

The Tuck

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Abstract

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“There is no place for fear in this new world of ours, Mr. Peck. It can only hurt you, be used against you. I’m sure you see this; understand it better than I do. The question is: are you ready to feel better? To be free to be the man you were meant to be?”

What would it mean to live a life free of fear? In *The Tuck*, we are introduced to Peck, a man who imagines himself able to effect such an escape by means of the titular surgical procedure. At once a chilling vision of a dystopian near-future and the perils of technological promise, *The Tuck* is also the story of a triangulated love affair and the conflict and complication it provokes. Through alternating points of view, we are offered a shifting perspective on the nature of friendship, romantic attachment, and the bonds of familial duty, exploring the inherent limits of love and the ways that we inevitably fail each other. It is a novel about the endless compromises and negotiations of which every life is comprised, the stories we tell to ourselves

and others, and the hope inherent in our imperfect efforts to come to know a love that may redeem us, may free us from this fearful state.

Introduction

We are afraid. We are afraid of the future and for the future; of what it may bring and what it will leave in its wake. Once, in times past, we had the luxury of believing ourselves the architects of what was to be, the builders of the bridge between the present and that which came next, and yet, now we feel ourselves afflicted by a burgeoning shift in the locus of control, an inevitability to a course of events that seem to uncoil and stretch before us toward a dimly perceived yet menacing horizon.

I am afraid that we were never the drivers of our destiny at all, that we cling to the long-indulged illusion of a control that never was, a blank tablet held proudly aloft and presented to the empty air, evidence of our distinction among the beasts, of our special place beneath this kingdom of shadow and dust.

You are afraid because one day you will die, and the inevitability of this event and the burden of its foreknowledge is the ultimate insult to control, a glimpse of the impermanence of all things, a synecdoche of the worlds end. It makes a mockery of all enterprise and ambition, of life itself, and it is what we mean when we refer to “the human condition”.

We are afraid of our power, because while we have no control, we have strength, and strength without control is a terrible weakness. We can see that it is from this peculiar state that the furious whimper of our surrender must someday issue.

We are all of us afraid, but still we go on, even though we cannot. We go on and we create, bringing into this world life in its various forms. We go on because it goes on and to deny the imperative of this command, this unseen current that carries us, is both impossible and also the path to despair. We go on and we write; we paint and we sing and we dance, and we make love, and in this way we honor our fear and give praise to that which allows us to do so. We go on because it is our duty, to ourselves and all other selves and everything that came before and that which will come in our aftertime.

I write because if I don't I will find myself paralyzed in the presence of my fear. Some of this fear is specific, and some inchoate, but I have found that the act of writing is a uniquely effective inoculation against the various strains of dread that will otherwise find me in a state that is not quite alive. I write from the fear and to the fear, and it is through this ritual address, this recursive prayer, that I am granted the grace to go on, that I afford myself the space to live and to love.

My thesis concerns itself in part with this eternal human negotiation, and the perhaps misguided desire to be free of it. What would it mean to be free of fear, to gain control over this most primal dictate, this emotion designed to keep us alive that now often seems merely a prickly impediment to the joy many of us take to be a right of birth, an essential and natural state of being? If such a thing were possible, what might it make of us? Would such an engineered mutation represent human evolution or beget a monster? Are these two possible outcomes mutually exclusive or merely a false dichotomy, born of sentimentality and the fear of inevitable change that the future represents?

The story I am writing is set in the future, where a procedure as I have imagined seems within the realm of possibility. It is a near future, however, and so, in many ways, it is much like the world we find ourselves living in now, only perhaps more so, the latent features now brought forth and more explicitly revealed, as Martin Heidegger would have it. As such, the story could be classified as dystopian Science-Fiction, that broad genre that seems ubiquitous now, lending itself as well as it does to the exploration of our various and collective fears of and for the future. Certainly, I have endeavored to build a landscape composed of and cobbled together from my various future-related anxieties and terrors, and in this way, “The Tuck” might be viewed as repository for my fears that is essentially constructed of these same fears, the tail of the worm tucked ever-neatly in its own teeth.

Although I have made an effort to not consciously mimic the voice of other writers, or directly borrow fundamental elements of their stories, it would be laughably unrealistic and arrogant of me to suggest that “The Tuck” is not an unconscious amalgamation of a broad array of antecedent works, a motley quilt assembled from pinched patches of admired voices. Of course, any and all failures are mine alone, and the process of writing a (partial) novel that necessitates the creation of a largely alternate universe has humbled me and given me deep respect for those that succeed so well at hiding the seams of their constructions. There is simply so much to convey to the reader, and as essential as the included exposition is, equally critical is the elision of information: the details left out because they are extraneous or can be referred to elsewhere more obliquely or effectively, or that which is not mentioned so as to preserve mystery or allow speculative engagement on the part of the reader.

It is difficult to resist a return to the procreative metaphor when describing the process of writing any piece of substance or length, and perhaps more apt than childbirth is the image of the

not-so-perfectly assembled monster brought unnaturally to life, presented to the world in the hope that it may pass as “real”. Presumably, this is to some degree true of all writing, but in the case of dystopian fiction, it would seem to be especially applicable, the conjuring up of the “monstrous world” adding further resonance to the evocation of the monster of Frankenstein.

If Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* offers an illustration of the hope inherent in the act of creation, albeit one complicated by the “incompleteness” of the resultant monster, it is also an effective rendering of the technological horror that underpins much dystopian fiction, including my own effort. Like the protagonist of “The Tuck”, Dr. Frankenstein is motivated by a fear of death, but it is his hubris, his insistence upon his ability to control this fear through the unnatural means of forbidden knowledge that provides the horror of the story, and its ultimate tragedy. Itself a reworking of the “Genesis” of the old testament, Frankenstein imagines himself able to return to the Eden of eternal life by stealing of its forbidden fruit. But the terrain of the dystopian fiction is a postlapsarian one; we have fallen and there can be no return because there is no longer anywhere to return to. The reader cannot help but be aware of this and know intuitively that any effort to sneak back to the empty garden can only result in heartbreak and horrific consequence. It is an understanding that gains its resonance in the reflected recognition of our own unnatural desires, the dim knowledge that they can never be fulfilled. We are forever forbidden the Tree of Life, our mortal condition irremediable, but we seem incapable of fully accepting this fact, programmed, it seems, to endlessly reenact the play that is our defiance of God’s law and the resultant expulsion from His garden, chastised for our greed. This stubborn refusal born of fear is both the seed of dystopia, and the impetus of the secondary tragedy that serves as its plot.

Given that that most dystopian fiction concerns itself with apocalyptic and/or existential themes, it is little surprise that it is a genre that is popularly employed in order to explore the anxieties born of a recognition of one's mortality. In solipsistic and experiential terms, the end of one's life is the end of the world, so it is difficult to imagine that a preoccupation with the elements of a dystopian story don't represent a certain literal conflation of the two. Such a dynamic is nowhere more evident than in YA fiction, where the inevitable creeping realization of "the way of all flesh" produces daily a new readership hungry for its allegorical exploration. At the same time, it is inarguable that the current conditions of this world have set the stage for more literal representation of a post-apocalyptic landscape. We have always wanted to know how the story might end, but we see now as never before the precariousness of our perch at the edge of the abyss, how little the distance before the final fall. It no longer feels like a story for kids.

While the fear of death may be an underlying engine of the dystopian story, its lesser surrogates also play a role. In my case, it is in perceiving a world that makes less sense to me by the day, and the attendant feeling that I am hurtling rather swiftly into disconnection and obsolescence, those precursors to the final alienation. The writing then, and specifically the creation of a dystopian alternate reality, this place that seems real, represents an effort at restoring the illusion of control and coherence of experience. The reality conjured by the story may be grim and fatalistic, but at least it is mine, and because it is mine it, it offers me a sense of meaning, of control.

The rendering of a coherent world also provides a surprising degree of transitive effect; the real world seeming somehow less alien and hostile when captured and transformed through

the creative lens. It is, all of it, become story and so more readily borne. There is both the comfort of remove and the intimacy of engagement within it, and it is there that I may live.

In writing to make sense of the world, there can be seen a recapitulation of the effort of science to reduce the world to quantifiable measure, to order the chaos and so feel somehow in control of its incomprehensible multiplicity. It is a natural and perhaps inescapable human impulse, but it may be that it is nonetheless misguided and impossible. We are all of us tasked with making some sense of our own brief lives, of fending off the sense of pointlessness that afflicts those possessed with a foreknowledge of their mortality, and, to this end, we cannot help but seek to assemble a world of our own, or at least an image of this world, that allows for us to imbue it with significance. For some, this refracted image takes the form of a universe presided over by a sentient overseer, an omniscient being whose divine and sensible hand can be seen in all that exists. Certainly, such a perspective has been characteristic of humanity at least since we put painted hand to cave wall and, whether perceived as a singular being or a pantheon of sky-dwelling immortal creatures, there is a notable commonality to such a rendering of that which we cannot see yet exerts control over us and everything else.

“If God did not exist, it should be necessary to invent him,” observed Voltaire, and such invention is on full display in the supplanting ideology of the scientific model. While it has yet to be actually realized, the promise of eternal life, once the domain of certain religions, is now part of the dubious clarion call of technology. Such an offer must always be exclusive, of course, and I think we are currently in the process of witnessing one snake oil salesman discredit another, all the while extolling the virtues of his own future concoction. The plot of “The Tuck”

concerns just this sort of techno-hustle, and the difficulty in rejecting such an irresistibly enticing but altogether unrealizable proposition.

What is the ultimate goal of technology? What is it we hope to build? It may be that the answering of these questions is impossible, that to endeavor to do so presumes a prescience and perception that is simply not available to the human mind. Perhaps there can be no knowing until we get there, until we've done it, this thing, and can finally step back and see what shape it has taken, the culmination of all our collective efforts. Is it possible for us to even imagine arriving at such a point, some sort of terminus? And do we possess the humility to accept such a limit to our powers of perception, of imagination?

It is the objective and function of speculative fiction to render such an unknowable future extant, to produce a world that, while markedly different from our own, still feels credible to the reader. In doing so, it is essential that the conjured reality contain contemporary analogues, features that are familiar enough to fix the story to the realm of possibility and so allow the fantastic elements to seem believable outgrowths of what already is.

While writing my own piece of speculative fiction, it quickly became evident that such a feat relies largely on a sort of *trompe l'oeil*, an almost continuous effort to draw the reader's attention to one feature of the depicted landscape so they may comfortably ignore that which remains vague or undefined. Some of this is intrinsic to the challenge of all fictional writing; what we elect to reveal or explicitly state necessarily forms the text, but, in endeavoring to create a world outside of the one in which we currently find ourselves, the challenge of selective presentation becomes more acute and difficult. For a story rooted in present day reality, it is possible to allow much of the environmental and situational context to remain unstated, the reader relied upon to furnish the details from his/her own perception of the world. Such

assumption is more problematic in the case of speculative fiction, depending as it does on the specificity that comprises its difference to the now, its very reason for existing. The writer must answer the questions begged by implication, while still mindful of over-exposition and its likely consequence of making the reader feel bored or patronized. In the case of “The Tuck,” I found that every deviation from present reality that I imagined necessitated a reconciling of multiple threads of suggestion, making me both appreciative of the artistry required to build a credible alternate world, and attentive to the ways in which every writer, no matter their ability, will always fall short.

In her novel, *The Children of Men*, P.D. James offers us a future in which procreation is no longer possible owing to the sudden infertility of the male of the species. It is an excellent conceit and one that James explores with an exceptional degree of literary skill and intellectual rigor, the world she depicts seeming realistic and credible. Writing in 1992, however, it seems unlikely that James could have been unaware of the emergent technology of cloning, a reality, that if acknowledged could not help but have considerable implications for her world of 2021. It would seem that James, aware that such a recognition might jeopardize the central theme of her book, elected instead to ignore it and allow her propulsive and engrossing prose to gloss over the elision. The considerable success of the book and subsequent movie would suggest that she was correct in her gambit, but I would be surprised if the necessity of it didn't continue nag at her to some degree. As writers (and humans) we crave the fecundity to bring something beyond reproach into this world, but the seams of our creations are always visible upon close inspection, the artifice of our work always shy of godly perfection. In world building, there is simply too much required of the writer to get it all right. Sometimes, the best we can do is keep the story going and hope no one notices the gaps.

The main character of “The Tuck” is possessed of a somewhat outsized fear of death that largely inspires the procedure from which the story takes its name, but it my intention to suggest that the recognition of such fear is an essential part of everyone’s life journey. It is through the character of Mikaela that I introduce the idea of the perversity inherent in avoiding the idea of one’s own mortality, whether through religion, drugs or scientific hucksterism. It is her belief, and mine, that it is exactly this universal fear, unencumbered by false promise, that affords us what is perhaps the most significant human connection possible. When people attempt to deny their mortality, this intimate connection born of the shared recognition of life’s essential brevity is no longer possible. If it is true that we have to die in order for life to mean something, then a life believed to be eternal is essentially meaningless.

It is only fairly recently that we have been confronted with a sense of the diminishing returns inherent to the application of reason, and to the limits seeming to afflict scientific progress. While technology certainly does not lack for cheerleaders, there is a blossoming feeling among us that we have arrived and then moved past a critical juncture, a point at which the advancements of technology no longer seem to serve the interests of humankind, but are instead beholden to something beyond us, something sinister and as yet unformed. It seems we have been seduced, once again, by a paradigm that would have us persist in the delusion that there is nothing out of reach: that all is decipherable and remediable, that we may still, all, live forever. And yet what do have as an alternate repository for our hopes and aspirations? What path remains to us that will quell our fears and allow us to believe in the possibility of a better, brighter future? Where do we go from here?

There exists to every piece of speculative fiction a cautionary note. Whether optimistic in tone or representing the increasingly popular dystopian variety, the fabrication of an alternate world necessarily contains in it the seeds from which sprouted its deviation from the world we live in now. In the case of my own piece, it is largely my concern that we are becoming irrevocably estranged from one another that forms the basis of my appeal. Somehow, we have reached a point where we can indulge the illusion of functional independence, that we no longer need each other.

As Jean Paul Sartre observed, “Hell is other people,” and it would seem that, for all of our vaunted digitally-effected connectedness, we have never been more able or inclined to separate ourselves from the needs and perceived impositions of those that are not us. We are living in a time of unprecedented social and political polarization, a time when hostile rhetoric has reached a fever pitch and the hope for the empathy required to bridge this widening gulf between us seems increasingly dim. At the same time, the predatory imperatives of late-stage capitalism, now seemingly untethered from ethical restraint, have further exacerbated this attitude of distrust, creating the conditions for a Hobbesian state of interpersonal combat that operates in the guise of mere survival.

The three primary characters of “The Tuck” are, to varying degrees, suffering from the further effects of the estrangement we see at play in our current era, with each of them reaching out in somewhat clumsy but genuine desire to bridge the void they feel surrounded by. The central protagonist, Peck, is notable for his radical effort to free himself from a fear that he feels hobbled by, but they are all circumscribed in their actions by fear in its various iterations, each of them simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the two other points in their particular triangle. It is through the dynamic of this three-way relationship that I am endeavoring to explore the

condition in which we currently find ourselves and, perhaps because am not optimistic about our chances in the real world, I find myself wanting to afford my characters something of a happy ending, albeit one mitigated by their immutable circumstances. I hope that I may find the discipline to resist such a sentimental impulse, laboring instead to spare them their worst possible fates in a way that feels credible and earned.

Like all apes, humans are social beings, and our ability to thrive for as long as we have is almost entirely attributable to our ability to work together, to place a premium value on the well being of our community. But we are also clannish by design; we have not been engineered to adapt to the dispersed and vague sense of belonging that is characteristic of emergent globalism. What we seem to be left with is the ability to curate our own reality, a lonely game of identity politics that disallows the interplay among individuals that is essential to the formation of a collective identity, to the sense that we are all in this together.

It's as though we have become Frankenstein and his monster, both: each of us a creature cobbled together from disparate parts and also the person responsible for the abomination. We feel the agony of dispossession, of not belonging, and also this irresistible impulse to see what, in our power, we might still create. There remains in us the hope of being accepted by others, of inclusion, but we are somehow perversely disinclined to extend to others this gift. So we find ourselves locked in this stalemate of estrangement, our universe ever-expanding, unable to risk the trust required to bring us all back to where we need to be: back in orbit around each other.

If the reconstructed community of the future is to find its foundation in a mutual acknowledgment of our fear, it must also make its peace with the unknown. We need to come to recognize that the mystery is the eternal thing, the closest we will ever get to immortality, and

that all efforts to pierce the veil are misguided and doomed to failure, a fact that I feel should be celebrated.

Keats' concept of "negative capability" provides us an illustration of what it means to reconcile oneself to a state of unknowing, and the genius that may lie in its true expression. He describes recognizing in Shakespeare what he came to identify as the characteristic that most made him a "Man of Achievement": an ability "of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In this description we cannot help but recognize that Keats' admiration largely stems from Shakespeare's ability to surrender what is surely a natural but potentially destructive drive, a drive that is, not coincidentally I think, a perfect encapsulation of the scientific impulse.

By contrast, it is the artist that is tasked with the discipline required to resist this urge toward completion, toward the inevitability of death. He/she must also dig for truth, but it is an effort that must operate free of any assumption of resolution or solubility. The artist necessarily accepts that there is no absolute truth, no looming grand reveal, only the eternal state of wonder and wondering that is life, and the attendant challenge of offering this experience to creative purpose, inexplicable though it may be. It is in this way that the artist may be seen as participating in a broad, collaborative effort, a story endlessly told and inexhaustibly extended, of which the inclusion of all artists (past, present and future) precludes any notion of conclusion. It is all just one long tale, assembled from all tales told, with every teller a voice within the chorus.

I am writing of my fears, and through them, and then they are not mine alone. You are singing a song, a lament of what can never be and what is certain to come. It is in a foreign tongue but I know every note. We are leaning to the dark and groping for the light, and this is

where we are sure to find each other. I am carried along this long, cold stream and I can hear the rush of deeper waters. Do you hear it, too? May we ever relish the fear and feel the chill.

The Tuck

1

He was drifting in the soup when the message came in so he didn't catch it until it kicked out a vox sim piped into the stereo that echoed through the empty house. Even with the "Hadley" default Peck could tell who it was underneath, knew it was Mast from the way almost every sentence started with "so". It may have been five years since they spoke last but Mast still talked like he always had, as though he remained the uncertain boy of twelve rather than the neck-step Pinchcrew boss he had been for years. Peck played it back, then again, and laughed out loud, half from the soup but also because he was glad to hear from him and because it was a fine and funny thing to hear that familiar growl tweaked to a bright, British chirp.

Mast wanted a callback, something about a job, but an hour passed and still Peck made no move to com him. The soup was off by then and he started to wonder and scratch at the reasons, tapping his foot and making the odd finger-snapping motion that he always made when on the suss.

The last time they spoke, he had told Peck flat that he never wanted to see him again and Peck had believed it; Mast was stubborn and had always known how to nurse a grudge, even as a boy, and he didn't like to lose. Never mind that Peck, on the face of it, had more cause to recrim. And now to call about a job as though nothing had happened between them? It made no sense, felt sloppy and suspicious, beneath the man.

So of course it was about Mikaela; Mast must have heard she was gone. But how? Who could have told him? For a second Peck considered the possibility that she had reached out, had gone to him, but that was impossible. Wasn't it? He knew it made no sense, but

somehow he felt that he knew where she was, could sometimes see her from a distance, and even up close when deep in the soup.

Peck sipped on an espresso and read the original com, his head more or less clear. Mast had left an address, either an office or his flat—it was hard to tell— but tony for sure and deep in the 11s. Peck had heard that he had done well for himself in the past few years, but to be in that zone—frontal, or near enough to it— Mast must be in with some top cocks, might even be one himself. What use was a bug-runner—even a pro like Peck—to a comer like that? No, the job was definitely a ruse; Mast just wanted to know about Mikaela, and to gloat, maybe.

But even so, Peck wanted to see him. Mast was still the best friend he'd ever had, and as pathetic as it might be, he had to admit that he'd rather be made to feel like a sack of shit than to give up on the possibility of some sort of reconciliation, to continue on with nothing between them.

Plus, he didn't have anything to lose. Peck figured it was The Tuck that allowed him to see that fact clearly, free of the fog of ego, of self. It hadn't been what he thought or hoped it might be—it hadn't saved his marriage, for instance—but the procedure had not been for nothing, even if it increasingly seemed to Peck that he had always been this way. They had told him this would happen, but he hadn't believed it until the old Peck came to seem like a half-remembered stranger in a faded old photo-pic.

It had rained that night and dipped-down to freeze in the morning, and when Peck went to his car he found it sheafed in ice. It was a classic, an '05 Merc and so lacked the thaw feature of even the lowest-end current models, and it quickly became clear to Peck that there was no way he could chip his way in without damaging the paint job. Part of him didn't care, but he knew that the checks would go harder on him in a beater, and already he wasn't entirely sure they'd let him in to the 11s. His rating was good, but he didn't know the min on frontal and imagined it must be about as exclusive as it got. He no longer felt the anxiety of being turned away, but it would be a nuisance to go all that way in the ice for nothing, to have to turn back. He dropped the scraper and went inside to find the fob to Mikaela's own ice-caked Silway before allowing himself the time to think about it.

It was right where she always left it —on the peg— but somehow Peck had not noticed until now, despite having many times in the past five months hooked his own ring on the next peg. He imagined that there were lots of things escaping his attention these days, and felt then—and not for the first time—that this was in no way an unusual or undesirable way to live. He was no longer afraid to face the truth of things, but if the past year had taught him anything, it was how seldom the truth is of any use to anyone. It couldn't set you free, it was only able to show you clearly the absurd impossibility of such a desire, the bounds that pinned and penned every life.

The fob had a thumbprint reader on it and Peck pressed it without thinking. It glowed the green of approval and let out a pleasing chime, and Peck squinted in surprise as Mikaela's cruiser hummed to life, the photovoltaic paint changing color slightly as it melted the ice which

then cracked and fell off in large chunks. He had never driven her car before, and was almost completely sure that they had never registered him as a driver.

“She did it without me knowing”, he thought and knew it was true, but was still not sure why or how this would even be possible.

It took a bit of time to adjust to driving Mikaela’s car but it seemed to make little difference to the car itself, which was so automated and accommodating that it appeared to operate itself with an almost cheerful yet detached sense of purpose. Peck had been in plenty of modern vehicles as a passenger but had prided himself on owning only cars that predated the piloting-redundancy protocol of 2019, and he was amazed and even a little abashed at how quickly he acceded its operation, how pleasurable he found it to feel at once in command of the vehicle while so removed from the responsibility of any real control. So deftly did the car anticipate his intention and desires, that it seemed to almost read his mind, indulging him in only the aspects of operation that he insisted upon preserving, and almost imperceptibly softening and correcting the imprecision of his decisions.

“Where do you want to go?” it purred in a strangely familiar voice, and Peck fairly mimicked the voice in his response.

“Collecting and collating requisite PL data.” The dash display flickered with a simulated sheaf of papers spread out before him, page upon page of personal info -parts of it redacted in precise and impenetrable opaque lines- that then gathered itself into a neat stack and disappeared inside a folder bearing his name in Hancocked cursive.

Pausing at the guard post that marked the entrance and exit of his own homezone, Peck gave a two-fingered-salute to the man behind the glass —Benny, maybe?-- who squinted at him in this alien vehicle, before offering the dumb open-mouth smile and slight nod of the head that

always signaled his recognition. Peck watched the undulating distortion of the static gate fade and disappear and felt the car lurch confidently into motion without any prompt from him, onto the road and towards his destination. Peck couldn't help but envy the car its lack of hesitation, its certainty of purpose.

The road had not been cleared of ice, which was fairly typical for the nether zones, and Peck was glad to be in Mikaela's car, grateful for the way it navigated effortlessly the deep-carved troughs. Peck had seen something on his feed recently about how the funding for road maintenance had essentially dried up, how most people saw little value in tax revenue being directed towards projects outside their homezones, especially when new technologies rendered many of these expenditures unnecessary. "Keep it local" had been a popular slogan for years, but it seemed to Peck that the definition of local had been steadily shrinking and he couldn't help but wonder if the idea wouldn't ultimately be reduced to the space immediately surrounding each individual, every man finally an island. He could feel how these new cars and their affected tiny ecosystems fed into this worldview, were just one more way that this mindset was reinforced. Peck understood all too well how seductive these feelings of comfort and security could be, how anything that afforded you a remove, some sense of protection from the outside world, could become something that you would never surrender. Even post-tuck, Peck could appreciate the value of a space of one's own, a separation from the real.

There seemed no way to deny it anymore so few even tried: this world was grim and seemed to be getting worse by the day. The last time he had driven this route —two, maybe three years ago? — he had seen the occasional Rougher's hut by the side of the road. Now, as the car lifted them on to north-bound bahn, Peck could see a whole colony of them wedged into

the thin copse of trees that skirted the highway, hundreds of icy tarp-topped shantys and sagging TPs, stretching on endlessly it seemed, with many more for sure but most invisible from his vantage point. A fragment of memory came to him then, unbidden, the image of tents wrapped around a city block, he and Mast among those camping out for a phone, or a watch; some sort of now-forgotten digital device.

Peck shuddered and turned his eyes back to the windshield display. What the fuck was this car's name again?

“Car: run newsfeed.” He didn't really expect it to respond with so vague an address so he was surprised when an animated icon of a squirrel's face appeared on the display and winked at him in acknowledgement then wipe-faded with his tail to what Peck soon realized was his personal trough. He wondered for a moment how it knew to find his feed but then remembered Mikaela's synch. It was curiously easy for Peck to forget how linked every data stream was these days, how his PL contained what was essentially the totality of his recorded identity, his self in ones and zeros. The Tuck had reduced his paranoia considerably, but he remained uncomfortable with this digital doppelganger, with how promiscuous it was in sharing their mutual characteristics and how little say he seemed to have in these furtive exchanges; to what use they would be put. Peck realized that it was hypocritical of him to object to any of it given how he made his living, but working the pinch had made him constantly aware of the thinness of the digi-skin, how insecure each of us was in the borders that marked our mirror selves from everyone else's, how easily they could be —and were— compromised.

“Use it,” Mast had said about his fear, all those years ago, back when it hadn't been quite so bad, when Peck could still be buoyed by a pep talk. “Anyway, just let it remind you of what's at stake; that it's *always* them or you.”

Mast had never seemed bothered by what he did, or what they did and continued to do. He was perfectly suited to the job, marked as he was by what he saw as early childhood betrayals, by a failure of his parents to protect him from the ugliness of the world; a world that seemed to only have recently caught up to his perception of it.

As a child it had been difficult for Mast to conceal his anger, and this rage coupled with an obvious sensitivity and his puny stature had made for an assemblage of weakness that had proven impossible for many to resist. He had been the sort of universally detested kid that even teachers seemed to want to abuse or, at best, turn a blind eye to the torment inflicted by others.

It had been an awakening to Peck, teaching him how the powerless are always treated in this world, and there had been little he had seen since that served to contradict this lesson. But he had tried to protect Mast, hadn't he? He hoped so. But it was a long time ago and harder since The Tuck to remember the sort of boy he had been. There had been times, as adults, that Peck had thought that he detected some resentment from Mast, a look of disappointment—or disgust—that seemed to suggest that Mast felt Peck had failed him in some way, but he could never be sure. Mast was hard to read and predictably reticent when it came to his emotions and, when he thought of it now, Peck couldn't pinpoint the exact time of “the looks” and thought maybe they had been a part of the later ugliness between them, the post Mikaela era.

Peck had certainly pitied him when they'd been classmates. He could remember that much and it was possible that Mast could too, and didn't like it. He had always been more comfortable with scorn and hatred than he had been with pity. Later, they had become the closest of friends, and then brothers, really; sleeping in the same room when Peck's parents had taken Mast in after his mother finally split, there had been something like a perfect understanding. But it had started with an act of charity on Peck's part—he had been a child who

liked feeling noble, if he was to be honest— and he wasn't sure if Mast was capable of forgiving him that.

How old had they been, then, twelve? Thirteen? It had been seventh grade, so, twelve, Peck guessed; the last year of Mast's pariah status. By eighth grade he grown into himself and his rage, which seemed finally to generate an energy that emanated from him, endowing him with a dark authority, a sort of unapproachable charisma that pulled you in even as it pushed you away. Peck took to calling this the "power of the glower," and there was no question that this new-found strength signaled a shift in the dynamic of their friendship, a shift that would from then on find Mast in the dominant role.

Not that Peck cared; he had never been the alpha-male type, more like an easy-going beta, the lover to Mast's fighter, if somewhat prone to periods of dark introspection. Power had never really appealed to him, although he always liked to live close to it, to benefit from its proximity. He would never forget that early lesson of what the world does to the powerless.

Mikaela's car was slowing down -Peck having rather quickly surrendered to its continued insistence on automation- and he looked up to see a half circle of Peace vehicles blocking half the highway, their lights flashing in aggressive display, bright enough to blind in the light of day. They appeared to be surrounding an old recreational vehicle, and Peck turned and watched the car in front of him, the family within twisting their necks in order to get a better view, faces all but pressed to the glass. Even the father, who sat in what would be the driver's seat, appeared to lean over his wife's lap, and Peck could see that they were all smiling excitedly, the sharp little fingers of the children poking at the window.

Peck followed the pointing fingers back to the scene. Containment units now flanked the perimeter, rifles trained at a plume of black smoke that looked to be billowing from the camper

door. Was the camper burning, or had they gassed it? Peck thought he could see a face pressed against the camper's rear window, and a set of small hands clawing at the glass —was that a kid in there?-- but then Mikaela's car lurched forward with an abruptness that snapped his head back and the image was snatched from his view. Peck zoomed-in on the rearview and watched a riotmasked protector shrink into the distance, his hands redundantly motioning the traffic forward in a practiced and strangely soothing gesture, a digiscreen unfurling behind him enfolding and camouflaging the scene.

This was how the world was now: you went along with it or you would be made to. There had been a time when he and Mikaela (mostly Mikaela, of course) had been involved in protests, had engaged in acts of civil disobedience intended to draw attention to the plight and treatment of the Roughers, but the problem —as well as the circumstances that fed the problem— had only gotten worse over the years, and it had become difficult to see the situation as anything but inevitable. Then the Daimler Sedition Act had made providing material support to unregistered citizens a federal crime, so that the potential consequences —even if seldom enforced— had discouraged most of those who didn't outright revile the untaxed from voicing their sympathy, let alone attempting to help them. To sympathize with the Roughers was to risk being identified with them, and to be identified with them was to risk being treated like them. Few people remained who were willing to subject themselves to that kind of shame and peril. Peck had to admit that his own attitude had shifted over the years, that he had become hardened to the plight of the despised and disposed, even if his reluctance to join the chorus of voices that called for their extermination qualified him as a "bleeding heart". He had been pleased to find that The Tuck allowed him to see the issue afresh, free of much of the fear that these "others" inspired in people, but he had soon discovered that so entrenched a prejudice is not so readily

surrendered, even when you thought you were past it. So he had felt ashamed of what he understood to be his cowardice, had taken pains to conceal his lack of compassion from Mikaela who, while pragmatically compelled to curtail her activism, never wavered in her attitude towards the Roughers, even when news of their horrific crimes made its way on to everyone's feed, as it so often did.

"It's complete bullshit," she said when asked about it. She had always been strong, and fearless, and though Peck often resented her for it —was frustrated by the stubborn inflexibility of her belief— he couldn't help admiring and loving her for it at the same time. Mast had always said that she was the best of them —despite vocally opposing nearly every principle she held— and Peck had agreed with him, even during the worst of their time together.

"What about The Tear, Mikaela? Are you saying that they —that it— doesn't exist?" This had been around the time news of the group first emerged and Mast —like many people— had been inclined to talk of little but the revolutionary guerillas who supposedly drew their recruits from the Rougher population.

"You know what, Mast? I hope they do exist. I hope that this is still a country, still a world, where poor people are capable of defending themselves against a system that is trying to fucking kill them." Mikaela had been characteristically heated in her response, training her tight-lipped glare at Mast and all but daring him to continue the argument. But Mast had only looked away, grinning smug in a way that Peck was sure had been engineered to infuriate.

There had been no other role available to Peck during these battles but intermediary, and he had grudgingly taken it on, thinking somehow that it was only through his efforts that a sort of détente was achieved between them. Of course there had been something about the intensity of their argument that had troubled Peck: an unmistakable intimacy that made him feel strangely as

though he shouldn't be there, that his presence was somehow intrusive, even indecent. But he had shaken off these thoughts, reminding himself that these were the two people who loved him most in the world, each of whom only tolerated the other out of that love's necessity. It had been a fantasy born of vanity, and it was hard for Peck not to feel embarrassed for himself when he thought about it. It had taken him a ridiculously long time to see what was right in front of his face and to fully appreciate how unnecessary his presence had truly been.

Whatever else Mikaela was, or had been, she was a person who cared about things, about people and what happened to them. Peck believed this, even if her actions didn't always seem to reflect this concern. He had begrudged her the democratic nature of her love, had felt jealous and cheated by it, and never more so than after she left. But that was the thing about the lovers of the world: they were never yours, you always had to share them, and you didn't get to decide who you shared them with. It had been a difficult lesson for Peck, and even thinking about it now caused a kind of twitchy irritation within him. Mikaela had accused him of having "boogie sensibilities," —and it was true that he was trad-minded in some ways— but they both knew that what he really was when it came to her was possessive. He hadn't liked that part of himself, never felt that it was consistent with his core self-sense, but it had been impossible to ignore that what he really wanted was for Mikaela to want him and only him; wanted her love for him to be so singular and unique as to reduce everyone and everything else to an indistinct blur. But of course, then she wouldn't have been Mikaela. Peck recognized the paradox of this desire, saw how ugly and irreconcilable it was, but there had come a point where he had had to accept his feelings as strange but immutable fact: the heart is not a thinking organ, after all.

Peck tuned his trough and to local feed, thinking that there might be something about the burning camper. Sure enough, there was a bite-item about the roadside pacification of a Tear cell by Peacers, but no mention of any children. The story concluded with the testimony of someone claiming to have witnessed the operation, a woman who described breathlessly —and quite convincingly, Peck had to admit— how the Tears had fired on the Peacers as they approached the camper, adding that it looked like they had then set fire to their own vehicle soon after, so to destroy evidence and probably to try and injure the peace officer.

If there had been someone in a position to see the episode more clearly than Peck, they could not have helped but be visible to him, so he was fairly certain that this person had not been there and was, in fact, employed by the Peace department if she even existed at all. There had been a time not so very ago when this would have been surprising —if not shocking— to Peck, but he could not help but be influenced by Mikaela’s perspective, even if he had been resistant to her more radical conclusions. Still, he paused to wonder how often such false witness was employed and in reply he saw in his mind’s eye Mikaela’s shaking head and nearly heard her voice pitched in half-lament: “Whenever they need it, P.” Of course. That had to be true, because it seemed like something sad that he knew already, but did that mean that everything anyone ever heard, everything channeled through his trough-feed, was completely suspect? He wasn’t ready for that; there had to be something you were allowed to believe these days, something still whole and real.

Peck felt a familiar flutter in his chest, a vestige of the old fear and knew that it would formerly have signaled the onset of a full-blown angst-attack. He rubbed his temples with his fingers feeling at once grateful for The Tuck and the remove it allowed, and wondering how anyone got along without it. He hoped that he had been mistaken about the kid.

M,

Last night I didn't dream of you, for the first time in weeks. It was Clay this time, again in the rowboat, the dream I used to have right after they killed him. I'm sure you remember it, the one where I'm swimming in his wake, trying to catch up, and calling to him in a gurgling scream. Only he can't hear me or maybe he's just ignoring me. I can see his face, pale and gaunt in the light of the moon and it looks like he's looking right at me, but I can't be sure because I can't quite see his eyes, or maybe it's that he doesn't have eyes. He just keeps rowing that dingy with a kind of maddening rhythm and then I'm losing him and swallowing water and starting to go under. But then it's as though I want to drown, that I'm giving up, sinking down in order to punish him. I remember the term you used when I woke up and told you about it. You said it was like "cutting off your nose to spite your face," and I had never heard that before but had to admit that it kind of fit, even if it was strange to think of myself as my father's nose, and made me think of that Russian writer whose name I couldn't, and still can't, quite remember, but you probably could. And then you said my dream was "too perfect", and I knew that you were mocking me, calling me out for my lack of imagination. That even though you loved me (and everyone else, right?) it was always going to be a competition between us, one that you would be sure to win, because it always had to be your game. Is that why you left, because The Tuck changed the rules? You always wanted me weak, but not too weak, and you never expected to see me strong. And then you said I scared you but what was it that scared you, that you might come to need me? It was always best when I was a part of you, but never too dear a part, not something you couldn't live without, because you were always on your own, right? You had to

be sure that I couldn't hurt you by hurting myself, that I could never truly spite you. Well, you win, Mike: the game is still yours and I am the man I always was, and ever will be. I'll be any part of you you want me to. Just come back.

-P

It had been her idea, somehow. She said, “Why don’t you see what they have to say” and he had had to admit that there wasn’t any reason for him not to look in to it. Things had been bad between them for some time; bad enough for him that it became bad for her and so far-enough-gone and familiar by then that it seemed neither of them had much hope for a return to anything that might allow for an imagined future together. But still she had cared enough to hope for some help for him. That had to mean something. He wanted to believe it did.

Clay’s death the year before had been a blow but had seemed to both of them like one of those things he got through. The sharp part of it left after a month or two and Peck had seemed to return to his old self at work and home and had even signed up again for the C-11 certification classes, previously scrapped in some forgotten pique. But even then he had sensed the old thing gathering, felt it creeping, a dark and churning swirl just beyond sight. He had hoped it might miss him, or burn out before it hit land, but this time luck had not been with them.

And then, where others had lifted before in time to allow for repair, this one now stayed. He hears the clack of her bracelets, her nails digging into his forearm as she reaches down to him, “You’re letting it beat you! Don’t you care about yourself? About us?” And she had been half-right; he had given up at that point, had let go. But how could you continue to fight a thing that was all around you, inside you, knocking you to the ground, pulling everything from your hands as soon as you could gather it up? It could not be done. But he had felt that he owed her this.

Mike had always been good at that: she could make anyone feel a sense of obligation to what she believed to be their ideal selves. She was a motivator in that you wanted her to like

you, to approve of you, in both a specific and general way. Peck had seen this phenomenon at work in nearly every relationship of Mikaela's, from the guy at the security gate to her closest friends, Mast and himself included. He, like everyone in her orbit, had never wanted to feel like he had let her down, never wanted to have to see himself reflected in her disappointed gaze. It wasn't that she was judgmental, it was more that she believed—or at least professed to believe—in everyone's potential, and to not live up to this potential felt very much like failure. And not just failure, but something worse, more fundamental: like a betrayal of the natural order of things. She had an idealized view of people and no matter what she put you through it was hard to call into question the truth of her read. To do so would be to jeopardize the view of you that suggested you were so much more than you thought yourself to be, that you were capable of greatness.

Peck had seen on more than one occasion how desperate people could get when they sensed her interest in them waning, felt her pulling away from them. Mikaela's attention could be like a drug, and the symptoms of withdrawal had proven truly agonizing to those lacking a core of self-confidence. Peck had felt a complicated mix of emotions when he observed Mikaela mollifying her no-longer-favored supplicants: disgust, pity, a possessive pride born of the knowledge that he alone continued to survive the culling, all the purges, fear that it was unlikely that he could rely on always being so spared. Because they were necessary, these cuts; Mikaela's passions, though deeply felt, were ephemeral in that they inevitably gave way to new effusions, new crops of people and the projects they embodied. It was not so much that she stopped caring about people, but that the pace of her mind—and the hunger that it fueled—necessitated an ever shifting cast of characters.

“I wish I had time for everyone,” he had heard her sigh into the com more times than he cared to recall, a spurned admirer pleading on the other end. How did she have the patience for it, Peck had wondered, the psychic energy that it demanded?

The place was called “Nu-Yu” and if the name inspired little confidence, the building that housed it was even less encouraging. A squat, brown stucco early-aughts affair with frosted glass windows, it sat squeezed between two “for lease” signs in an outdated stripmall. Peck sat in the car for half an hour in hesitation, watching to see if anyone came in or out and half-listening to the drone of his vox-feed relating the news of the day. Three or four mid-range cars dotted the lot, but he could see no other evidence of human activity, not even the odd scrap-hauling Rougher. Pulling himself out of the car, he was ashamed to recognize the hope in him that there would be no one there, that the door would be locked and he might then just go home and return to bed.

There was an identiscan at the door and Peck found himself leaning to the screen before it told him to do so —a bad habit learned from early models— but this one didn’t bark at him for rushing the procedure, merely told him in a soothing female voice to wait for the prompt. His score was above average, but he was, as always, anxious that it would be insufficiently high to admit him; that there would issue the twin beeps that —on the few occasions he had been unlucky enough to hear them— never failed to remind him of a wrong answer on some long-ago game show. He didn’t really want to be here but that didn’t mean he wanted to be told he didn’t belong.

“Welcome,” purred the imaginary woman’s voice, posh and with a slight British inflection to it — a Margot, maybe?— followed by the click of a bolt-lock pulling back. Peck couldn’t help feeling a bit buoyed as he opened the opaque glass door and stepped inside.

If the outside of “Nu-Yu” was less than impressive, its interior seemed to deliver on the promise of the name, demonstrating a sort of before and after effect. Gleaming cherrywood paneling —real, it seemed to Peck— wrapped the space; an open, round room that seemed remarkably spacious and high-vaulted given the apparent squatness of the structure as viewed from outside. Peck found his eyes drawn to the domed ceiling where hundreds of tiny points of light hung like dim stars, shining down in such a way as to make their distance difficult to determine.

“Not what you expected, Mr. Peck?” The voice that spoke suggested that this was not entirely intended as a question. His eyes fell from the skyscape and found a small, tidy man standing before him with a sly smile, his hand extended. Peck shook it and was surprised by how rough and callused it felt. They were the hands of a day laborer, a Rougher.

“No...I...uh...,” Peck faltered for a moment, struggling to gather his thoughts. His recent near-isolation combined with the strange incongruity of this place made him feel disoriented and he couldn’t help but wonder then if maybe this wasn’t the intended effect, rather than the sense of awe initially suggested. “..I guess not.”

“Well, we here at ‘Nu-Yu’ are all about confounding expectation. It’s what we do, really.” The small man’s smile broadened briefly in a way that seemed to suggest a conspiratorial understanding between them. He wore a finely-cut suit, clearly expensive, and a green jeweled pinky ring —an emerald, or glass cut to look like one— which glinted in the

artificial light as he swept his hand toward a large hardwood desk that seemed to materialize with the gesture. “Let’s talk specifics, shall we?”

Peck followed him past another desk nestled within a cleverly constructed nook at which sat a young woman with a shaved-pate bob and photo-luminescent lip liner miming into an airtab. She looked up at him and smiled wordlessly, never pausing in her present task. Looking around he became aware of a number of other occupied desks —three or four at least— each one concealed from the entrance point by a curvature of wood. He realized then that the roundness of the interior was an illusion, skillfully effected by these structures and only available to someone upon first entering the office space.

Had the man offered his name? Peck couldn’t remember if he had, but it seemed awkward to ask now as he allowed himself to be guided into a plush chair facing the desk. The man sat behind it and switched on a white-noise field, affording them some privacy in the doorless office. He looked intently at Peck and perched his chin on a closed fist in what seemed a studied gesture.

“Let me ask you a question, Mr. Peck. Or do you simply go by Peck?”

Peck nodded noncommittally.

“Do you consider yourself to be someone ruled by fear?”

Peck looked at the man and sensed that a reply was not yet expected of him so said nothing, only shrugged slightly and allowed the man to continue with his pitch.

The small man uncurled his index finger and let it rest on his cheek, tilting his head slightly as though reconsidering something. “That is to say, someone whose life, and the choices made in that life, are largely constrained or dictated by a fear of their consequences?”

Peck waited to see if the man would continue and when he did not, replied in a voice that sounded strange to him contained as it was the sound field. “I suppose I am. But I would imagine that everyone is. To an extent.”

The small man leaned forward in his chair and clasped both hands together in an evident expression of excitement. Again his ring glistened in the light. “So true, Mr. Peck! Everyone is, surely, to an extent, ruled by their fears. And this is natural... to an extent. It is this natural expression of fear that protects us from undue risk, that keeps us alive, in fact. This fight or flight response, without it we would surely have been gobbled up by predators, long ago. We would be extinct, no?”

Peck nodded. Even in his compromised state of mind he was pretty sure he could see where this was going. Still, there was something about the man’s speil —his rehearsed mannerisms and canned responses included— that Peck enjoyed, found oddly soothing. He liked the feeling of so little being expected of him, liked the obvious artifice of the small man’s performance. He knew that this was evidence of weakness, a manifestation of his illness, but he wanted to remain a passive audience to this one man show for as long as he could. And he felt quite sure that the small man recognized this in him, smelled it as a predator smells its prey.

“But this vestigial fear, this primal response, it has largely outlived its usefulness and in certain people, people like yourself, perhaps, it has become an invisible prison, an impossible impediment to the enjoyment of life.” The man leaned back in his chair, exhaled audibly and offered Peck a squinting, half-pained smile that looked convincingly like an expression of empathy. “There is no place for fear in this new world of ours, Mr. Peck. It can only hurt you, be used against you. I’m sure you see this; understand it better than I do. The question is: are you ready to feel better? To be free to be the man you were meant to be?”

Again Peck was unsure if a response was warranted. The question seemed a rhetorical one, but he allowed an ambiguous grunt that he thought signaled his continued attention. He looked down at the desk as the man pulled something from a drawer beneath it, noticing then a tilted stand that bore a name etched in brass: M.C. Stirovich. When the hand returned from under the desk, it held what looked like a small, curved piece of white plastic, a cursive letter “T”.

“This is what the device looks like, Mr. Peck, only many orders of magnitude smaller. In fact, if I were to show you the actual object you wouldn’t be able to see it without a microscope. I know it appears quite unimpressive, but I assure you that what it effects upon insertion into the amygdala region of the brain is nothing short of extraordinary. I won’t bore you with an overly-technical description of the process, but briefly, it dampens the synaptic reflex within the neuronal fear pathways, resulting in a dramatic decrease in the presence of hormones associated with the fight or flight response. In essence, it allows you to remain aware of your fear while releasing you from its dictates. The effect is, put simply, a freedom from fear in all its forms: Anxiety, depression, PTSD, all the unnecessary terrors and worries that have outlived their function and come to plague us in this modern age.”

Peck was suddenly aware that Stirovich had been holding the piece of plastic in his hand throughout his little speech, intending for him to take it from him. He did so then, with slight embarrassment, holding it up to his face and examining it with the half-feigned interest that by now had become second nature to him. It did seem wholly unremarkable, a plastic wishbone with a series of tiny holes dotting the concave sweep of the outside ridge. Peck wasn’t sure what he was expected to do with it, so he placed it on the desk in front of Stirovich in what he was sure was an awkward manner.

Stirovich smiled indulgently, with a brief grunt of understanding and a slight nod of his head. “Uncertainty and the hesitation it begets, Mr. Peck; the Neuro-sten takes care of that as well. Would you like to see the test-subject vizo?”

“I would,” Peck forced himself to look directly at Stirovich, “ But I want to be sure that I can afford this procedure. Otherwise, all of this is for nothing, right?”

There remained a slight smile on the small man’s face, but the reduction of its full expression made it register almost as a scowl. “I assure you, Mr. Peck, if financing hadn’t already been approved, you wouldn’t be sitting here with me at all. I think you’ll find that with your Vet-cred, insurance and the beta-test discount we offer, your costs will prove minimal.”

Stirovich reached again under his desk to activate an airtab and with a swat of his hand swung the display towards Peck, who peered at it skeptically. When Peck looked up again, he found the salesman leaning back in his chair, his coarse hands folded across his midsection in evident satisfaction, the gem of his ring gleaming almost unnaturally.

They had told him that the effects would be immediate, but still Peck found himself surprised by how thoroughly altered he was, how completely unlike his previous self he now felt. The world looked brighter —as they had assured him it would— both more vivid in color and less shadowed, but also lighter, as though his mind had been freed from the weight of all morbid association. But was it true that he was really a different person? Because this new self was not alien, but somehow familiar to him, a recovered memory, as though The Tuck had unlocked — or, more precisely, excavated— a complete, undamaged past version of himself that had lived dormant within him all these years. It made him think of that old movie he'd seen as a kid, where the blood of an extinct creature is extracted from a chunk of hardened sap —amber, they called it— and the beast is born again, resurrected by the godhand of science.

And that was how he felt: like a beast freed from a stone, released into a world that nearly glowed with possibility. Of course: it was the *world* that was new, it seemed to Peck, and he merely restored to the original, essential self of his childhood.

“Wow, sounds nice, P.” He had been trying to explain it to Mikaela, the change, but somehow she seemed oddly unmoved. She was driving them home from the clinic and Peck had only been conscious for just over an hour. “Do you think part of it is maybe the painkillers they have you on?”

Peck peered over at her and tried to read her expression. She was driving his Merc —her new car was juicing— and seemed wholly consumed by the act of operating this antiquated vehicle that made no allowance for inattention. He pressed his hand gently to the bandage at the base of his skull; it felt hot to the touch if not particularly tender.

“I don’t get it, Mike. I thought you wanted me to do this.”

She was chewing her bottom lip as she often did when concentrating, or when pretending to do so. It seemed to Peck that it took her an unrealistic amount of time to formulate a reply.

“I wanted whatever was going to make you feel better, Peck”

He laughed at this —or half-snorted, maybe— at her calling him Peck instead of the affectionate and familiar, “P”. It was irritating, this coldness toward him, but still Peck did not register any real feelings of frustration, did not feel “hurt” by her distance, only perplexed by it. It was a revelation to have his thoughts unencumbered by feeling, to feel completely in possession of himself, but he didn’t feel any better able to read his wife’s feelings. If anything, he could see how The Tuck could make it harder to relate to other peoples’ mess of emotions. He was fine with that, but was also relieved to find that Mikaela’s love still mattered to him, but without the desperation, the off-putting neediness.

“This could be a new start for us, Mike.” He reached over and put his hand on her knee, her nylon tights feeling strange and wonderful against his skin. “Not just for me, but for you, too. I feel like we could make this work.”

Again, a long silence before her reply.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” She looked down briefly at his hand on her knee before returning her attention to the road. “That tickles. You’re distracting me.”

Her leg made a little jerk, almost like an involuntary twitch, but the message was clear. Peck withdrew his hand.

He was surprised —and disappointed— to find that he could still feel lonely. He made this discovery upon waking up one morning to find Mikaela gone, with no note to explain her sudden departure or provide a clue as to where she may have left for. Her mad bag and travel toiletries had disappeared along with some camping gear that had only recently materialized in the house, but everything else was left behind, including the fancy new Silway which she had hardly even driven.

It hadn't come out of the blue; she had become increasingly distant after his procedure, eventually moving into the spare room and making —what seemed to Peck— to be a concerted effort to avoid talking to him or even setting eyes on him. When she *had* spoken to him, she vaguely alluded to going away for a while, maybe to see her mother in the Southern 5, or some other homezone Peck couldn't remember to visit her college friend, Rebecca, who was filing for a D-section divorce from her deadbeat husband. At first, it seemed unlikely that she would stay gone, given how little she had brought with her, but after two weeks, Peck was forced to consider the possibility that she was gone for good, or at least for a good long while.

He had started to work again, running the bugs for a Grayzone data mining concern that allowed him to fly the gear from home rather than the poorly-heated Quonset in the East 7, in an unincorporated interstitial. The arrangement worked out —surprisingly generous of them considering the risk— except that with Mike gone Peck had become something of a shut-in. The pain wasn't so sharp as it would have been before The Tuck, but that was part of the problem: The Tuck sometimes made it harder for Peck to recognize social/emotional needs, or even remember that he still had them. It had been days since he saw another live human being

—besides those through the vizo of the bugs— and the absence had started to register as a vague itch under the skin of his chest.

That's where the soup came in.

He'd done a little in the day, before Mikaela. He and Mast, in their early twenties and newly discharged from national service, had liked to get good and stewed before hitting the clubs, back before the flu hysteria had shut it all down. They had both enjoyed the way that it seemed to blur the boundaries of the self, had allowed them to feel as though they were part of something beyond them, even if this larger entity to which they felt they belonged was just the pulsing, sweat-drenched mass of bodies held in the music's hypnotic sway.

They had both been lonely back then, he thinks, despite the parade of partners that peopled their shared loft, and Peck —even with The Tuck— can recall how adrift he felt, can almost feel again the sense of disconnection that marked these years, the clench of directionless rage that accompanied it. They had scarcely discussed it, of course, but Peck was sure that Mast had felt it too, probably even more acutely than he himself, given the man's tendencies. So the soup helped, even as it gradually made the prospect of life lived without it feel cruel and untenable.

Of course, it had been Mast who decided to kick first. Peck had seen it coming, had felt a wordless discontent growing within him, a sense that Mast was becoming disgusted with them both, with their way of life, and would soon announce his intention to be an entirely different person. Then Peck would be compelled to go along with the change, or else effect a separation that he found even less palatable than giving up the soup.

That had been Mast: a boy and then a man who would not compromise, would not allow his actions to be informed by anything but his own suddenly realized convictions which then

seemed to spring fully-formed from his head, loosed on the world with little thought of implication or consequence. There was an undeniable courage to the way of him, to his lack of hesitation or fear, and Peck had always admired or at least envied him this, but there was also a cruelty to it, a capriciousness that troubled Peck —gnawed at him— all the more so because Mast seemed so oblivious to it.

It had never been clear to Peck whether these tectonic shifts were the result of lengthy contemplation or simply a sort of reflexive impulse over which Mast had little control. Certainly, Mast was prone to a sort of brooding contemplation, a retreat into his mind that rendered him largely unreachable. Peck could recall poses of introspection that were almost comical in their resemblance to a clichéd pantomime of deep thought, but since Mast kept his own counsel, never really thought out loud, it had always been difficult to know the working of his mind. Instead, by the time they were in high school, Peck had developed a sort of sixth sense, a means by which he could detect the coming shift, anticipate it and the vague contours of its form without presuming to understand what forces worked to bring it about. In this way, Peck could give himself over to the suggestion of the change, could soften its abruptness —its inevitability— through his ability to see it coming.

At first, he had been unaware of this dynamic of their friendship —had been in denial, really— preferring instead to see himself as a sort of social facilitator for Mast, a handler for his charismatic but off-puttingly reticent friend. It was clear that Mast needed him, and Peck had felt validated by this function; it had pleased him to think of himself as essential to someone so reluctant to acknowledge his need of anyone.

Over the years, though, he had come to see the perversity of their relationship, had grown uncomfortable with how Mast took his support and acquiescence for granted, had come to treat

him as a sort of sidekick. By the time Mikaela had come along, he had made a concerted effort to repress his intuition about the direction of Mast's thoughts, had taught himself to ignore the quiet tyranny of his mood. To his surprise, Mast had appeared to accept the new arrangement, and each of them had seemed to adjust to what Peck felt was a more conventional friendship. It could never be relationship of equals, Peck understood, but it could at least be one of which he didn't need to feel ashamed.

Of course Mikaela, for her part, saw right through the changes to the heart of the continued dynamic.

"So, are you like Mast's cronie, or what?" They had known each other for a few months and were lying in bed, still in the playful, teasing stage of their relationship, but there had been a firmness to her voice, a tone that telegraphed the seriousness underlying the question. Peck can remember watching the dust motes float in a shaft of morning sun as he considered his response, knowing that whatever he said was likely to be either obviously dishonest or true and therefore unacceptable to her. He knew that despite his efforts to "normalize" his and Mast's relationship, it was not likely to be seen as normal, especially by someone as perceptive as Mikaela.

"I guess I take care of him. And he takes care of me." It hadn't been perfect, but Peck had thought it not entirely evasive, if a bit vague. He had been determined not to scare her away, but he wasn't sure he was prepared to have the basis of his closest friendship challenged by someone he had only known for a few months.

Mikaela could not have helped but recognize the sensitivity of the subject, must have heard the cagey defensiveness of his reply, so what she said next had surprised Peck, had given him a glimpse of the uncompromising principles that lay at her core, even if it sounded just a little bit rehearsed.

“Well, you obviously love each other, and that’s a great thing, Peck. I just hope it’s a love that allows the both of you to be who you need to be. Sometimes love can own us, can stunt us. You deserve better than that, Peck; we all do. None of us should be one thing forever. We couldn’t even if we wanted to.”

She had rolled over on the bed and peered up at him then, her bright blue eyes searching his for a sign that she had overstepped, had offended him. She could be brash, Mikaela, but she knew how to play the diplomat as well. And she had never been shy about using her beauty in the service of persuasion, in rendering her personality more palatable, or in soothing hurt feelings.

But Peck’s feelings hadn’t been hurt, didn’t feel threatened or judged by her observations, as pointed as they were. If anything, he felt flattered to have someone like Mikaela—someone so strong and confident and beautiful—see the truth of him and not find it wanting. It made him feel strong himself, like it might actually be possible to find the courage to be the man he imagined himself to be. And that it might not be necessary to feel so alone in the world. Of course this had all been before he understood that this was how Mikaela made everyone feel, that it was who she was and what she did.

And then she was gone. They had been together for six years, much longer than he had any right to expect, really, considering all they had put each other through, given the sort of people they each turned out to be. But had she changed so much? Despite her insistence on allowing herself and others a love that afforded change and growth, it seemed to Peck that what was notable about Mikaela was her immutability, the strange consistency with which she viewed the world. She had always seemed to stay the same to Peck, and to treat everyone with similar invariance; as though everyone were deserving of the same measure of compassion and love, an

idea that had proven unacceptable to Peck. If he had to attribute the need for The Tuck to one thing, it would be this: her need to give of herself so freely, her unwillingness to allow him the illusion of singularity. She had shown him what it was like to not feel alone and then taught him the lesson that took it away: we are each of us, every one, completely on our own.

But the soup told a different story, even if it was one that was difficult to believe in when you were off the soak, once the real seeped back in. Peck remembered how hard it had been to surrender the escape back when Mast had issued his indirect command all those years ago, but in starting back up, he found that The Tuck softened the return, made the shift less jarring and the two ways of seeing the world easier to reconcile. He had discovered a reliable source in a coworker, a young screener at the mining venture who didn't mind running it to him; dropping it at his stoop and then disappearing after ringing the bell. This suited Peck even as the irony was hardly lost on him: the soup was to help him feel less lonely, but the last thing he wanted was to have to be around another person. Unless that person was Mikaela or Mast, or maybe his mother if she ever sobered up, Peck couldn't really see the value in any sort of social interaction. The world had simply turned too predatory, too cynical and self-interested; everyone scoping each other and angling for exploitable advantage, making sure that they did to others what would surely be done to them if they relaxed their skepticism or otherwise allowed themselves any vulnerability. Peck's feed was fairly stuffed with alarming counsel, every other item a caution against trust or a story reinforcing a fear of the other, the necessity of insuring personal security through isolation and eternal vigilance.

The implementation of the Northeastern homezones had been conceived by the council as a way to offset the threat of the outside, a means to keep out the Roughers and Pinchers, and to allow for a place where taxpayers could feel safe with their families, snug in the knowledge that their neighbors were just like them. It had been modeled on a Brazilian scheme that had apparently been a success, reducing lifestyle crime and the vigilantism that attended it, and producing a measurable spike in the general happiness quotient/property values.

As in the Brazilian model, qualified participants had been algorithmically matched to ensure lifestyle and financial compatibility and so facilitate a mathematically-based sense of trust, but in the end it had been difficult —at least for Peck— to see the experiment as anything but a hardly mitigated failure; an enormously expensive enterprise and logistical nightmare that yielded little in the way of any social gain. It might have succeeded in separating the Roughers from the genpop, but all Peck had to do was look in the mirror to know that it had done nothing to weed out the Pinchers, fortunately for him.

Most significantly, the plan had only seemed to reinforce the isolationist tendencies that it claimed to be ameliorating. Peck had absolutely no idea who his neighbors were or even what they looked like. He would occasionally glimpse another face through the smoked glass of passing vehicle, but the high walls separating each compound from the next fairly insured the secure anonymity insisted upon by virtually everyone these days. It was broadly understood that it was only through absolute undetectability that you could be safe from targeting by those who would harm your family, would seek to take whatever you had if given the opportunity. Remote socializing had come to be seen as the only safe form of human engagement, and even in these

virtual spaces, considerable safety protocols had been introduced to keep out undesirables posing as honest taxpayers, wolves cloaked in digital wool.

Peck had signed up for the relocation program largely because the tax incentives combined with his service deduction made the move more-or-less cost effective, but he had had a difficult time convincing Mikaela of its necessity, not to mention its moral defensibility. She had been unsurprisingly disgusted by the idea of it, and had rightly predicted that it would only make things worse in terms of human estrangement. Peck had agreed with her argument that it was a wrongheaded and dangerous example of social engineering, but privately he had been glad for the opportunity to move out of the city, had been for some time uneasy with the barely contained chaos of what came to be called the nether zones. More than that, he feared what they might become once severed from the homezones, once they were fully stripped of tax revenue and so could no longer support basic public services. He, like everyone, had seen the horror stories on his feed, had heard what life was like in the failed citystates of Old Eastland and Treeway.

As always, Mikaela could see his true heart on the matter, and had chided him for what she saw as his ready acquiescence to the “fear campaign” that she saw as driving the program, but in the end it hadn’t mattered, as the building that housed theirs and Mast’s apartment had been flagged for vagrancy promotion and so slated for demolition.

Peck had been greatly relieved by this intervention. He had a more personal reason for wanting to move, a reason that he was fairly certain Mikaela was attuned to, even if for all her vaunted honesty she was reluctant to acknowledge. He knew he needed to get her away from Mast.

“Welcome to the 10’s! Please be advised of upcoming compulsory checkpoint. Your PL data has been requested. Release data?” The squirrel peered at Peck from the display, its tail waving rhythmically behind its bucktoothed smile, its exaggerated cartoon eyes blinking expectantly. Looking at it again, Peck wasn’t so certain that it was a squirrel at all, it might be a beaver or some other extinct creature he’d never actually seen. Peck laughed to himself at the overlapping absurdity of it all: whatever this imaginary creature was, it was offering him an option where one did not really exist, a pretense of choice.

Peck allowed himself a moment to imagine what would happen if he refused the request. He was pretty sure that the squirrel/beaver would ask him repeatedly if he was “sure” before honoring such an ill-advised and dangerous directive, then finally conclude their exchange with an expression of sad uncertainty and maybe a shake of its head. What would happen then? Would the Peacer’s open fire on his vehicle, or would they just disable it remotely? If they didn’t kill him outright, what would they do to him once they had him in custody? Would they bother questioning him verbally or immediately resort to enhanced interrogation? But of course all of this was just idle speculation. It was only because of The Tuck that Peck even indulged this kind of thought; never for a moment did he —or anyone in their right mind— actually consider refusing this kind of request. To do so would be like announcing yourself a member of the Tear.

“Yes,” he intoned to the waiting rodent, who winked at him again, this time supplementing the gesture with a even broader smile, a goofy giggle and an outsized thumbs-up gesture.

It was past nighfall by now and a few moments passed before the lights of the checkpoint grew visible. At first they were just a faint and somewhat eerie glow beyond the treeline, but as the Stilway rounded the final corner, they were bright to near blinding, almost as though a spotlight was trained directly on the vehicle.

The shift was disorienting, and Peck couldn't help but raise a hand to shield his eyes, once again thankful that he was in Mikaela's car, which abruptly slowed itself to a near crawl and maneuvered to a left lane still not entirely visible to Peck. Normally he would have been annoyed by the loss of control, but had he been in the Merc, a piloted approach would have been virtually impossible, and whatever alternative the situation offered was not immediately evident to him. Clearly the protocols had changed.

A number of roads converged upon this checkpoint, but traffic was light and Peck found himself situated in a lane behind only one other car, the occupants of which —though dramatically silhouetted by the bright lights— were clearly the family that he had observed some hours earlier at the scene of the Peace action.

They were much less animated this time, occupied as they were with an interrogation that was taking place on each side of them, two black-clad Peacers directing questions at the parents as a third walked a large dog slowly around the perimeter of the car.

Peck watched as the father gesticulated apologetically, shrugging his shoulders and throwing up his hands in some sort of pained explanation, and for all their earlier loathsomeness, Peck couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for this family who suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of it. He had seen something on his feed some years ago —back when “foreign culture” had been an option on trough settings— a bite about a kind of puppetry from the far East that used shadows on lighted scrimms to tell stories of their gods and heroes. There

had been vizo of it, and Peck can remember being strangely affected by it; something about the contrast of light and dark, and how you felt as though you couldn't quite make out the details — couldn't really see all that was going on— made it more powerful than it would have been otherwise. There was a sort of mystery to it, both terrible and beautiful, and Peck thought now about how that was really the only way to tell a story: with light and shadow, and in a way that showed you —or maybe just reminded you— that it's better to not really see everything or to understand what's really going on. That the real power was in the not seeing.

And then the dog was barking at the trunk of the car and Peck watched as the Peacer on the passenger side pointed with some sort of club or stick, signaling it seemed to someone just out of sight, and the car with the family inside slowly descended, drawn hydraulically and disappeared into some catacomb hidden beneath them all. Peck waited as the peacer with the club held his car at bay with a raised hand and then waived him through without any of them offering so much a glance in his direction.

Dear C,

I remember when you went away when I was six or so, to England, I think, or some other place in Europe that's part of someplace else now. You had to go for work, I know and knew then because you told me, but still I thought that you had left me, that you had decided to start over without me and Mom. I remember that I missed you so much that I came to hate you for it, wanted so much to tell you so that you would hurt as well, and also so that you'd see that I understood what you had always told me: that there are consequences to what we do. I needed you to understand that I finally knew what you were saying: that it never matters if it's something we have to do, or something we decide to do, in the end we have to be prepared for the consequences, and that we always have to face them alone. I guess I wanted to tell you to be sure that you understood this as well as you made me understand it, but I never got to while you were alive, so I still don't know if you understand, even now that you are past any sort of understanding. I think you knew then that it could never be the same between us after you left, even though you would come back a year or so later, that you would return then and in many ways still be my father. I learned in that year that I could never really trust you, never count on you to be there for me in the way that a child wants to believe his father will always be, even if I understood that you only did what you had to do. Was this part of your lesson? There is change to every relationship especially those of fathers and sons, but this was the consequence that changed everything for both of us. This was the change that allowed me to let you die alone. I hope you can understand that I only did what I had to do, and that you died knowing how well I learned your lesson.

-Your living Son

He found him on genlync but synched to his wife's PL so he'd know that he had him.

"Hi, Honey." Peck could hear a hum in the background and knew that the guy must be at the wheel. Normally he would aim for maximum impact, but he'd lost one off a bridge a year or so ago and since then he opted for a slower squeeze on the drivers. You never knew how they might react when the severity of the situation dawned on them.

"Hello, David." He was trying for familiar, relaxed, like he could be a friend, but he could hear the tight menace in his own voice, was sure in the pause that followed that the mark heard it too.

"Who is this? Where is Helen? What have..." And then another pause as he likely pieced together the situation. It didn't usually take them long these days; the pinch was suddenly on everyone's feed. Not that it helped them avoid it.

"What do you want?" This guy was quicker than most; he sounded almost impatient, already on the defensive, like he had something better to do. He made a mental note: careful with this one.

"I think you know what we want. The question is how much."

"Well, how much then?" The hum was gone. David had evidently pulled his car over rather than set it to auto. The assertiveness in his voice was not a good sign and Peck wondered briefly whether the runners had made a mistake in their selection.

"You *tell me*, David: how much are your secrets worth to you?" This was not his usual approach, toying out the grab, but this guy needed reigning in already, needed a reminder of who

was in control of the situation. Peck didn't think he could get him to break down, whimper and plead like they sometimes did, but he needed to hear the fear in the voice, needed to know that he fully appreciated what was at stake. Only then could he see the true value of what Peck was selling.

"This your first time doing this, squim?" Peck heard a contemptuous puff of nose-breath through the line and then a faint chuckle. Who the hell had screened this guy?

Peck sent the vizo and said nothing, allowing the mark to work himself up with a stream of insults. This guy might be quick on the uptake but he seemed oddly blind to the facts. Had he had The Tuck, or was he just a natural never-surrender type? Either way, he clammed-up quick when he got the clip. Peck let the silence sit between them, let David dangle in the dread of his imagination.

"Don't." said David in a voice that was not quite a plea, but close.

"Don't what, David?" It was impossible to feel bad for this prick and Peck was starting to enjoy the squeeze, making his finger-snapping motion in anticipation of David's capitulation.

"Don't..." an exasperated sigh —this guy was not accustomed to giving up— then, finally, "...tell Helen." Peck smiled involuntarily, as if David could see him.

"Well, that's entirely up to you, isn't it?" Peck was a smarmy therapist, his voice dripping with feigned empathy.

"OK." Another sigh, but this one different, signaling defeat. It never failed to amaze Peck how quickly it could turn like this: the guy was broken.

"Helen doesn't need to know who you really are, David. You can trust us to keep your secrets. But, you need to give us a reason to trust *you*."

Mikaela,

I try not to think of you, but sometimes you slip into my mind in the darkest hours, when my guard is down and I am at my weakest. I have to wonder what it means that I find you then, when I feel the least myself. Are you there to comfort, to console, to bring me back to strength as I would have you do in real life? Or are you the thing that hovers and haunts me? My loss, my love, my failure, the one that taunts from a place beyond reach, that teaches me again and again that what I want beyond all else is always what can never be mine?

There was a time when you let me believe that you could love me, wasn't there? I know that there was, but I suppose what I'll never know is if you only let me believe it, let me think it was possible in the way that you wanted everyone to believe in the endless power of possibility. You have always claimed to believe in the truth, Mike, and I'm sure you never thought that you were lying to me, but you were, even if you allowed yourself to be blind to it. I think that maybe the reason you couldn't see the lie was because it was part of the bigger lie that you had built around you; about Peck, about me, about yourself and the Roughers and the whole rotting corpse that is this world.

And it was a lovely thing to see you in thrall to this lie, to see the light of your eyes, your voice so full of hope in how things could be. You were like a beautiful child and we all loved you for it, everyone who knew you, who fell into your orbit, but no one more than Peck and I. And you needed to be loved more than anything, didn't you, Mike? Sometimes I even wonder if you ever really believed all the stuff that you said, or if maybe it was just that you knew how irresistible it made you, kept everyone flinging themselves at the flicker of your light.

But I think you believed it, mostly, your fairytale. Even I can't be so cynical as to think that it was all an act. I guess I even have to believe that you truly loved Peck, as inexplicable as that has always been to me, but I suppose we both know that I have never been able to accept everything he was given in this life. It always killed me to hear him complain about having to share you with others, as though he somehow deserved all of you, when I would have done anything to have just a piece of what he had, what he was willing to waste in his weakness and self-pity. You may have been fooling yourself in how you saw this world, Mike, in believing that it could be anything but what it has always been, but Peck's lie is one I could never abide, or forgive. Even though I always thought you naïve, I could always see the strength in you. It takes courage to see potential in people, in the world as it is, but in Peck there is only ever been the illusions of the coward. I heard that he got The Tuck, and that even then he couldn't hold on to you, none of which surprises me. Peck is a man doomed to lose everything because for all that he has been given, he has earned none of it.

But you have heard all this before and never wanted to hear me say it then. So I will leave it now, believing as before that you will know that what I say is true. As you maintain, Mike, there may truly be potential for change in this world, but a man is who he shows himself to be, and all The Tucks in the world can never change that.

I have come to accept that you will never love me in the way that I want you to, but I have to believe that you have learned the value of your heart, that your love is too precious a commodity to be squandered on someone who cannot appreciate its value, is too weak and blind to know what it is good for. If you cannot give it to me, Mike, I hope you will promise to find another deserving of its grace.

Forever, Mast

He'd come, no doubt in his mind. It was an old whistle but he knew how to blow it and felt sure that Peck would respond to its familiar, comforting call.

Peck. It wasn't hard to have some feelings of nostalgia when he thought of the man—they had grown up together for god's sake—but Mast almost always felt the tug of his one-sided smirk (the one Jef had warned him about) when he said the name out loud. He knew he would need to be careful not to show it to Peck, who was maybe daft but had never been stupid, or unobservant. If he got a whiff of Mast's true face he would definitely walkout, and possibly start on a suss that could make trouble for the thing. He certainly wasn't beyond him, for all his limitations. It galled him to think that he needed Peck, that a thing of such consequence hinged on the cooperation of such a man.

Mast spun his chair away from desk and planted the soles of his climbers on the glassoid window with a firmness that elicited the wobbling ululation from the earthquake resistant material that somehow never failed to please him. It reminded him of a whining but wordless plea, like an old man shiver-whimpering, a tin cup in his bony, outstretched hands. He smiled and huffed, despite himself. Too sweet.

No, he would have to tap into the old feelings, such as they were; would have to think of the long familiarity, the shared spaces and times, the *friendship*. Peck would expect that, would need it. Also, he would need to feel that Mast was still a little bitter over the whole Mikaela thing. Well, that wouldn't be hard, but he needed to be sure that he didn't overplay it. It was important to keep in mind that Peck knew him, as much as Mast imagined it possible for any person to *know* someone like him.

Certainly, Mast knew Peck. The first time he had seen him, heard him talk and saw how he carried himself during sixth grade gym class, Mast felt he had a pretty solid bead on who Peck was and nothing he had seen of him since had warranted a reevaluation of this initial impression. If anything, the closer he had gotten to Peck (and they had been very close) had only reinforced this formative sense, rendering Peck an almost cartoonish figure in his mind. In fact, Mast realized now that the image of Peck that had sprung to mind causing his halflaugh was indeed an actual cartoon rendering of his old cronie, a hopeful but sad-eyed smile on his eager handsome face, a look that said: show me what I can do to help. Just how handsome could he be now, Mast wondered, given the time and what he had heard of Peck's recent lifestyle decisions. Mast allowed himself the fantasy of a withered and desiccated Peck, still cartooned, but now wobble-voiced and pleading, the tin cup extended, shakily. Lovely, but unlikely, and wholly unsuitable for what he had in mind for his oldest friend.

The freeze had been unexpected, especially since it had been in the eighties the day before. The weather had been unpredictable for years now, but this seemed like a new sort of strange, unprecedented and logic defying. It suggested a sort of chaotic tipping point; that there really was nothing you could rely on anymore, like anything could happen at any time. But maybe it had been like this for some time and she just hadn't noticed, ensconced as she had been in the artificial environment that was life in the compounds. She had known that things were bad for some time —bad in ways that extended well beyond the weather—but she recognized now the vast gulf between abstract understanding and an understanding born of first hand experience, of being within it rather than looking from without with a concern that couldn't help but be detached with the distance born of comfortable separation.

It had been her plan to give up that comfort, to live as they did, but she had to admit that she had been unprepared for the hardship that this living would entail, the pain and fear that comprised nearly every moment of life in a Rougher camp. She had known that she would miss the security —and the luxury, if she was to be honest— that she enjoyed in her old life, but it didn't take long to recognize that such relative ease of living had rendered her ill-suited for life in the nether zones, with nothing but a tent and a thermo-bag to protect her from the elements. Even five months in, three in this camp and two in another that had been even worse —just a squat of hardtimers with no hope or even a spark of revolutionary spirit— it was impossible for her to not long every day for a hot shower, for clean clothes, for a door that she could lock behind her and feel safe.

But that was the point, wasn't it? She had been spoiled in her old life, like everyone who lived in the homezones, spoiled and deluded, a right little boojie princess. Which was something she had promised herself she would never be. There had been a time —it seemed so long ago now— that she had believed it possible to effect change from the inside, that she could remain where she was and still do the right thing, but she knew now that that had been cowardice on her part; a soft-headed vanity designed to make her feel better about herself through half-assed commitment to her so-called principles. And then that had not even been possible. Even those palliative measures, the sit-ins and protests, had come to represent a threat to both her and Peck, and that hadn't been fair to either of them, especially Peck, whose guilt over his father and the things he done in the name of National Service had finally unmanned him, it seemed.

Mikaela tightened the hood on her thermo-bag and allowed herself a moment to think of Peck, her Peck, to call his face to mind and remember the man as he had been, had remained in part after the breakdown and still recognizable once he had had the procedure and become a man who absurdly —but not entirely unendearingly— imagined himself freed of the dictates of fear. It was still dark out, an hour at least before daybreak and the scratch on the tent, the whistle that would announce a call to order and to the planning that had been her reason for coming here in the first place. She could permit herself this brief indulgence, a small happy memory dug from a past forever gone. The challenge, as always, was in making it seem real.

There came another checkpoint and then one after that, both of which Peck was waved through without so much as a second glance from the Peacers. He was now in the 11s —the squirell/beaver had wasted no time in welcoming him— and had to wonder how he had managed to penetrate into the most exclusive Northeastern zone without so much as a word exchanged with any security personnel. His rating was favorable, particularly after the voluntary retiring of his father, but he couldn't imagine it was good enough to avoid any sort of scrutiny from those charged with monitoring all the comings and goings of a zone that housed some of the most sensitive research facilities, governmental apparatus and the homezones of those who peopled these institutions.

Peck knew that Mast must have something to do with it, had been able to alert the checkpoints somehow and prevent any harassment that might delay or derail his journey, but no matter how much he sussed at it he couldn't fill in all the blanks. Even if he had been able to rightly predict Peck's coming, how could he know when? How could he have known that he would be driving Mikaela's car, a car whose existence he shouldn't even be aware of existing? It made so little sense, and Peck felt another momentary prick of what he again recognized as a vestige of former fear, a sense that not everything was as it seemed and that he was stumbling into something that he had allowed himself to be insufficiently prepared for. He understood abruptly that he would need to be cautious in a way that was not his natural custom, and certainly not natural to what he had imagined to be —if not a warm family reunion— at least the reconnection of old friends.

Could it really be that Mast had become so powerful in the past five years that the Security Services were subject to his direct bidding, to his command? Peck had heard and further assumed that Mast had achieved an impressive level of success since they had last seen each other, but the implications of this apparently unchecked authority were difficult for him to wrap his head around. If he had been elected to some branch of the council Peck felt sure that he would have known, so it had to some ancillary post, an appointment of some sort that allowed him to circumvent the normal protocols of the law. Clearly, he was ambitious enough, and no one was ultimately more capable than Mast, so really nothing was beyond the realm of possibility. Despite his apprehension, Peck felt strange flush of pride for what it appeared his old friend had achieved, and then immediately another prick of foreboding, recognizing that his sentimentality might be misplaced, or even prove dangerous. It was obvious that whoever Mast was now, it would be foolhardy to assume that he would still regard Peck with any affection, especially given the tenor of their last encounters. He felt slightly foolish, a sensation he registered even through The Tuck. Yes, he thought to himself, he would have to be careful of this new Mast, whoever he turned out to be.

It hadn't seemed appropriate to show up to meet Mast in the evening. The man he remembered seldom slept more than a few hours a night, so Peck felt certain that he would be prepared to receive him no matter the hour, but a vague yet insistent instinct told him that this such an approach was strategically suspect, that the dark and Mast's comfort within it would somehow afford him an advantage whatever the nature of his intentions.

And Peck was tired. He hadn't yet had time to process the scenes of the day and couldn't quite shake the image of the tiny hand pressed to glass—the truth of it more certain now framed in recall—or that of the car and the family inside descending slowly to some hidden hell beneath.

“Squirrel: find me a restarea.” Peck was unsurprised now to find the cheery rodent scuttle obediently to the center display, again his tail wagging rhythmically in some pantomime of consideration or thought.

“There is a charge and sleep two miles from here on Frontage Road. Would you like me to redirect?”

Peck nodded absently and then registered the strangeness of the car's evident comprehension of this gesture, the buck-toothed creature now clad in a spacesuit and zooming on rocket boots toward a photo-accurate depiction of the earth that grew larger and more defined before transforming into a cartooned rendering of the street he now drove on. A red, flashing beacon on the horizon of the graphic seemed to represent his destination, and the squirrel now ran as though leading the car, his spacesuit discarded for a retro-stripped tracksuit and a pair of conspicuously branded runners. Peck shook his head slowly and snorted in half-disbelief. The

squirrel turned his head toward him then, his panting expression of exertion dissolving into a broad grin, then one oversized eye winked at him again, this time in a way that Peck, in his present state, couldn't help but see as faintly menacing.

Peck had expected well fortified compounds and the conspicuous presence of security personal in the 11s, so he was surprised to find evidence of neither. Instead, the main boulevard that Mikaela's car followed at a deliberate but leisurely pace presented itself as a bucolic and stately town center, a snapshot of a bygone era that was only recognizable to Peck from movies he vaguely remembered that had already been ancient in his childhood. The effect had been clearly constructed, but Peck couldn't help but be impressed—and even a little moved—by the perfect artifice of the scene, by the towering elms that shaded the street, the ungated new-colonial-style mansions that skirted the thoroughfare—each one of a slightly different design, he noted—and set behind its own perfectly groomed lawn. The lazy arc of the sprinklers so perfectly lit with golden morning light nearly mesmerized him and reminded him of some old political plug he must have seen in a school civics class, or maybe in one of his father's nostalgia reelz.

Even more amazing to Peck were the sidewalks and the people he now saw actually walking on them. Peck's head turned involuntarily as he watched with astonishment a friendly exchange between two people, an old lady and a young woman who was pushing a stroller. It had been a long time since Peck had heard or thought of that word, "stroller," and it took a moment for him to remember it, and once he had it still sounded strange to his mind's ear, like a foreign term or some sort of gibberish.

The squirrel car moved now at a steady, slow pace that seemed appropriate to the setting—parade speed, Peck thought and wondered if that was even a thing—and he had ample time to record the spectacle of the two women. The older of the two wore a ruffled blouse and an antiquated but somehow still stylish tweed skirt, the legs visible beneath the knee-length hem revealing a remarkable state of preservation. Zooming in on the rearview, Peck now saw that her face was unlined, her posture that of a young woman, with the only aspect of her appearance suggesting advanced age her silver hair, which was straight and thick and pulled smartly atop her head, two sticks protruding from the tidy bun. Peck watched as she arched her back and neck and tilted her head upward in an exaggerated expression of laughter, her teeth gleaming white in the sun. The younger woman was smiling and seemed to be telling a story as she absently pulled the stroller back and forth in a rocking motion, some sort of mug held in her available hand.

Peck scanned the two sides of the street and his eyes locked onto another scene that seemed so perfect as to suggest staging: a grandfatherly man squatting before a shy young boy with a baseball glove, his father's standing above grinning with muted pride, the paternal hand resting on the boy's shoulder. Next it was two men running side by side, both in their early thirties, well-muscled and confident, the blond one relating some sort of anecdote that elicited a knowing smirk from the dark-haired and smaller of the two.

“They're talking about a female coworker, who Jim has slept with, even though he has a girlfriend. Jim is telling Tom about the strange granny-panties with little hearts on them that Annie was wearing during their last encounter when last time she wore a thong.” The thought had come completely unbidden into Peck's mind and he had no idea where it had come from even as he was completely convinced of its accuracy. How could he know this? Was he losing his mind?

Peck understood what it meant to be loosed from reality's centripetal tug, but this didn't feel like a loss of senses; nothing like the distortion he was always aware of even at his worst. It felt instead like a return, something remembered, a thing restored to him.