His words were a challenge. It was almost as if he believed that the invitation was a promise under false pretenses.

“With the invitation, you are asked to take an oath without the benefit of knowing upon which altar you have sworn.”

To Dymytriev, it seemed more like a confession than an unbridling.

“Through the canal of life, we’ve all passed through the first gate. Who amongst us wishes to return to the safety of the womb?” the traveller said. “You could have entered. You could have confirmed your feelings. You did yourself an injustice by ignoring your inclinations. Your inaction has condemned you to lifelong regret.”

“I think that they are all damned,” said the guard. “They don’t even try to escape. Because then they’d have to offer aloud that which they dared only whisper to their hearts during moments of solitude.” He seemed barely able to admit it himself. “If they remain in the field, they can tell themselves anything they wish as there is no one there to challenge it. They are all in the same boat, as they say. And here, to challenge another is no different than challenging oneself. If this were the case, it would be sheer brilliance on the part of the architects, as there would be no real need for additional guards. The only requirement would be the perception of the need. At some point, the invitees themselves become *de facto* assistants to the guards, helping them to curry favour. Some of these assistants would even accept forms of payment from invitees in exchange for preferential treatment, or at least the perception of such.”

He paused briefly, ostensibly to allow the traveller an opportunity to speak.

When the traveller stayed silent, the guard continued, “Because of this, I believe the gates become more heavily guarded as one passes. This would give the perception of the space having value, as each new gate is the most highly guarded gate that they have seen. Thus, they may feel that they have made it to the second-to-last gate. In this, they may find consolation for how far they have travelled: consolation that they have surpassed so many, as witnessed at the gates they have passed where they alone moved on. The invitees travelling the furthest are permitted to enter first so as to shroud one’s own limits. But the reality is that they may not have travelled at all. There may very well be an additional thousand gates before them. Maybe, in some small way, they are permitted to maintain this life, and some of their daily functions are permitted beyond this gate. In reality, the illusion of their life is no different than my own... within or without the gate.”

He looked deeply into Dymytriev’s eyes. “They are protectorates over the illusions that were their lives. Failing to protect that illusion may cause all the

memory and desire one had associated with their life up to that point to shatter into a million pieces if the protectorate's grip were to loosen."

It had never occurred to the Cossack that this protectorate, this lowly guard, may not be a guard at all. He might be merely a pretence, making people believe that not only was there a system, but that that system could become their trusted protectorate.

"You would defend the gate over your beliefs?" the traveller asked.

There was a silence between them.

"You think me rude," Dymytriev stated.

"Hardly. Bold would be a more apt description," the guard smiled. He weighed his next words before speaking. "I could open the door. In the strictest sense, I would not be letting anyone in; thus, I would be honouring my oath. This is especially true since you attach malevolence to the invitation and would never willingly accept it. I would, on the other hand, be letting you out," the sentry said. "And that's not nearly the same. So therefore, it wouldn't necessarily be forbidden. For the invitees on the inside, they cannot leave, and for the uninvited, they cannot enter. But those on the outside are free to leave once they accept it. Then they can leave entirely. In the most meaningful sense of the word."

"There is no good or bad," said Dymytriev. "Only thinking makes it so."

"You speak beyond your years."

"It's preferable to call out to the distance so the guide doesn't neglect the trailing journeyman. The two are rarely in lockstep," Dymytriev said. "Go in my place."

For the first time, Dymytriev seemed resigned in the knowledge that his journey to revolution had been stopped rather than delayed. "We lack a certain pageantry in our movements," he said, staring into the distance beyond the gate. "Can I offer you anything? You seem frozen... tired." He looked into the direction from which he had first approached the gate—the same direction the crowd had appeared from around the bend. "It's entirely possible that the paths are only lined with potential gatekeepers... by those, although trained in a craft other than sentry, become a sentry all the same. By growing weary, they unwittingly become the gatekeepers."

"Keepers of their own demise?" the sentry asked. "Then we are all gatekeepers."

"Yes. I like that," Dymytriev said, his voice carrying an unexpected tone. "There's an element of romance to it."

“How’s that?”

“Unrequited.”

“Loneliness as unreturned?” the sentry said.

“Aloneness,” the traveller said. There was a crispness to the word.

“Reclaiming aloneness.”

“Hmm. Although there is a shred of truth, it baffles logic.”

“I like that youth still values logic,” the sentry said. “I’d think that youth is interested in only the shredding of logic. I’d think youth solely values its loins.”

“You are more vagary than vagrant. I value both, but never at the expense of the other. Before this journey, my colleagues dragged me to a tavern,” Dymytriev said. “I engaged in a single toast whilst they continued in seeming perpetuity, evidently having a great deal more to toast than me. It seemed odd that they invited me at all. It was already late when I refused to join them at the bathhouse. I enjoy the fairness and charm of women. My preference, though, is one for a lifelong of keeping.”

“I can only speak for myself. Although I’ve not perfected logic, it guides me in protecting that which others would shred,” the sentry said.

“Can you speak of what they discuss?”

“Although I have not heard it myself, I’ve been told they discuss, pontificate, laugh, debate a great many of topics...”

“Much as we do... no less,” the traveller said.

“The only difference is from where they make such debates. We do so from the gate while they do so from beyond. And on our behalf,” the sentry said. “My understanding is they discuss the outside.”

“While we discuss the inside,” Dymytriev said. “So we make identical arguments, differing only in perspective.”

“Yes. I suppose so.”

Dymytriev gripped the gate, seemingly to confirm that it remained in place. “Your oath is impossible to keep,” he said, smiling resignedly.

“What use do I have of an oath when that oath is unkept? Let alone one I cannot recall making?” the sentry said. “I am one of the deceived. I, too, am at a party to which I received an invitation—one to which I cannot fully enter. But my invitation is different in that I also cannot leave. Within my invitation, I have been bestowed the authority to process travellers through the gates as I see fit, as warranted by my duty. If anything, it is a writ summoning me to bear witness, to

what or to whom, I know not. Some enter, whilst you alone choose to remain. And I am already ripe with retirement.”

“So it is decided?” Dymytriev said.

“You may be correct.”

A shriek shrilled through the field. Its echo, like the bony and withered fingers of a wraith, rattled against the metallic bars with its lingering touch.

“See! There it is again,” Dymytriev said, pressing himself firmly against the gate. He held his breath and steadied his ear as if he were readying his rifle to be fired. “What could make such a sound?”

The guard turned around with great reluctance and looked beyond the gate. “I see nothing. Not a mouse stirring. Only the top of the hill.”

“But you heard it! Surely, you heard it!” Dymytriev said.

“It could be the wind. Twilight strutting across the stage,” the guard said. “Or instruments of the pit.”

“You’ve grown accustomed to your post. Duty is all you hear,” Dymytriev said, defeated. “It’s gone. And will not answer. It was a cry... a shriek, no less... in desolation...”

“That’s a little dramatic. Although my ears are aged, I would have noticed such a thing.”

“This hill is haunted and it will make ghosts of your remaining dreams” the traveller said. “There are moments when you seem more a keeper *on* the grounds of a gate than a keeper *of*.”

“I am too hard on you,” the sentry said. “I’ve forgotten what it is to be young—to be a revolutionary.”

“Yes, the world is revolving. There are those wishing to shake its axis.”

“We are bound by the same oath but for different reasons,” said the guard.

“Our oath should be to Reason, and no other.”

“There is the oath of the gatekeeper and the oath of the invitee.”

“It would seem that the oath of the invitee is to speak of injustice, and that one should only accept one’s own authority,” the traveller said. “It seems to matter little whether, ultimately, the architects accept an invitation. It only matters that the recipient accepts it. By accepting the invitation, whether one enters or not, you become part of that system through your tacit deference.” A humility traced the edges of Dymytriev’s forgiving smile. “Thus, conscience does make cowards of us all,” he said.

“And what if they came for you, too?” the sentry said.

“What’s that? By force you mean?” the traveller said, somehow reinvigorated.

“I took an oath. And it cannot be undone by the likes of such men.”

“There you go again. What if I were part of such a rabble?”

“Words outlive the stock they were printed on... as do deeds.”

“We should go our separate ways,” the sentry said. “It would spare us from all the dizzying.”

“Yes. My limbs become ever etherized by the minute.”

Although both the sentry and the traveller had, in fact, come to an agreement much earlier, the sentry lurched forward, realizing that he could delay no longer, and opened the gate.

“How will you know the path?” Dymytriev said.

“I shan’t. I need only walk and accept the path laid before me,” the sentry said. “There are some markers, though. The lower-level gates are more easily recognizable as they have numerous doors to gain entrance but only one that allows for entrants to proceed. As one proceeds to the upper-level gates, the entry doors become scarcer.”

“At times, we seem more like performers on a stage,” the traveller said. “Everything is somehow scripted; someone other than ourselves has breathed words into our otherwise pale, lifeless lips, as if it were all make-believe. For although we speak of progress and movement, we rarely move.”

“There are those who accept the system willingly, and there are those, in a state-of-near-unconsciousness, who accept it dreamily,” the sentry said, still standing at the open gate. “And there are those who, not knowing any differently, follow the masses and, even if they are not permitted entrance, wholly accept its jurisdiction...”

“Over their sovereign selves,” the traveller completed. “Love is the most revolutionary of all acts.”

The sentry offered what he likely thought was a smile. But he was far too engrossed in his thoughts for it to have had any affect. “Youth has an innate wisdom,” he said, “much like a fruit picked unripe from a tree, yet somehow still bearing a sweetness; it is a likeness to justice.” He then stepped close to the traveller and, as if he were embarrassed to say it aloud, whispered a long passage in the traveller’s ear. Dymytriev listened attentively.

Stepping back, the sentry now assumed that the gate was now held under Dymytriev's care. The sentry paused before it. His face was marked with forlorn indecisiveness. "We won't be back," he said. He seemed to feel that there was nothing left to say. He stabilized himself on the gate and took a deep breath as if he were subduing vertigo and tracing his future steps.

"We know," Dymytriev answered, watching the sentry disappear behind the gate, the whisper still resonating in his ear.

After a suitable amount of time, the traveller, newly appointed as guard, turned to the gates. "For our sake, I hope you find her," he said. "I care not for fortune, nor riches, nor title when such a system exists—a system of our own making. It will not willingly change. And we, too, were part of its creation."

And with that, he departed from the path, the gate left wide open behind him.

* * *

The sentry's whisper:

The invitation is a formal offer from an unknown source to join an inscrutable system that seemingly doesn't accept everyone, by those who, for their own benefit, wish to distract you from your true invitation. By seeing the two of you, you and her, I think I understand. Though you may be unaware, in some shape or form, we all receive an invitation. For some it is a moment of despair, their first broken heart, death of a loved one, some unexpected kindness, or parenthood that brings them to such a gate where they accept the invitation. The invitation's offer is bound only to your time on this plain. And during that time, through the false pursuit of fortune, we effectively withdraw from an invitation that is our birthright. An invitation that favours not gender, religion, geography, culture, nor army. For the invitation is to civilization. For you, the invitation to revolution, the struggle against an injustice, is what you have accepted. These gates, hierarchies, and secret societies supplant this true invitation with this artificial one and will make relics of our future.

The Garden

For Rachel C

We must cultivate our own Garden.

—Voltaire

Interest in the care of the village's gardens diminished inexplicably over the years. Where once the villagers had considered maintaining the garden and lawn to be honest and noble work, now many allowed weeds to flourish and strangle the wild daffodils, daisies and tulips that freckled their once-bright groves. And even the Prefect took no action on villagers neglecting their gardens. For it was a rare sight to find hoes, sickles, edging irons, pea hooks, spades or a shovel protruding from the soil. It seemed that none were as committed towards such a cultivation other than a particular citizen who had come to be known simply as the Gardener.

As if he had taken an oath, he tirelessly tilled every corner of his land, even neglecting his appearance. In addition to the smell of earth emanating from his skin, his dishevelment was disconcerting, and his ragged clothes—as if out of disdain for him—seemed to stand apart from his body. It wasn't long before his neighbours kept their distance, their children instructed to never venture near the unkempt Gardener. Though he would skim past the villagers' judging eyes, he was aware of their whispers, ridiculing his work, belittling the devoted life that he had chosen.

In spite of being both aware of their misconceptions about him and failing to understand why they neglected their own gardens, he did not go out of his way to engage his neighbours. On the occasion he made eye contact with a passerby, he would pause in his labour and hold his smile until they left. He would say nothing, though he wanted to.

Tired of seeing the Gardener's well-groomed grove, villagers begrudgingly reseeded their fields and mended their trellises. And although the villagers enjoyed this reversal in appearance, many harboured animosity and spite towards the Gardener, as if he were solely responsible for what they deemed as unnecessary labour. Capitalizing on this sentiment, a maintenance service arose and spared villagers of this burdensome labour for a fee. What followed were identical heady, healthy green lawns, devoid of the character and the uniqueness of their owners.

With the rise of the service contract, owners became blessed with something in addition to a return to their former state. And instead of spending this free time with their families, or enjoying walks under parasols, or engaging their neighbours, villagers simply remained in their homes. They filled their time with the distractions offered by the latest craze of wooden box peg puzzles, whose goal was to stack matching marbles in their designated columns by tilting the device while avoiding traps and obstacles within the game. The clacking of the marbles and the clicking of the counter keeping score constantly chirped from the homes of villagers.

For his part, the Gardener took greater pains in cultivating his garden. In fact, there was a point in time when he dug up his entire lawn in an attempt to rid his land of weeds and their roots. For several days, the overturned soil lay scattered haphazardly like ripples of drifted sand on a dune, the drying soil no longer exhibiting the pink, wrinkled worms or the white, grooved grubs from when the soil was first overturned. During this disarray, a moderate rainfall flooded his garden and vineyard, as the uneven ground funnelled the flowing water and washed away what had been years of labour.

Although his garden had been ruined, he realized it could be restored, whereas his relationship with his neighbours and his extension of goodwill towards them was irreplaceable. He remained vigilant in caring for his garden, but he exhibited a greater openness with his neighbours, and the understanding (which he always knew but seldom acted on) that tending one's garden was equally as important as

caring for one's neighbours; that goodness, generosity, and caring for others were vital for the village's existence. "The village is my garden," he said.

At first, many neighbours were skeptical of his newfound openness. Even though they failed to recount a single instance when the Gardener had wronged them, they had nonetheless mistaken his quiet demeanour for pretentiousness, as if his solitude and dedication were manifestations of an attitude of superiority over the simple folk of the village. But for those who had spoken to him both before and after the damage to his garden, they saw the same steadfastness and care, except for an odd warmth in his eyes, a quiet wisdom borne from sadness and forbearance.

Some were suspicious, believing that he was not as steadfast in his labour as he appeared. Some were even convinced that when no one was looking, the Gardener had indeed, at his disposal, a rapid, pre-commissioned maintenance service waiting to react. The hidden workers would spring out from the forest beside his property—ascending the azalea and rhododendron that guarded the entrance to the forest, their clothes somehow miraculously unscathed—and with rake and trowel in hand, furiously turn over the soil, throw tulip bulbs into the earth, and at the approach of a stranger, under the cover of the bushes' thickets, scurry back into the forest's shadows, completely unnoticed.

When neighbours approached him with these accusations, he would smile politely and allow them to speak uninterrupted. "I do not wish for my garden to be kept. I wish for only your own—that your land be well-maintained so you may enjoy the splendour of your garden," he would say. "If you will excuse me, I will be in the company of worms making the soil ripe." Then they would turn around and sniff that he was just a dirty zealot, a crazy person, as they stomped away. Although his isolation weighed heavily upon his heart, he accepted this, despite never quite growing accustomed to it.

Despite some villagers' suspicions, there were yet others who were inspired by the steadfastness of the tireless Gardener, those who mimicked his garden, those who skirted the ankles of birch with rings of white daisies and chrysanthemums, and those who planted modest vineyards draped atop wooden trellises in orderly rows. They planted queues of tulips, the finest tulips whose petal tips shimmered in the sun like gleaming stained glass. Within the first few weeks their gardens reaped the rewards of their labour, as their gardens were lush and beautiful, a bounty full of inspiration and vision.

But the Gardener came to see that their labour seemed unsustainable, as (outside of the Gardener) this steadfastness to one's garden appeared to be based more on guilt than commitment. This observation was shared equally by the various maintenance firms who, already enjoying a thriving business, introduced the Indulgence contract. Indulgences showed little difference from a regular service contract except that they effectively forgave the custodians who purchased them, not only of their past neglect of their gardens, but also acquitted them of any future guilt during the term of the contract.

However, it was, in general, gardening itself with which this responsibility to cultivate in perpetuity was synonymous—the notion that one had to both accept the current state of their garden while striving to improve it. Since no villager was in a position to relentlessly chronicle his actions day and night (quill ready in hand like a court stenographer), no one could account for the steadfastness of his struggle. The Gardener himself was the only one who could know that, and be both the only accuser and defendant capable of presiding over the judgment of his effort. Yet the reason his work was rather incomplete was something entirely different. Because he alone knew, in fact, both how very little his devotion required of him and the honesty of his work, yet he could not completely accept this prejudice towards him and the resulting solitude. So perhaps it was not the filth of gardening alone that made people avoid his garden during their travels so as to not have to look at him, but rather the mirror his conviction offered that they were unwilling to face.

It was the lingering question of his sanity and the sentiment of ill-will towards the Gardener by some villagers that the Prefect took full advantage to pressure the village council to schedule a hearing on the appropriation of the Gardener's spacious land, an appropriation the Prefect had long schemed. The Prefect had contracted a Developer who specialized in building village squares and communal gardens, a project which, unbeknownst to the villagers and the Developer, would individually profit the Prefect greatly. To garner support, he had promised the agitators the placement of the Garden Square atop the Gardener's centrally located land, to force the Gardener and his way of life to the outskirts of the village where his garden would be of little influence. For some businessmen, the Prefect promised exclusive vendor licences within the square, without the worry of competitors winning a licence when the contracts would normally be tendered publicly. The

Prefect would bypass this open and fair process for the businessmen's loyalty, in exchange for profit.

However, when the Prefect filed a land appropriation request, the council flatly refused any motion for a hearing on the Gardener's land. For forty days, they refused to listen to any motions of land appropriations or to repeal his land title. The council viewed the Gardener as harmless, despite his appearance, and thought he was free to do with his land as he wished. They considered the task of persuading or seizing the Gardener's land on behalf of the Prefect as outside their authority.

Accustomed to getting his way and presiding over four other villages in the district, the Prefect stood to lose much profit and credibility. It wasn't until some villagers, influenced by the Prefect, questioned the Gardener's mental state as a threat to others that the council finally agreed to a meeting. From the meeting, the council announced a hearing to take place within twenty-six days. For his part, the Gardener obliged and was unaffected, his work continuing as it always had, despite this looming discussion over the future of his property. However, some villagers were ecstatic. Under the guise of progress and modernization, and in the context of the council hearing, they collectively imagined the very real prospect of finally unhusking themselves from gardening and the burdensome and unreasonable expectation they felt was placed upon them by the Gardener and those he inspired. With the Gardener's land appropriated, he would be relocated to the outskirts of the village where he, like his way of life, would be forgotten.

For two weeks, the Prefect, more agitated than patient, was unable to comprehend why the Gardener had yet to contact him, why he was not grovelling at his feet to save his precious garden, or acting erratically in earshot of his neighbours when raving about his grievance with a council hearing. He waited for the Gardener to contact him. The Prefect believed that with the long-awaited council hearing finally being announced, the Gardener would succumb to the inevitability of the mounting pressure and forego the hearing by resolving the issue beforehand and thus save himself the ignominy that would follow. But the Gardener tended his garden as he always had, seemingly without a care in the world.

With two weeks left before the hearing, the Prefect dispatched his representatives (the main agitators) to resolve the issue outside of the council walls, hoping to manage the possibility of the Gardener refusing his offer in front of both the council and his fellow villagers. During the first of the two weeks, they had visited

the Gardener daily, offering him more money on each succeeding day, despite the Gardener's forthright answer on their initial visit: "You speak as if famine strangles my throat. Not all of us are motivated by money."

During the last week, they became more belligerent, their behaviour suggesting violence. The Gardener just shrugged. "Once uttered, a threat loses all credibility. It becomes meaningless. In threatening me, it is not fear that you instil in either me or in others through me; instead, all that you've accomplished is awakening those unwilling to live under the yoke of lawlessness," the Gardener professed calmly and firmly.

On the day of the hearing, the large wooden doors of the village's hall, a hall that was both the council chamber and a courthouse, opened. Two villagers handed leaflets to the enthusiastic audience who entered and soon filled the chamber. Once inside, villagers filed patiently up the stairwell on the left towards the mezzanine and the bell tower. On the main floor, the rows of wooden benches could not accommodate all the villagers, overflowing into the aisles and almost into the ankles of those who, unable to take a seat, lined the walls of the chamber. From the mezzanine overlooking the main floor, countless arms draped over the wooden rails, and from wherever a vantage point permitted, villagers lined the creaking stairs leading up alongside the masonry walls to the bell tower.

As the Gardener walked towards the table, silence overtook the chatter in waves, each ebb pulling upon the conversation until, row by row, all the words were washed away. From the mezzanine, pressed on by the tiptoeing villagers wishing to see past the first rows of spectators and get a glimpse of the Gardener, shoe soles squeaked over on the polished tongue-and-groove pine floor.

A bailiff, normally unnecessary during council hearings, but who was asked to be present due to the extraordinary attendance, gently ushered the Gardener towards the front of the chamber, where, when the court was normally in session, the two rectangular tables would be reserved for the accused and the prosecutor, respectively. The bailiff motioned to an empty table and removed the chamber's lone spare chair from the witness stand. He bowed apologetically to the Gardener for having delayed his comfort. The Gardener sat down, extending his arms across the table and arching his back to stretch his spine as if he had awoken from a long slumber. For many, the Gardener was a faceless entity, an outsider easily ridiculed for his efforts. But now, seeing him in person, the villagers seemed unsure of their opinion.

He surveyed the chamber, a chamber full of faces that overflowed with anticipation, curiosity and empathy, and some that were indifferent; a chamber that hung onto his every glance, awaiting his words; a chamber that was full of hope for his success. Momentarily overcome with emotion, the Gardener lowered his head and stared at his hands. Still seeing the faces in the chamber in his mind, he studied the dirt that he couldn't quite scrub off from under his fingernails—as if the faces and the dirt were indissolubly associated.

Sitting at the adjacent table, the Prefect stared directly at the Gardener, his eyes frozen in an authoritarian gaze, while his two well-dressed colleagues busily organized documents in an overly officious manner.

The Gardener felt a great weight pressing down upon him. He was getting older, his body breaking down. Why did they want to take away his gardening, when his end would come soon enough? Why did the villagers, who from afar pretended to despise him, now look upon him with such hope as if he were a condemned man (whose fate were all but a foregone conclusion)? As if he would inexplicably raise his head from the imaginary guillotine, the ropes holding him down fraying from his will, sending the blood-soaked basket and the contraption crashing to the ground, due to his limitless strength? At that moment, in some indescribable way, he realized he had surpassed gardening and had quietly tilled something in the hearts of the villagers.

At the front of the hall, the council of five sat at connecting tables that resembled a crescent moon. Through the tall glass windows, the sunlight sharpened the gleaming edges of the tables. Like scythes marking the boundaries of the harvest, sat the two tables accommodating the Gardener, and the Prefect and his rabble.

Sitting in the middle of the council of five, the chief councillor smiled benevolently as if to both welcome and subdue the audience, before directly facing the Gardener. “Thank you for attending this council hearing for which you owed no duty to attend. Further, I would take this opportunity to repeat that this council lacks both the legal justification and the will to force the sale of your land. Your land is yours and yours alone. The hearing is merely the tabling of an offer for your land with the full transparency afforded under the law. This council and this chamber are witnesses to your discussion,” he said, outstretching his arms as if he were inviting heaven. “Normally, it would be a private matter between you and the Prefect, no different from the negotiation of a contract; however, there seems

to be some agitation over this matter.” He leaned forward. “Consider this house your own, and may it offer you protection today. And perhaps us all.”

Regardless of which disposition the crowd held towards the Gardener, all in attendance nodded in unison. The majority turned to face their neighbours to share in their delight in the benevolence, grace and wisdom brought forth by the chief councillor.

Agitated by the chief councillor’s opening address and unable to repress his impatience any longer, the Prefect abruptly thanked his fellow villagers, as well as the council, for attending, even though he avoided eye contact with the chief councillor. After each sentence, in a manner both peculiar and dramatic, the Prefect, as if he were a wooden doll, would pause and swivel his upper torso to confirm the mood of the audience.

His contrived smile lined his face as he spoke with a honeyed tongue. With nostalgic ambiguity, he described the clear blue skies that mothered the village’s establishment. “We have a duty to protect the citizens of this village, even if from itself. Is it not by how we treat the ill, with forbearance and kindness, that we will be judged?” he said. “We must protect the Gardener from himself and by doing so fulfil the village’s birthright of progress and modernity.”

Throughout his speech, his statements were met with applause from the same twelve villagers spread throughout the chamber, who sometimes even applauded before he had completed his words. At each ovation, when he was forced to wait a moment to speak again, his face became locked in emotional indefiniteness. His words were neutral, but when he smiled, his lips curled and trembled from holding in the cruelty he bore in his heart.

When the final applause for the Prefect ended, the Gardener stood up and warmly welcomed the audience, and thanked both the council and the Prefect. Then he turned and faced the Prefect.

“You assign appropriation as progress, as if they went hand in hand, as if this were the only solution. You speak as if I were your captive. What dominion do you hold over free men? Where I cultivate the garden, you cultivate consent within the village, consent which was not given freely, but instead was dug and raked and manipulated with the spade of conformity and judgment. Why is it you covet my land so? It is not for the preservation of my garden. You would till beyond its roots and lay down layer upon layer of mortar, making death and birth bedfellows of my garden,” he said, standing up. “Now if you’ll excuse me. I must

tend to my garden.” He tucked in his chair and then paused, smiling gently. His eyes swept across the chamber. “You would be mistaken if you viewed this hearing as a failure. In fact, you’ve accomplished a great deal. I can think of no other that has filled these halls. Build your square outside these walls; you can count on my hands. After all, the village is my garden.”

* * *

Leading up to the hearing, the villager’s opinions were heavily in favour of the Prefect. Although some thought the construction to be wasteful of the communal funds and a heavy financial burden on the village, the criticism was muted when the majority framed the Garden Square as a symbol of community, a narrative the minority had felt obliged to accept. But after the hearing, great attention was paid to the character of the Prefect, for the Gardener, a long-time citizen of the village, long viewed as eccentric, had acquitted himself well. The Prefect, who once led the majority, had little popular support. For beyond a dozen loyal supporters who followed him as they viewed the Gardener’s diligence as a poor reflection on their own neglected gardens, the Prefect was now only supported by a dwindling rabble of easily malleable citizens who were likely coerced into their view and could just as easily accept the alternate. Citizens who previously rushed to shake hands with the Prefect at his every appearance, now nodded a greeting for civility’s sake, while watching him with great scrutiny.

With each passing day, the prejudice against the Gardener seemed to wash away. He benefitted greatly from his presence and his words at the council hearing. More and more villagers visited the Gardener, some even altering their paths to get a glimpse of him, waving hello as they passed by. Some villagers paused for longer conversations, their children playing at their legs and running throughout his garden. During these moments, the Gardener did not mind that the children played in his garden and that occasionally, their games would result in trampled daffodils or especially worn sections of grass. Although the Gardener never complained nor gave the perception of annoyance with the children’s playful trespass, the parents nevertheless chastised their children. It was not out of a mutual agreement to protect their lawns borne from the concept of reciprocity, a seminal social contract, but out of the pervading fear of being judged as parents who could not control their unruly children. And although a greater majority had accepted the

Gardener, this type of disciplining by the parents, seemingly for the benefit of the Gardener, confirmed how he remained misunderstood and that they were yet, unduly, under the yoke of conformity.

The Prefect, facing the failure of his project, became more aggressive in cultivating support. There was a mounting pressure placed upon him by the developer to provide a start date for the project. After three months of the Prefect relentlessly badgering the council, largely due to the efforts of the main agitators (who insinuated that the Gardener's seeds would spread to their own lawns), a second meeting was called during the chief council's absence. Although it was merely a council hearing and not a judiciary meeting, the Gardener's refusal to leave his garden for the purpose of attending this second hearing was deemed unacceptable by his neighbours. As a result, the Gardener was effectively convicted *in absentia*.

Without the Gardener's calming disposition to counter the Prefect's words, the Prefect easily stirred up supporters and formed a mob, many of whom were swept up by the emotional contagion of power disguised as justice. And although the council had no legal standing whatsoever, the voices of the elected were trampled by the masses who, having repeatedly attempted to rule over the Gardener, inevitably germinated a seemingly insatiable appetite for absolute authority.

So on the day the developer was to visit the village to obtain his final answer from the Prefect, the crowd stormed out of the hall, intent on lawlessly intimidating the lowly Gardener—their violence quickly escalating towards a judgment that the Gardener was unable to escape.

* * *

At his garden, badly injured by the on-looking mob, the Gardener lay listless at the feet of the developer, who had only just arrived in the village to receive his answer from the Prefect when he had decided to investigate the source of the village's commotion. The developer removed the kerchief from his breast pocket, shook it with forceful elegance, and placed it on the ground beneath his bended knee. The Gardener reached up with his soiled hands, dirt embedded under his fingernails, and motioned for the Developer to come closer. Understanding how they had both been deceived by the Prefect and recognizing the Gardener's grave state, the

Developer obliged and removed his black top hat, placing it on the ground facing up. He brought his ear towards the Gardener's dry, cracked lips.

The Gardener's breath was feeble and laboured. "It matters little that there may not be a garden, or that mine may wither away," he whispered. "It only matters that I believe. By cultivating my garden in this life, I'll have little work to do in the next. I may be wrong in my assumption, as there may very well be no hereafter. But it is of little consequence, as I will be dead. And whatever grievances I may have had, like my body, will be food for the worms and the garden that I loved so. And nothing more." The Gardener coughed violently. "All I wanted was for you to have appreciated the beauty of your garden."

As if he were bowing, the Developer nodded slightly. "But we do. During my travels, I have seen towns, those that have rivalled but never achieved this beauty, the village's gardens merely tendrils from your own," he said, spreading his arms wide. "Though I would have enjoyed working alongside you, now seeing your garden in its entirety, I have little to offer."

The Gardener turned his head slightly to his right, straining to look into the twilight's expanse, seeping through the grey and darkling branches of the forest. He let his eyes trail over the forest's foliage, where the golden twilight glowed warmly as if a candle's flame flickered behind. "I was wrong to have dug up all the weeds at the expense of my land. It wasn't until that first weed speared through the green plain that I understood," he said. "The weeds are every bit part of the garden as the grass, the tulips and the gladiolas. All serving a purpose."

The Developer removed his black leather gloves and held the Gardener's earth-worn hands. "What purpose?"

"Although I wish not for weeds to strangle my daffodils, weeds serve a purpose, for at any moment, they rise to cover the empty space to protect the earth and to allow the soil to replenish." He looked into the Developer's eyes. "The greater danger resides in the apathy that would plant itself in the emptiness, a prospect far more insidious," he continued. "Yet, here you are. Cold as the cement you have all but poured onto my grave, endeavouring to create a garden atop one that already exists." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Forgive me this trespass upon your kindness. There are weeds in every garden. Perhaps none as stubborn as the one that chokes my heart." He swallowed deeply.

Growing tired, the Gardener kept his head still and stared into the darkening sky. Mysteriously, the smell of freshly baked bread lingered around his nostrils.

Although it hurt when he swallowed, from deep within his throat, as if a morsel were lodged, he could taste bread, its warm fluffy insides soaking on his tongue's gathering saliva. From a branch overhead, a solitary red-breasted robin perched watchfully, like a protector guarding over the dying Gardener.

"Cultivate only that which brings grace and beauty unto the world," he said, fighting against his closing eyelids. "Evil cannot succeed. Although evil is seemingly strong, it only flourishes in the darkness because at its heart, evil is a form of cowardice, as is the unwillingness to confront it." He had a coughing fit, his body jerking in its wake. "Ridding one's garden of weeds is impossible. There is one simple truth." With his eyes fully locked with the Developer's, he spoke deliberately, and mustering his remaining strength, he clenched the Developer's hand with final conviction. "This life is meaningless. It is only a test for the next. The goal of this life is to struggle against evil. Nothing more."

And he died.

The Developer gently lowered the Gardener's head to the ground and crossed the dead man's arms against his chest. He stood up and shook the bits of earth from his kerchief. Though he lacked the prefectural authority, he raised his hand against the murmuring crowd, demanding a moment of silence. He stared at the Gardener as if he had never seen a being in such a deep and peaceful sleep.

* * *

Seven years later. After the trials.

The water fountain hums softly. The water pours from its lip into the basin, swallowing the nearby chatter of villagers into its soft, bubbling undertow. With sporadically waving wings, a robin descends onto the upper bowl of the fountain, its claws tapping the glossy rim. It tiptoes counter-clockwise, retreating from a nearby villager. The displaced water exhales an invisible breath upon the robin's brown breast; a single wisp of feather flaps. The fountain, like two grey hands open in prayer, catches the sun and like a spindle, spins the shimmering light into thin threads embedded into the coiled, translucent ropes shooting from the nozzles. A groundskeeper shoos the robin away.

A child, wise well beyond her years, runs her fingers along the willowy tips of a gladiola, a petal tip tickling the secret skin just underneath her soiled fingernail.

“Careful, Rachel. There is a groundskeeper nearby,” the mother says. “He’ll shoo you away. At your feet is a weed if you like. You can pull up any weed you wish.”

She pulls up a single weed (its hearty stalk remaining stiff), which seems unaffected by being removed from the earth. Like gentry, the weed stands upright, firm, and proud; its ruffled, white-collared trim like a peony against the purple-petalled cape. “I don’t understand why it is any less beautiful. I wouldn’t have thought twice if I had found it on the flowerbed among the tulips.” She reaches down and snaps a dandelion, holding it near her lips. “And this, it’s a cotton flame of dreams! Blow at its wick, and watch the seedlings fly. They’re billowing wishes, riding the wind, sprouting in the air. Our breath its soil and water.” She digs out the remaining stem from the concrete with her sandalled heel. “Do you harm the air? The worms? What say you?” she asks the weed.

The mother smiles. “I never thought of it that way.”

On her knees, Rachel pushes loose soil away from a budding weed, and as if it could not have been unearthed any other way, she finds a small, hidden inscription at the base of the fountain. “Mother, is this where it happened? What did his garden look like? Was it full of purple orchids? I so wish to have seen it.”

The mother reaches for the dandelion in Rachel’s hand and drops her head to study its hollow milky stem. She lifts her head up and looks at her child, squinting from the sun appearing just above her head. “If you wish to experience his garden...” she says, smiling, “you need only to walk through your own.” She hands the dandelion back. “What was the inscription?”

“If you wish to know the inscription...” Rachel says precociously, barely able to keep a straight face. “You need only read it yourself.”

*THE VILLAGE WAS MY GARDEN
MERCY, GRACE, FORGIVENESS
AND BENEVOLENCE WERE MY FRUIT
THE SEEDS OF MY WORK WERE BUT A SINGLE HARVEST
IN THE SEASON OF THE INFINITE*

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¶ Let the revolution begin!

K., an anti-war advocate, studied English, Religion and Philosophy at University of Toronto and has written fiction for years, publishing several stories in literary magazines. *Resistance, Revolution and Other Short Stories* is K.’s first book. K. lives in Malton, Ontario, Canada, with their spouse, five children, an American Wirehair cat and a Quaker parrot.

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