

Beastiarium

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*The Other Side of Disaster: Towards a Poetics of Uncertainty and Disruption*

If I had to point to a central ethos in my fiction, it is that it strives to occupy a sort of unsettled middle space. This space encompasses not only my Todorovian approach to genre, but also the rigors I tend to put my characters through and where I decide to leave them at each story's close. My ultimate goal in writing any story, whether conscious or not, is to leave my reader with more questions than answers, without a wholly satisfying resolution, and in the end, as muddled and confused as my characters. I'm not a hundred percent sure how effective this recipe is at producing enjoyable readable fiction. But since these tactics seem to be my modus operandi, the fiction I write tends to be of disruption, of instability, and of doubt.

If I had to put locate my poetics on the map of literary theory and history, I would have to say, above all, my fiction is of an anti-Enlightenment bent. My stories have little interest in human perfection or achievement. There are no epic journeys in search of personal nirvanas. No self-fulfilling revelations nor Joycean epiphanies. My characters live fully in the muck of a post-Western world, a world dominated by indulgent technologies and ever-decreasing social circles. A place where technology has finally stripped away all of the old myths and now provides direct, unfiltered access to human desire, free from all of the messy interactions with actual people. The social order has been fragmented, and my characters live among the ruins. For better or worse, these stories operate on the other side of this disaster. My characters are left a strange breed of forager, forever picking over a broken landscape in search of any relevant meaning. When I was a teenager, I was fortunate enough to stumble upon Anton

Chekov's classic short story "The Lady with the Dog." I didn't know this at the time, but the story would gradually shape how I thought about and largely approached not just literature, but art in general. The story, itself, is rather simple. Two people trapped in loveless marriages meet by accident, fall in love, and after being separated for some time, are reunited at the end of the story. But where Chekov's work breaks with tradition is how he leaves his reader: in indeterminacy. Do the lovers forgo their comfortable lives in order to risk an existence of hardship by running away together? Or do they simply return to their respective spouses and count down the minutes of their barren lives? In the end, Chekov refuses to give any sort of a definitive resolution. By leaving the answer up to the reader, he transforms his story into a litmus test of his reader's temperament and worldview. By concluding in the nebulous region of uncertainty, Chekov's stories are less stories than they are fortune-telling machines. Squeeze the metal grip with your hand and all will be told.

Nothing has defined my character and outlook than the string of tragedies I suffered a decade ago. Late in August of 2006, the levees of New Orleans broke after a monstrous hurricane ripped over the region. The city was flooded with up to fifteen feet of water in some areas. Luckily, I was hundreds of miles away in Chicago when this tragedy struck New Orleans. But in the aftermath, my brother and father passed away during the rebuilding process. When I returned to the city, what I found was, in effect, a disaster zone. The city was a wretched mess. Corridors of trash, wrecked refrigerators, and molding furniture lined every street. I heard gun shots at all hours of the day. And even the most casual rainstorm would knock the electricity out. It was pretty obvious to anyone who lived in Post-Katrina New Orleans that any conception of a social order was

an illusion, and you were pretty much on your own if you ran into trouble. Even today, ten years later, and living in a city with an established and ever-present social structure, the knowledge that chaos and disorder is lurking in the background and could break out in less than a day's time is a reality for me still, and it colors my perception of those around me. I certainly do not take for granted how little it takes to push a society into savage madness.

As bleak as this outlook may be on its surface, it would be a mistake to overlook the hopefulness and perseverance at its core. Anyone who has survived a disaster, whether social or personal, can attest to the temperament and resilience it brings to their character. Difficult tasks are simply a matter of course. People come and go from your life more easily. As cliched as it may sound, it really is true that what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. A lot of people didn't make it out of post-Katrina New Orleans, and my brother and father can be counted among them. I survived, though, and to this day I can't help but draw a line of demarcation right down the middle of my life, before and after the hurricane, between who I was then and who I am now, a line to separate the illusions I once had and the clarity of vision I struggle to maintain today. Therefore, at its root, my poetics is a poetics of disaster, of disruption, and most importantly, of resilience. Disruption typically acts as the impetus for my plots. Disaster tips my stories over into climax. And my plots almost always resolve in uncertainty, a place I believe is the key to resiliency in the face of chaos, failure, and destruction. It's only in doubt that one can be free of illusions, and surviving disaster and tragedy is the shortest possible path to seeing the future and the world with honest eyes and a resilient character. No one informs my take on genre more so than that of Tzvetan Todorov. His conception

of the Fantastic has allowed me to reorient how I see my fiction in relation to the established traditions of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Todorov sees any sort of Fantasy, Science Fiction, Surrealism, Horror or Magical Realism as genres or styles overtly concerned with his conception of the Fantastic, a nebulous idea he positions between two other concepts he has dubbed as the Marvelous and the Uncanny. The Uncanny describes events which tend to be, at first, utterly unexplainable. Eventually, though, these events will come to be accepted as real once the plot explains away its causes. A horror film where the supernatural antagonist is revealed to be an ordinary person is an example of the Fantastic, i.e. the unexplainable, settling in the Uncanny. The Marvelous, on the other hand, is any event which is beyond human comprehension or reason. A good example is the AS Byatt short story “The Stone Woman,” where the protagonist inexplicably begins to sprout rocky outcrops from her body until she turns into an actual living statue.

It is between these two concepts, the Marvelous and the Uncanny, where the Fantastic resides. According to Todorov, any work of literature principally concerned with fantastic elements must eventually resolve in either of these two categories, whether it be within the bounds of rationality or not. Todorov argues that it is the tension of where exactly the Fantastic eventually resolves which makes these genres so alluring. The reader is propelled through the plot in anticipation of this resolution. In short, the Fantastic is the engine of the plot.

As a writer, my goal is to neither resolve in the Uncanny nor the Marvelous. The nature of the Fantastic in my stories is of second concern to the development and progress of my characters. Keeping my reader in this unsettled region for as long as possible, if not for the entire scope of the plot, allows me to harness the uncertainty

produced by the Fantastic. One writer who manages to do this expertly with both science fiction and fantasy is Ursula le Guin. Her novels and stories more often than not resolve in the Marvelous, but the nature of the Fantastic is almost always secondary to the effect it has on her characters. Le Guin's concern, first and foremost, is with the humans she depicts and not with the fantastical elements of the world they occupy.

Similar to Le Guin, I am concerned less with the whiz-bang of lasers fired by rowdy space pirates, as I am with the impact such technological advancements have upon the psychology of my characters. As our society becomes more and more submerged with technology, it's with little surprise that science fiction has grown into the preeminent genre to capture the drastic and radical transformations our society is currently undergoing. I find it's a genre ripe for experimentation and advancement.

Fantasy, too, is a genre I feel I could find success subverting by grinding it into a more realistic mode. Following in the steps of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Cormac McCarthy, both of whom blended the genres of Fantasy and the Western, respectively, I hope to combine Fantasy with literary realism in order to explore new themes, plots and situations. The idea of a sort of realistic Fantasy seems intriguing and certainly fits in with the contentiousness of my poetics.

Conversely, I am interested in the idea of science fiction that offers little or no explanation, and always settles in the Marvelous, if it settles at all. PK Dick is a master of writing fiction that does just this. In his novels *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *The Man in the High Castle* little explanation is given about the science fiction elements found in the plot. The androids are a given fact in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and the alternate reality of *The Man in the High Castle* is never

adequately explained.

Each of these stories begins with a disruption; a happenstance encounter in a hospital, an errant string, an android housemate, a time-traveling blip, a love for a tattooed lady, or the birth of a giant into a sleepy mountain town. And each ends in confusion, frustration, and loss. But each loss is far from final. In many instances, my characters are better off in the end, for what they lose are negative qualities of their character, stubborn habits and personal flaws: vanity, narrow-mindedness, and most of all, sorrow. The opening story of the collection, *The Blind Oasis*, is a story about internalized sorrow and finding a way to release it. June, the protagonist, reenacts her brother's suicide by plunging off of a pier into the ocean. But instead of swimming out to sea as her brother did, her instinct to live resists and she's forced to shore. The next morning her mother finds a bit of string coiled inside of her ear. She takes the young girl to the doctor and hijinks ensue. Once the string is finally removed, thanks to the help of a strange character, jets of water blast out of June's ears, eyes and mouth, flooding the town until the water melds with that of the neighboring ocean. When the townsfolk return to June's hospital room, instead of June, they find her mother cradling her previously lost son. June is nowhere to be found.

Obviously, the water in the story is the physical embodiment of June's sorrow over the loss of her brother, and it is only after she has found a way to release it that the true memory of her brother is returned to her. For years after my own brother died in an unexplainable drowning, I blamed myself and was wracked with guilt. Every memory I had of him was a negative one where I had neglected, manipulated or acted cruelly toward him. Once I eventually began to overcome my sorrow and guilt, the more joyful memories of him slowly returned and I was able to find peace with our past together.

What was most surprising about this well of sorrow inside of me was how painfully oblivious I was of it. So when I set out to write this story, I wanted to capture this peculiar ignorance, hence the title, *The Blind Oasis*.

The second story in my collection is called *Eight Days in July* and it tries to imagine first contact with an alien, but from the perspective of the inferior species. I imagine a being capable of traversing the perils and vast distances of our galaxy would possibly be beyond human perception, so I did my best to keep my protagonist in the dark as to what he was dealing with exactly. My protagonist is a poor black man who is trying to make a living from the restoration of post-Katrina New Orleans by buying drywall at a discount in Texas and selling it at a marked-up value back in New Orleans, where it is in short supply. My character in this story is a victim of poverty, a failed education system, and largely lives in the margins of society. But at his core, he's a decent human being who feels compassion for others and due to these qualities, he's able to make contact with the story's central mystery, the peculiar alien entity. The plot culminates in the protagonist forming a social connection with the entity he encounters and as a reward, the entity heals the physical scars on his face he suffered due to his impoverished upbringing. The impetus for this story concerns language and communication, and the idea that kindness and morality are the most effective and universal ways of understanding others.

*Fidelity Decay* is my take on a time travel story. At its heart, the story is about the inexactness of memory and nostalgia as it is about the misplaced hopes of the future. My protagonist is inexplicably tossed backwards into the past and is forced to live in close quarters with both a younger, more optimistic version of himself and an older, defeated version from even deeper into the future. In an ironic twist, the protagonist eventually

takes advantage of his younger self, i.e. his past, and is predictably chastised by his older version. The title *Fidelity Decay* plays with the idea of the grandfather paradox. By going back in time, one risks ruining your own the future. And likewise, by sending different versions of my protagonist to live together in the past, their very character and morality is called into question and altered. However, in another ironic move, my protagonist not only finds it difficult to benefit from his knowledge of the future, he finds the changes he tries to make have little impact whatsoever. The central point of the story is to underline how our advanced technological society has actually ruined our future instead of perfecting it and is making us more immoral by feeding our desires instead of weening us off of them.

The next story is by far the shortest and could probably use a few extra scenes to fully pad it out. *The Curse of Cain* is a sort of forlorn history of what begins as a relationship of convenience between the narrator and the eponymous Tattooed Lady, who is a genetic anomaly in that her tattoos are natural and periodically bloom in and out of existence. Being a pariah, though, the Tattooed Lady is forever at risk of violence from the general public, and seeks sanctuary in the relationship she has with the ornery narrator. In the grand scheme of my thesis, this story is a companion with the final story about a woman who grows into a giant and causes havoc in her hometown. Both stories are takes on feminism, but from opposite angles. *The Tattooed Lady* is somewhat a commentary on my own feminism and how fragile it can be at times. The fight against chauvinism and sexist behavior can be a daily struggle at times as my brain fights against my base male urges. But the story can be taken as a metaphor for the larger give-and-take between those born into positions of power and the powerless populations who have no choice but

to seek their protection. The story concludes with the narrator feeling a loss of purpose and an extreme uselessness as he watches his ward banish herself to a commune for the remainder of her life. He knows, on one hand, that due to his advanced age he won't be able to protect her for much longer, so her self-banishment is for the best. But on the other hand, he feels the selfish desire to keep her in his company for the emotional and sexual comfort she provides him. I chose to end the story on this conflicted note because I see it as a truly human moment.

The penultimate story is my take on the classic android tale. My focus is less on an artificial life form finding humanity than it is on the possibility of one exceeding humans in their own humanity. My aim was to reorient the conception of humanity around the morality incidentally achieved by an advanced artificial life form. My protagonist uses the android for sexual and emotional fulfillment without feeling a single pang of guilt due to her objectification of it. Similar to my time travel story, I attempt to do a complete reversal of the trope I was working with. Instead of the android merely wanting to be human, I leave my protagonist recognizing the moral superiority, emotional depth, and experience of the android. The place where I chose to leave my protagonist is that of a child, an uncultured animal, being told moral fables by the android. This moment is a reversal of traditional android stories in that the synthetic being is imbuing its human counterpart with humanity and not vice versa.

The closing story is a story about a giant, which is ironically named, *The Generic Giant*. On a personal level this story is a commentary on my own intellectualism. For the greater part of my life, I've felt somewhat alienated by the majority of people around me, people more concerned with wealth, reproduction, or simply passing time. In contrast,

I've always been with grander pastimes, literature, art, music and whatnot. I've been an voracious reader for much of my life and as a result, I feel I have a larger view of the world and of history. So, in a way, the protagonist of *The Generic Giant* is a literal representation of my worldview in comparison to others' and the central conflict of the story captures my clumsy attempts to fit in with normal, everyday people. Therefore, the conflict of the story is one of identity, a conflict that is borne out on Rona's body. As she grows and grows, the community she lives in conversely shrinks to the point where Rona has no choice but to flee society altogether. Her identity is then wiped clean until she is re-tamed and brought back into civil society. Yet due to the great difference in Rona's size and the community's narrow-mindedness, only one side can survive and so, the town is destroyed, a la King-Kong-style. The story, and my entire thesis, concludes with a moment of hope as Rona recognizes the call of other giants off in the distant mountains and she manages to escape to find them. This conclusion illustrates the few people I've found in my life who have passions greater than day-to-day survival or the perpetuation of our species, for the people who chase giants.

The title of my collection is "Beastiarium," which is a word I made up by, rather obviously, by combining the word 'beast' with the latin root '-arium'. I chose this title in hope of capturing both the irony and the paradoxical nature of my characters and their situations. The irony of the title lies in the idea that a beast is an uncontrollable entity, so to create a 'beastiarium' is to put restrictions on this entity. And this is the key to how I approach the so-called modern condition: that we are all animals ferried into abstract categories we neither control, nor even realize we subscribe to. One side note, the title is also an allusion to Julio Cortazar's short story collection, "Bestiary," which has been a

huge influence on how I write my own short stories.

As an artist writing within genre, I look for any opportunity to work against the unwritten rules, to subvert the foundation of the genre itself. By using science fiction and fantasy themes to write stories in the realistic mode, I hope to occupy the hazy inter-region of Todorov's concept of the Fantastic. I want to leave my characters with more questions than answers about just what kind of world they occupy and especially about who they are. I don't want my stories to settle in either the Uncanny or the Marvelous. I want them to buzz with the uncertainty of the Fantastic. I want them to flourish in their own personal disasters.

### *The Blind Oasis*

The itch behind June's ear burrowed into the pulpy sponge of her brain like a clicking beetle. The irritating sensation began the evening she had dropped a wreath of azaleas into the ocean from the very same barnacled dock her brother had jumped from exactly a year before.

Her mother, ever-fussy, had suggested June drop lilies instead. Azaleas are more of a love flower, the heavysset woman had told her. They're usually meant for women.

In the end, June stuck with azaleas and after watching the pink wreath spin atop a green whirlpool before vanishing into its depths, she dropped herself into the seething sea.

Pushing off from the pillars of the pier, June swam desperately for shore, fighting against the invisible pull of the waves until her eyes bulged and her muscles burned from exhaustion. Once ashore, she stretched out on the beachhead and napped in the angry stare of the sun.

The next morning, June discovered the itch quietly gnawing beneath her right ear, her favorite of the two. Thinking it nothing more than an errant bit of sand and seawater, she did her best to dislodge it with her finger. But this only seemed to increase the muffled buzz and, accordingly, increase her irritation.

At breakfast, she complained to her mother of her predicament in the hopes she might offer some sort of sage remedy only a mother would have knowledge of. The itch was a constant presence in the background of her thoughts and tinted her mood a deep shade of blue. June was sure she'd go mad if she didn't find a solution soon.

Have you tried shaking your head repeatedly, her mother suggested. Like when you

really don't want to eat something?

June gave it a shot, shaking her head until she became dizzy and nearly fell over onto the floor. The remedy seemed to work at first, but the moment the room regained its equilibrium, the itch rebounded and continued on with its bothersome clawing.

Her mother then tried attacking the itch with a Q-tip. She dug with the confident thoroughness of a miner, and not two minutes later she stopped and said aloud, Now what do we have here?

June tried to glance around the side of her head as her mother inserted a pair of tweezers into her ear and removed a long gleaming string out of the girl's head.

Tell me what it is, June said impatiently. Tell me what it is.

It's just some sort of string.

Gross! Pull it out! Pull it out!

June's mother did as she was told. But the more she pulled, the more string inexplicably came forth. Pretty soon, a spool of several feet lay wound in her mother's hand.

She then tried cutting it with a pair of scissors and when that too failed, she tried burning it off with a lit match. Nothing she did, however, had any effect whatsoever.

What am I supposed to do? June whined. I can't go to school with a string hanging out of my head.

I have a plan, but you probably won't like it, her mother said. The older woman wrapped the string several times about her daughter's head and tucked it beneath the girl's black hair. There you go, she said, satisfied. Good as new.

June's mother had made an appointment with the girl's doctor the following week to address the spiderweb-thin string coming out of her daughter's ear. But after two days

spent in the torture of her classmates, her mother managed to get the appointment pushed up to the following Thursday.

Once they had discovered the string, June's classmates had been unable to resist pulling on it at every opportunity. They grabbed it during class, yanked on it while standing in line for lunch, and the sophomores even made a game of grabbing the string and running up and down the hallways with it. It took June so long to bundle up the string, she was late for class and received detention from the vice principal.

The girls, however, were the worst. A gang of the more popular ones caught June alone in the bathroom, forced her into a stall, and tied her to a toilet with a series of knots so tangled and intricate the janitor had to be paged to set the poor, sobbing girl free.

June's doctor was a pipsqueak of a man who wore telescope glasses and a silver mustache so bushy it looked as if a ferret had curled up under his nose and fallen asleep. Indeed, the man was so short, he had to stand atop a stool in order to peer into June's ear with his otoscope.

Hmm...yes...I see, he mumbled. He set the otoscope down and proceeded to pull out great lengths of the sparkling string from June's ear. Minutes later, a pile of the spooled string rose up from the floor right up to the doctor's ankles.

See that you don't fish out her brain, Doctor, June's mother said cheekily.

Of course not, replied the doctor. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. He let go of the string and pretended to consult June's chart. We'll just need to run a few tests. He then backed out of the room in a rather obvious attempt of escape. Moments later, a nurse came into the room with a hospital gown and the announcement that June would be staying the night, so her condition could be, quote-unquote, monitored more closely.

June spent the following month in the hospital and was systematically moved from room to room, wing to wing, so she could be examined by every doctor, specialist, expert, and practically anyone else in the hospital who had a qualified opinion. One by one, she was paraded before audiologists, neurologists, oncologists, and once, even, a surly dentist who knew nothing of the string growing out of June's ear, and could, quite frankly, give two damns, as he, himself, put it. But he recommended, anyway, that she have her wisdom teeth removed soon, or she ran the risk of them becoming impacted.

And so it went, for weeks on end. With each visit by a new doctor, the string was unravelled more and more. Some doctors only removed a few feet, while others would pull out long reams, stretching yards and yards of it out in an inexhaustible supply, each hellbent on being the doctor who reached the end of the seemingly infinite fiber.

One night, weeks into her stay, June muted the documentary she was watching about the Great Valley Mountains in the northern country and asked her mother if she was going to die.

Her mother put down the sweater she was crocheting out of the excess string and told her plainly, Of course not, dear. I'd like to think I'm not unlucky enough a mother to lose both of my children. Now get some sleep, we have another dozen appointments tomorrow.

On and on, the doctors came in a parade of starched lab coats, each picking, poking, and prodding her with questions, fingers, and needles until she felt like a human porcupine.

Flanked by a battalion of doctors, she made the cover of *Medical Maladies Monthly*, and a million dollar prize was even offered by Milton Moses Morrison, the notorious

billionaire and space travel magnate who was known widely in the medical community for his interest in outlandish illnesses. The more bizarre the condition, the more he invested in its scrutiny.

In the end, no solution was found, and the string continued to be unspooled all throughout the winter and deep into the following spring. June had lost considerable weight during this period and lay in her hospital bed like a pale and brittle seashell.

Days before the start of summer, a possible solution arrived from the most unlikely of places. June was close to giving up hope of ever leaving the hospital when a peculiar elderly woman emerged from the thick fog of doctors and began prodding her in the stomach with a stick so smooth and black June mistook it for a taxidermic snake. Upon closer examination, June realized the stick was, in fact, a stupefied cottonmouth, long charmed into its rigid position. She was amazed to see its beady copper eyes were still alive and flicking about the hospital room.

The woman, herself, was of an even stranger appearance. She wore a spotted giraffe coat, had a hairy face and a crooked nose, and her glossy opal eyes were so steady and focused, June came to trust the woman after just one look. And she continued trusting the strange woman even after glancing down and seeing the heads of two baby alligators gawping up at her from the woman's feet.

The elderly woman proceeded to examine June in the most curious manner. She peered up her nostrils, smelled her hair, and even touched a drop of the girl's spit to her tongue. When she did finally speak the room fell into a quick silence.

I am a witch doctor from deep in the swamp, she declared in a voice so pointed several of the doctors shivered from an imagined cold. I have a potential cure for your illness, but

it comes with great risk, more risk than you can possibly imagine. If we are to continue forward, I must have your word that my instructions will be followed to the letter and most importantly, with complete trust. What say you? Do you still have courage in this husk you call a body? She poked June again in the stomach with her walking stick of a snake.

June looked into the Witch Doctor's eyes and nodded gently.

Very well, the Witch Doctor said. The first thing we will need then is an elephant.

With her options long exhausted, June had little choice but to consent to the Witch Doctor's unorthodox treatment. The gang of doctors, however, were acting mostly out of curiosity and, possibly, from the guilt they felt about their own endlessly ineffective remedies. They agreed to assist the Witch Doctor in whatever way possible and promptly set out to fill her meticulous orders.

With the help of June's mother, half of the doctors tracked down as many of June's relatives as they could. The other half of the doctors made their way to the local zoo where they begged, cajoled and finally bribed the zoo's staff to lend them their largest elephant, Kingsford, for the day.

The next morning, the Witch Doctor addressed the crowd of relatives, doctors and any other curious staff members who had gathered in the sunny courtyard nestled on the hospital's rooftop.

The string is of the sea, the Witch Doctor said aloud, and as such it must be returned to the sea. In order for us to accomplish this, we must stretch the string out to its absolute limit. Now, this will require an enormous feat of strength and dedication. Make no mistake, this is no easy task, and its end result is far from certain. Anyone fearful of risk

and danger should leave now. The only person to turn and leave upon hearing the Witch Doctor's warning was a janitor who had worked at the hospital for years and was mere weeks away from retirement; he felt he had seen enough uncertainty to last him a lifetime.

The Witch Doctor then went on to explain her plan in full, and once she was finished the crowd leapt to follow her instructions. The doctors secured June to her hospital bed and then secured the bed with locks and chains to the cold concrete of the hospital itself. The Witch Doctor then fed the string off of the roof to the crowd of June's relatives, doctors and various onlookers who had gathered in the street below. Milton Moses Morrison, himself, was there to pick the string's end out of the air and tie it around the great neck of Kingsford who was happily rubbing his great gray flank against a sedan which had unluckily parked in the street that day.

Led by Milton Moses Morrison riding atop Kingsford, the crowd then marched south through the black streets for miles and miles as they slowly made their way to the white beaches and green waters of the nearby sea. Strung aloft behind them all the while was the slack crystal string streaming out of June's ear. As the crowd continued on, more and more people left their houses to join their ranks, each attracted, no doubt, by Kingsford's bellows, and pretty soon dozens upon dozens of chattering faces had been added to the merry parade.

Once they came within sight of the ocean's roaring green mouth, the string suddenly went taut and tightened with a sharp twang. The doctors and June's relatives then grabbed onto the string and began to pull it toward the gurgling green waves crashing behind them. Each member of the crowd joined in also and soon hundreds of hands were

pulling on the string with the gusto of a great game of Tug-of-War. Inch by inch, they labored behind the elephant against the taut crystal string until they could feel the salty breath of the ocean on the backs of their necks.

Atop the hospital, June's tilted head grimaced from the extreme pressure. Her mother held onto her hand, and the cousins who had remained behind offered her whatever words of encouragement they could think of. Hang in there, they said. You're doing great. Stay strong. The Witch Doctor, meanwhile, said nothing and merely peered through a telescope towards the sea.

When she finally saw Kingsford reach the water's edge, she turned to June's mother and cousins and told them to begin pulling on the string, too. They did as they were told and minutes later, the string began to tremble and vibrate. The Witch Doctor watched on tensely as the very air itself seemed to hum.

Keep pulling, the old woman urged.

June then suddenly cried out loud and the string broke free from her head. A great pop echoed over the town like a loud cannon shot and June's mother and cousins were very nearly thrown off the top of the hospital. Down by the beach, the string fell slack, sending Kingsford and the entire crowd hurtling into the breaking waves of the ocean.

When June's mother got back onto her feet, she held up the loose string and attached to its end, she found a common red rubber stopper, like one would use to plug up the drain of a sink. We did it, she said triumphantly We did it! She rushed to embrace June, who was staring forward in an empty daze. June's mother hugged her close and when she let go to thank the Witch Doctor, she felt a wetness spreading across the front of her blouse. She looked up at June and saw a gush of tears pouring forth from the girl's green eyes.

June, her mother said, why are you crying?

I don't know, June said, frightened.

She didn't know because, in reality, she wasn't crying at all, but was instead leaking. Little by little, water soon began to trickle out of her ears, dribble from the corners of her mouth, and even spray forth from her nose in two great torrents. It leaked off of the bed and began to gather into deep crystal pools on the concrete floor. One of June's cousins dipped her finger in one of the puddles and touched the sparkling liquid to her tongue.

Saltwater, the girl said with a confused scowl.

Saltwater? the Witch Doctor repeated. You mean like seawater?

Instead of waiting for an answer, though, the Witch Doctor rushed for a nearby fire escape.

Save yourselves while you can! she called over her shoulder. The last anyone heard of the her was the sound of her crocodile shoes clopping as she vanished down the metal stairs.

Unfortunately for June's mother and her cousins, they did not heed the old woman's advice and remained watching as more and more seawater gushed from June's body in greater and greater streams. They all watched, enthralled, as June's arms began to quake and jitter as if she were being electrocuted and then, suddenly, a huge surge of glittering water burst forth from the girl's mouth and swept her relatives from the courtyard in a great winding river.

By the time the parade of relatives, doctors, and onlookers made their way back to the hospital, each expecting to be greeted as heroes, they found great waterfalls of shimmering seawater pouring out of every window of the hospital into the street below.

My god! said Milton Moses Morrison, still perched atop Kingsford. The girl had a goddamn tsunami inside of her!

The cascade continued for eleven straight days, flooding the town and transforming the streets into salty channels of sparkling water. Fish, crab and curious porpoises swam casually in and out of homes. Sharks picked off house pets. And the screeching chorus of gulls could be heard at all hours of the day.

The townspeople were so overwhelmed by the damage done to their town, fending off jellyfish and electric eels, they had forgotten entirely where the offending waters had originated from in the first place.

Thankfully, on the eleventh day, fate relented and the tide swept the waters out to sea, leaving the town miraculously dry again. Despite the ruin all around them, the townspeople marveled at how lovely the sparkle of salt made their streets and buildings. They now lived in what felt like a town cast of diamonds.

This did little, however, to sate their anger, and with the hospital now accessible, Milton Moses Morrison, himself, assembled a mob of doctors and angry homeowners, each armed with fishing gaffes and spear guns they had used to fend off sharks, lobsters and flocks of cunning gulls, and the group made their way back to the rooftop of the hospital.

Expecting to find June in the courtyard, they were surprised to find the poor girl's mother instead, and in her arms wasn't her daughter, but an unconscious young boy, naked to the bottoms of his feet. June's mother looked up at the mob of people and in her eyes they saw she was crying. Regular tears, though, thankfully.

It's my son, said June's mother. I thought I had lost him forever, but he's come back to

me. My precious, beautiful son.

The mob stood and watched in silence as the mother cradled her previously lost child as if he were still a baby, until one by one, the crowd broke off, and they each returned to their homes to sweep away the piles of clams, jellyfish and dried mounds of dead fish left over from the flood.

No one ever did see June again. Rumors passed about the town that her ghost wandered the pier late at night whenever there was a full moon. Some sleepy-eyed fishermen even claimed to have spotted the girl swimming in the bay during the early morning hours. Most of these rumors, though, were little more than idle talk and eventually, they too were swallowed up by more interesting gossip washing through the town.

Occasionally, though, whenever a violent storm swept over the town and flooded the streets, anyone who listened closely could indeed hear young June's voice singing softly behind the howls of wind, or ringing up from the rippling puddles dancing along with the endless rush of rain.

## *The Curse of Cain*

I married the Tattooed Lady. Everyone knows the type. The woman at the circus, far from the action of the main ring, performing in the tents reserved for the freak show. Indeed, the first Tattooed Lady I saw was in just such a setting. I was a child at the time, but I never forgot how she sat slumped in her chair, a weary look on her face, as she filed away at her nails, puffing periodically on the cigarette between her lips. I remember how utterly disinterested she was in the line of spectators shuffling past her exhibit to take photo after photo of her magnificent splash of skin.

How could such an exotic woman could be so bored amid the mad, frenetic energy of the circus. Eventually, I came to the naive determination that the pallid stretch of khaki-clad tourists she saw day in and day out, didn't compare to her usual company. I tried imagining her companions and the secret lives they led as I watched the streetlights whip by from the backseat of my father's car. There was Orion, the strongest man in the world, with his ship-in-a-bottle obsession and addiction to steroids; there was the Bearded Lady, with whom the Tattooed Lady played Pinochle every Tuesday; an entire troupe of rowdy, belching dwarves with their roommate, Ethel, the girl born with the body of a snake, who had once been the mayor of a fairly large town far to the south, but had given up her position of power to travel the world after the circus had stopped in her town.

My tattooed lady, however, is plain as plain can be. She works in an office instead of a tent, prefers Romance novels to the company of dwarves, and has never even been to the circus, much less a freak show. Upon meeting her, most people find the shock of her multiple tattoos to be the most interesting thing about her.

I'm often asked about our relationship, how we met, married and so forth. I do my best

to answer these questions as politely as possible. But after so many years I've begun to feel as if I'm discussing the texture of paint. Even though marriage to the tattooed women is no longer banned in our province, it nonetheless remains taboo and the questions just keep on coming. I do my best to answer them as patiently as I am able to. To their credit, most of the questions are understandable. Do the tattoos cover her entire body?- Was she born with tattoos?- Do your children have tattoos?- At some point, though, I lose all patience and begin giving terse replies. Eventually, I simply say being married to a Tattooed Woman is the same as being married to anyone else, just with more tattoos. I then do my best to change the subject to something less personal, like the score from the previous night's baseball game or the recent Imp sighting at a nearby school.

Jordan, my wife, is far more patient than I. Not only does she answer each and every question thrown her way, she's even been known to a tour of her tattoos to some of the more curious children, turning her arms this way and that as if she were modeling an invisible blouse, pointing to her various tattoos as she tells each one's story. This one here, she would say, touching her temple, is the Evening Star Hesperus, which appeared on my seventh birthday and over here, on the back of my arm, is Buffalo Bill arm wrestling Alex the Friendly, the first Giant to win the Nobel Peace Prize. And this tattoo here, pressing her fingers to her neck, bloomed the day I met my husband.

She may put on a brave face for strangers, but I know, more than anyone, how much it truly affects her. I know why she rarely leaves the house without long sleeves and gloves, why she keeps few friends, and most importantly, why eight years of marriage passed between us before we finally had our first child.

It isn't that tattooed women can't reproduce or even that they aren't allowed to. Some

of the federal laws do still remain in place regarding their reproduction.- The truth is most Tattooed Women simply choose not to have children and despite having children of my own, I don't blame them. Children of Tattooed Women are not only prone to illness and poor health, asthma, skin diseases and whatnot, the stigmatization of their mother tends to carry over to the children. Jordan and I dealt with this problem regarding our own son and daughter. I can't tell you how many birthday parties our kids weren't invited to or how many times my son came home with black eyes and busted lips from fighting some loud-mouthed brat who insulted his mother and his family. To this day, few people are brave enough to socialize with Tattooed Women and their children due to the misconception of their condition being infectious. I'm the first to give the government credit for trying to combat this false belief with television and billboard ads—'Did you know Tattooed Women are just like you and me?'—but it's common knowledge that the government tracks the women, looks the other way when local municipalities segregate them and their children into separate classes and medical facilities, and though banishment is no longer mandatory, the sprawling Blue Chasm Complex is still up and running and many women who are unable to marry or without a strong family are encouraged to self-banish to the Blue Chasm.- And unsurprisingly, many women do just that, especially the older women who have spent far too much of their lives on the fringe of society and prefer a sense of community over the hollow life of a pariah.

Jordan and I once visited the Blue Chasm years ago after one of her closest friends decided to self-banish. I had to wait in the car while Jordan went inside to see her friend due to how strict the Complex is about who's allowed inside. Relatives of the residents and other Tattooed Women are only allowed to apply for day passes. Such severe

guidelines are in place not just for the safety of the women, but for the general public. A generation may have passed since the last massacre,- but the crime remains fresh in the memory of the Tattooed community and with the government's various security forces, who not only failed to prevent the massacre from happening but also failed to stop it from spreading once it began in full force.

In spite of the government's continued efforts, one doesn't have to look far to find a story of a tattooed women gone missing, harassed, assaulted, or worse. Due to this sad fact, many of the Women will marry young solely for the sake of protection. Those few unlucky Women who do not find a mate typically self-banish to the Blue Chasm in the hopes of finding lasting sanctuary. The sight of an unaccompanied Tattooed Woman in public isn't just rare, it's unheard of and it's common practice to notify the local constable if one is, indeed, spotted alone on the streets.

Whenever I become consumed by my work, the management of a fishery on the Glass Sea,- Jordan likes to tease that she'll one day leave me for the Blue Chasm. She's only joking, of course, but deep down we both know, thanks to the gap in our ages, the joke will eventually become a reality.

These days, I see an old man inside of the mirror, and the doctor tells my heart is weak and will eventually give up on me. If I were to pass suddenly, I know Jordan will prove too stubborn to become a burden to our children, and she will eventually self-banish.

I want more for her though. I want to leave her with the life I know she deserves. More and more these days, I find myself plagued by recurring nightmares of her skin mounted to the wall in some bastard's secret art collection. I always wake from these dreams sick to my stomach and in a cold sweat. I never tell her of these dreams. They would only

make her worry about me more than she already does.

In the end, she solves the problem for the both of us. I wake before dawn one morning to an empty bed and know she has left for good. I find a note on the table with all the usual sentiments. But it's what is tucked inside the letter which I will carry with me for the last years of my life: a stack of Polaroids of each of her tattoos. And when my doctor gave me the bad news that I won't be able to leave the hospital again, I carefully taped the Polaroids on the nearby wall matching the exact order of my wife's own skin.

In the haze of my medication, I can sometimes see her, between the borders of the photos, moving about the Blue Chasm, laboring under the carrying pole on her shoulders. Even though I know she will finish her life in the safety of the compound, I can't help but feel as if I have failed her. This is my greatest and last guilt, for I know it will be the sole burden I will bear into the next life.

### *The Generic Giant*

Rona's case was peculiar from the start. Her mother was widely known as a woman who enjoyed the company of men and there certainly was no shortage of men in our town. Nestled between the three northernmost mountains, the Great Mountains, as they were commonly known, the town was the only metropolitan area in the entire region and served as a convenient way station between the dozen or so ore and platinum mines and the Floating City of Avira a hundred miles to the south.

Shortly after Rona's mother became pregnant, her jutting belly barely covered by her stained apron, the patrons at the bar took up a game of guessing who, exactly, the prospective father might be. As far as I know, no one ever did win the game, for whenever anyone ventured a guess, Rona's mother would simply press her hands together, look skyward and repeat the same story, word for word.

God has blessed me, she said. He planted a great son in my belly and one day he'll grow so large he'll kick these damn mountains over and dig all out all of that precious ore with his enormous, manly fingers.

None of the men took her seriously, of course, and they all got a huge laugh at her fantastical story.

In private, she had confided a far stranger tale to Dr. Morris, our region's only physician, that is, except for the Witch Doctor who lived down in the swamps; but only the crackpots, wingnuts and paranoids ever sought out her counsel. Rona's mother claimed she was foraging for blueberries deep in the Southern valley when a thunderstorm, typical for mountain country, suddenly overtook her. Not one to worry about the elements, Rona's mother ignored the sweeping sheets of rain and continued

foraging among the thorny bushes and brambles. According to Dr. Morris, the last thing she claimed to remember was how her hair began to rise from her head as if gravity itself had been magically suspended by some unseen magician. The next thing she knew she was waking up inside the hut of an old Hermit who claimed he had found her fast asleep in the center of a large circle of blackened and flattened grass. You've been struck by lightning, Miss, the Hermit told her. You should thank the gods you're still alive.

Two months later, the girl's stomach began to swell. But close to two years would pass before Rona's mother finally gave birth. Dr. Morris said it was the most extraordinary pregnancy to which he had ever born witness. He'd seen women give birth in as little as eight months and even close to ten months one time. But twenty-three long months? Never, he said and insisted the increasingly-encumbered woman travel south to Avira in order to see a specialist.

Rona's mother put more stock into the magical disciplines of the world than those of the scientific, so she instead chose to visit the Witch Doctor. After smelling the girl's earwax, burning her undergarments and pressing an LED flashlight to the girl's belly and thumping it as if it were a ripe watermelon, the Witch Doctor gave her prognosis, which was short and to the point: You're carrying a giant in your belly. Rona's mother blanched as she cradled her swollen stomach. She had heard stories of giants as a child, outlandish myths, mostly, of carnivorous men and women some thirty feet tall who lived in the caves of the White Mountain of the north, the tallest and most treacherous of the three great Valley Mountains. The Witch Doctor told her how some myths spoke of giants bringing great luck and immense fortunes to the mothers who bore them. How exactly rearing a four-foot infant might possibly bring wealth or an easy life, the Witch Doctor

could not say and the girl began to sob into her hands. The Witch Doctor rubbed the young girl's back and did her best to wipe away the tears slipping through cracks of her fingers.

There, there, dear, she tried to soothe her. Things aren't as bad as they seem.

I'm not upset, said Rona's mother, beaming. I don't think I've ever been happier. The night Rona was born was moonless and so very black, the dimmest shadows seeped into thick pools and sent the town drunks tripping over the coagulated darkness on their way out of the bars. Just as the digital clocks flashed midnight, Dr. Morris performed a successful caesarian section and brought all thirty-two pounds of Rona into the world.

Pink and grey and larger than an adult Rottweiler, Rona was the biggest baby anyone in the town had ever seen. She was such an extraordinary sight, Rona's mother accumulated a small fortune of silver charging the miners, occasional tourist and townsfolk to have their picture taken with the cooing giant. Years later, when photos of the giant baby found their way onto the internet, most of the comments declared the photos a fraud, insisting they had 'obviously been Photoshopped.'

Though Rona's first few years were generally peaceful, they were hardly without incident. Before the birth of her child, Rona's mother was an avid caretaker of the town's stray cats. At any one time, her home played host to twenty sets of vertical pupils and flicking tails. But by the time Rona reached one year of age, the house was utterly bereft of any and all cats. Half of the animals were suffocated inside Rona's overtly-affectionate hugs and the other half were simply crushed under the man-sized feet of the clumsy baby. Not long before, Rona's mother's house had been known among the town's cat population as a reliable haven for a decent meal and unlimited days of sleep and petting.

But those days were long gone, as most cats wouldn't dare even to cross through the front lawn.

Rona's mother did her best to adapt to the rigors of raising a three-foot tall, hundred pound toddler. She bathed Rona in a makeshift pool she set up in the backyard. She converted her glass-blowing studio into a rumpus room for the ever-strengthening child. And she even struck a deal with a merchant at the local Food Co-Op to keep her pantry stocked with enough recently expired, yet heavily discounted groceries to feed her child's vortex of an appetite.

Luckily, Rona's growth soon began to taper off during the girl's fourth year. Instead of growing a full foot each year, her growth slowed to no more than an inch or two with each passing birthday. Regardless, Rona was still a head taller than anyone in her class and was drafted unto the boy's basketball team minutes after the school coach saw her curly mess of hair and pale gray eyes bouncing nervously far above the heads of her classmates. Rona, however, proved too clumsy and was quickly cut from the boy's squad and dumped back unto the girl's team.

Much later, Rona would look back on this period of her life with sepia-tinged nostalgia, since it was, easily, the most normal part of her life. On her birthday, year after year, her mother's house would be crammed with Rona's friends and classmates, as they celebrated the girl's one day of the year. Her closest friends, Connie and Carrie, would frequently sleep over on the weekends and the trio of girls would wander the Southern Point Mall, Rona's mother in tow. And thanks to being the starting Center on the girl's basketball team, she had the opportunity of traveling the countryside to play rival schools, even making it as far west as Silver City, a metropolis so large, so expansive a

person could walk for three straight days and still not make it to the edge of the cityscape. After returning from the shining city, Rona dropped her bags at the front door and breathlessly proclaimed that she was moving to Silver City the day she graduated from high school. To which, her mother merely grinned and softly said, We'll see.

Rona began to grow again during the spring of her thirteenth year. The spring would be remembered for years to come as being the brightest anyone in the town had ever known. Indeed, it was so very bright the excess sunlight synthesized with the sun-blasted tears of the townspeople and formed flecks of green calcite in the corners of their eyes. So many of the peculiar crystals were produced before specially-crafted sunglasses were passed out to the townsfolk, that barrels of emerald glass could be found for sale all about the town, though tourists were, typically, the only ones whoever purchased any of them.

Rona grew a full four feet that year and kept growing four feet each year thereafter. On her 14th birthday, she stood a full head taller than any man in town. At the age of 15, she towered in a gawky thirteen foot frame and a year later, on her 16th birthday, now easily 17 or 18 feet tall, Rona could jump atop the roof of a single-story house with a single hop, if she was so inclined. By the time she finally stopped growing, two months shy of her nineteenth birthday, Rona loomed over the sleepy valley town at a staggering height of over eight and a half meters. My god! her uncle proclaimed when he first saw the enormous girl upon returning from a failed three-year expedition overseas in search of moon pearls. She's a walking skyscraper!

Shh...his sister shushed him before warning in a whisper, She'll hear you. Her hearing is incredibly sensitive.

Rona was used to being ridiculed. High school proved to be a rather unkind experience

for her. Any friends she had as a child had long ago abandoned her. No more sleepovers, no more sneaking from one darkened movie theatre to the next, and especially no more strolls through the mall, since she could no longer fit through the front doors. Her birthdays, too, dwindled to lonely affairs, celebrated only by her mother, her uncle and herself. After the sadness known as her thirteenth birthday, they stopped celebrating the day altogether.

The only real upside to Rona's gigantism was the wealth her mother was amassing by selling online traced-out drawings of Rona's hands and feet, autographed photos of the girl and any other biological waste the girl shed. Eyelashes, long as a bullwhip, sold for just under a thousand rupees. Finger and toenails, an easy ten grand. Hell, her baby teeth alone netted close to a million rupees. With the wealth, Rona's mother was able to tack on a towering expansion to the house capable of comfortably accommodating a teenager the size of an orca whale.

Despite a life of newfound affluence, what bothered Rona the most about this time wasn't so much the loneliness she felt sitting in the school's courtyard as she eavesdropped on her classmates through an open window. Nor did she mind the endless taunts she received on her way home—Freak!, Andre the Giant!, You Big Bitch!—from children a tenth her size, all of whom she could have easily kicked clear over the White Mountain if she felt like doing so. No, what brought Rona to tears and kept sleep from her eyes was the so-called *Rona Challenge* the upperclass boys in her school had put into motion. Of course, being the complete outcast that she was, Rona was the last to learn of the sick game, and only after she had fallen victim to it again and again. Three boys, Ronnie, Derek and Aaron, had already successfully completed the *Challenge* and were

heralded as legends for having done so. And all the while, Rona was completely oblivious to what was going on. Naturally, she had assumed the boys were interested in her and starved for friendship and human connection, any sort of connection, she counted herself especially lucky to spend any amount of time amid the company of the most popular boys around.

It was only after a crowd of freshman chanted a particularly sadistic limerick at her, one which ended with the crude line, The biggest slut in town, that Rona finally lost her patience. In a red rage, she seized the first wriggling student she could get her hand around and demanded to know what was going on. Afraid of being turned into a glob of jelly, the student spilled all the nasty details of the Rona Challenge. There was only one rule and that was to get inside of Rona's bra, which wasn't a bra, really, but more of a trawling net her mother had had shipped in from New Port City on the most western tip of the Glass Sea.

Rona refused to give into the hollowness she frequently felt whenever she was treated as if she were the occupant of a zoo exhibit. Instead, she decided to get revenge.

When the next boy, Justin, a lanky seventeen year old with a surfer haircut, came lurking about looking for a date, Rona cut to the chase and asked if he would take her for a walk in the Lost Woods beneath the Forgotten Mountain, a popular destination for teenagers looking to hook up due in the impenetrable darkness of the densely packed forest. Justin happily agreed and once the two of them were in the woods, Rona waited for the perfect moment to spring her trap on the poor dim boy. As they frolicked in the damp grass, moss and nettles, Justin began to fiddle with the giant button on Rona's blouse, the garment of which, had been sewn from the aft sails of a long wrecked

schooner. Rona seized the opportunity and plucked the boy into the air by the collar of his polo. She then nimbly bound his ankles with the bit of giant floss her mother had ordered for her, which was a smoothed stretch of manila rope. With Justin properly wrapped to his waist, Rona bent over him and asked if he knew how to use a parachute.

A parachute?! he repeated. Why would I need to know that?

Why, Rona said. Because I'm going to fling you over the Forgotten Mountain is why. Or at least I'm going to give it my best shot. She tied another length of 'floss' around his bound legs to fashion a sling and lifted him upside down into the air and began to swing him in a whirl above her head. Once he was spinning at a decent clip, she aimed for the crest of the distant mountain and let her quarry fly. Up and up she watched him fly until he was no more than a twinkling splotch against the deep blue sky.

Justin didn't quite make it over the mountain, but he did travel far enough that it took him three days to hike back to town. When word spread about what Rona had done, she was expelled from school and a special town counsel was called to determine what should, be done about the surprisingly vengeful giantess. With one flick of her enormous wrist, the *Rona Challenge* had been transformed into the far graver, *Rona Dilemma*.

At the counsel meeting, Rona's mother gave a heartfelt and airtight defense of her daughter's actions and thanks to the top-notch Silver City lawyers she hired, each of the four boys involved in the *Rona Challenge* each owned up to their misbehavior and trickery. The lawyers went on to argue that Rona was the actual victim and her actions were those a person trying to defend herself. It was a convincing argument, but not enough to sway the counsel. Rona had proven herself a potential danger to the community and therefore, was to banished to the craggy wilderness beneath the great

White Mountain.

All throughout the counsel meeting, Rona had remained silent, murmuring any response required of her when she wasn't outright ignoring the proceedings. So when her fate was finally determined and the Mayor, who was acting as Head Council, asked her how she felt about the entire matter and what had been decided for her, Rona shrugged her shoulders and smirked.

To be honest, she said, I couldn't give two fucks.

The tract of land beneath the White Mountain was a barren and scarred wasteland. The shadow cast by the White Mountain was so long and so total that only the most rigorous creatures and hardy vegetation was able to survive there. Huge chalky boulders dotted the landscape as if they had fallen directly from the moon itself. The sun shone no more than an hour each day until it was swallowed up by the a halo of clouds forever swirling around the mountain's summit.

The forest was called the Fogged Woods due to how twisted, gnarled and leafless its trees were. Indeed, many of the trees were so ancient, they gasped a dusty gray fog every minute or so. This fog shrouded the area so absolutely that much of the land had yet to be fully mapped out by the geographical satellites orbiting above. The only other region of the continent which could be considered more desolate and bereft was the Charcoal Desert a thousand miles to the west. The Fogged Woods truly were a no-man's land and Rona could not have loved it more.

Her mother, however, refused to live in the ugly wilderness and chose to spend the bulk of her time in a luxury apartment she rented in a posh neighborhood just within the town's square. Thanks to the runaway sales of her autobiography, *How I Raised a Giant*

*and Remained a Successful Woman*, she had become wealthy beyond any of her previous expectations and thus, had little interest living the sparse, pared-down lifestyle required underneath the shadow of the White Mountain. This largely meant Rona was left on her own to explore the ravages of the Fogged Woods. She certainly didn't mind the loneliness one bit as she scaled the mountain's base, explored its deep well of caverns and chased down fleeing elk whenever she was in the mood for a fresh snack.

Free from the eyes and ears of the townsfolk, Rona spent years in silence, barely speaking outside of grunts, growls and yawps. Clothing, too, became optional as the snarled landscape reduced her wardrobe to shredded rags. Any adventurer or, more commonly, mycophagists, in search of edible fungus, who did happen upon her described a half-nude monster with humongous, swaying breasts, whom they felt both terror and attraction to.

It was around this time in Rona's life that I came into contact with poor, feral giant. Granted, at this point, I had been in her life for years, even speaking to her directly on occasion, but I was almost always on the periphery. You see, for a time, I was a Guidance Counselor at her high school and as such, I was in charge of guiding her from time to time. I'm sad to report, though, that I failed her during her stay at our school and following the unfortunate Parachute Incident, I took it upon myself to help her in any way possible.

It took me quite a bit of time, years, in fact, but I was finally able to track her down in the gloomy maze that is the Fogged Woods. And from there, it took me even longer to gain enough of her confidence that she would not flee at the first sight of me. Or: snatch me up into the air and dash my brains against the trunk of the nearest sequoia. The trick,

for anyone who's interested in tracking giants, was zebra meat, the rawer the better it seems.

She was pensive toward me at first. Six years had passed since her banishment. In this time, the interactions she had with humans was next to nil. For all I knew, it had been years since she had spoken a single word. With time, patience, and a lockerful of freeze-dried zebra meat, I eventually got through to her though.

Hello, I'd say.

Hello, she'd grumble in return, eyes on the striped parcel of meat.

Tell me how you feel today, Rona.

After some thought, she'd say something like, Satisfactory, or, Adequate. We'd continue chatting on like this for as long as I could hold her attention. She was flighty, at first, unpredictably dashing off into the yellow fog for no reason at all. But I persisted and after a number of months, I managed to draw her out of her self-imposed reticence. Once our conversations topped a full hour, I shifted my tactics and tried instilling a sense of etiquette in her. Back straight, I'd say. Elbows in. Chin held high, and so on. I corrected her slips in grammar, Ain't is not a word, and even managed to teach her some basic geometry, for discipline's sake.

A year would pass before I realized I had taken my boorish pupil as far as she was psychologically able to go. Giantism, especially in such an extreme case as Rona's, tends to have diminishing returns. Rona may have possessed a sharp and keen mind as a teenager. But as she grew older, and upward, her faculties simply could not bear the massiveness of her overgrown body. Her knees creaked. Her vision grew poor. And she was often short of breath. The worst development, however, was the toll taken upon her

mental abilities. She would forget my name some days and then a week later, she'd forget her own. In the morning she'd be as polite as Queen Zeb, herself. By mid-afternoon, though, she'd devolve into a raving madwoman, stomping through the yellow fog, pushing down trees and tossing moon rocks in every direction. If it weren't for the dress, that miraculous garment spun from the most delicate of carnation petals, I'd have surely been crushed like a beetle beneath a stray moon rock.

The dress was a brainstorm I had after seeing an old movie still of Fay Wray shrinking away from an off-screen terror. Up to this point, any interaction I had with Rona was while she was stark nude and though years of sleeping in the dirt had done a reasonable job of coating her in a thick layer of green algae and earth grime, I was a witness to more of her ladyhood than was certainly deemed appropriate by polite society. Trying to clothe her proved a losing battle though. No shawl, comforter or tarp I ever gave made it around her shoulders or about her waist. Instead, she would hang them from the tree branches as if she were constructing her very own personal gallery of paintings.

The dress, however, proved to be my ticket to Rona's salvation. I used the majority of my inheritance—my father had been a wealthy sea urchin magnate—to have it sewn by a renowned spinster residing in the Glowing City, a fully mechanical megapolis, near the Eastern Border. The dress was twenty feet long and had embedded sequins larger than my fist. It was white as the purest cream and softer than any fabric I've had the pleasure of touching. A veritable waterfall of fabric and worth every silver coin I plunked down for it.

At first, Rona was ambivalent towards the dress, thinking it a new addition to her gallery of art. But after much explaining, hand signs and dirt drawings in the forest floor,

she remembered that dresses are to be worn and not hung upon the brambles.

The moment the dress sank over her slender, delicate shoulders, a transformation seemed to come over Rona's personality. Gone was her guttural vocabulary, her incessant scratching and sniffing of unmentionable areas, the endless clearing of her throat and spitting of koi-pond-sized loogies. She was calm in mood, practiced in sensibility, and measured in her demeanor whenever the dress embraced her skin. What took me a year to accomplish with a mountain of zebra meat, I managed in less than a week with one oversized Fay Wray dress. Rona had become my four-story princess.

I would like to tell you I did not take advantage of my reformed pupil. I'd like to say our relationship was purely mentor-mentee. But the heart wants what the heart wants, and lust seems to want even more. Sexual relations with a woman of her size and girth proved just as unnerving as it was immensely pleasurable. Sex with a giant is not an easy venture. And to be sure, certain implements were required for our lovemaking sessions, a scuba suit being the most essential. But it was sex, nonetheless, and I take great umbrage at any implication that I was little more than a 'device' used for her personal stimulation. We were both consenting adults and if anything, I'm proud to say I was Rona's first and truest love.

Which is why what happens next in Rona's sad saga is all the more heartbreaking. As the days wore on, Rona wore the dress continually, even refusing to sit down without carefully bundling the skirt up above her waist. She began to ask questions about the town, about her mother and even about how her classmates turned out. When I reminded her of the ill treatment she received at their hands, she just brushed her hands in the air and told me, You can't expect kids to behave any better than animals. It was the clearest

sentence I ever heard her speak.

More than anything, she had a particular interest in the town's upcoming Fire Festival, an annual celebration of fireworks, a colossal bonfire, and, finally, a moonlit ball. The ball was reserved strictly for adults, so Rona had never gotten a chance to attend before her banishment to the Fogged Forest. When I asked why she kept asking about the Fire Festival, her face flushed red as she looked away.

I was thinking, maybe, I could possibly go for an hour or so. Just to see them light the bonfire and maybe, if it's okay, watch some dancing too. I'd stay out of sight, I swear.

I don't know, Rona. It seems awfully risky.

Please, she pleaded, hiking up her dress and getting down on her knees to beg, as if such a gesture made any sort of difference given the lopsidedness in our sizes. I'll let you ride in back like you like if you let me go for an hour—no, an hour and a half, and then I'll come straight home. Cross my heart.

Oh! What a fool I had been! Why did I relent so easily? A few days before the festival, I discussed the matter with the mayor and I was surprised by how wholeheartedly he agreed to her attendance. Everyone is invited to the Fire Festival, he declared, throwing out his hands as if he were scattering invisible handfuls of confetti. Especially our resident giant!

On the evening of the festival, I brought Rona a gift I had a shaman living on the Forgotten Mountain mix up for me: two vats of mauve paint and talcum powder pulled behind an old gray donkey. Along with the dress, the makeup made Rona look like a genuine movie star. One of epic proportions, certainly, but a movie star nonetheless. How do I look? she asked, giving a twirl that nearly blew me back into a tree.

Like Fay Wray herself.

Who?

A very beautiful lady, I told her with tears stinging my eyes.

We arrived at the festival just as they were preparing to light the bonfire. I had Rona wait in the shadows while I went to inform the Mayor that we had arrived. Great, great, he said joyously. Let me announce her. Before I could stop him, he dashed upon the stage built in front of the bonfire and tapped the microphone. Everyone, everyone. I'd like to introduce a special guest for tonight's festivities. Many of you already know her. And the rest of you have certainly heard the rumors. May I present Peace Valley's very own giant! A murmur rippled through the crowd as they waited anxiously for something to happen. When Rona's pale face appeared out of the gloom like a black omen, a muted silence broke over the crowd of thousands.

Sweet Jesus, I remembered thinking, what an astounding blunder I've committed. But then, thankfully, the applause began, a few scattered claps at first, and then an entire ovation of clapping, hoots and hollers. They loved her and by the redness of her face, I could see Rona loved them right back.

Now, now, the Mayor called into the microphone, settling the crowd. I'd now like to invite our enormous guest to do us the honor of lighting this year's bonfire. How does that sound? Should she light the bonfire for us?

The crowd roared their affirmation. Rona pinched the tiny torch between her wide fingers and promptly set it to the pyramid of firewood. The mass of kindling immediately burst into flame and within minutes tongues of fire licked the purple verge of the night sky.

If I could give Rona any gift, any gift at all, I'd bottle the next few hours of her life and let her relive them over and over, ad infinitum. We danced and mingled and ate and danced some more under the scowl of the full moon and I'd never seen her happier than I saw her stomping about next to the dance floor as she carefully lifted a few of the children above her head who had been lucky enough to stay up late. But alas, it was all for nothing. The pendulum soon swung the other way; I was about to lose her forever.

Who exactly started the brawl was a longstanding matter of debate. Some people claimed the whole thing was Flannagan's idea—cursed, rotten Flannagan with his endless rabble rousing. Others insist Sameer was the first volunteer to be thrown on Rona's back. What is for certain is that too much alcohol had been involved and the Constable certainly should have put a stop to things long before they got out of hand as they did. But he had snuck off to the Lost Woods with the Mayor's daughter for a little midnight infidelity.

The point being is that there was plenty of blame to go around and to be honest, more than anyone, I probably deserved the lion-share of responsibility. The first thing I, personally, remember was the sound of Rona's howl erupting out of the darkness. I had been engaged in a lively discussion with Mrs. Dowelmeyer about 19th century Clambroth buttons and had lost track of Rona's activities. When I rushed to the dance floor, four men were already hanging from Rona's dress and a fifth was being heaved skyward by four other men. They were all laughing riotously and chanting aloud, Show your tits! Show your tits! You big damn bitch!

Rona was spinning about in an attempt to shake the men off of her back and to her credit she was able to discard them rather easily. Unfortunately, with each man thrown

off, along went a sizable portion of her dress. I did my best to stop them, but one quick punch to my mouth put me out of commission. When I came to, I was greeted with the sight of an angry Rona, naked to her waist, snatching up one of the drunken men off of the cobbled street and popping his head off as easily as a bothersome tick. The sight of the dead man's torso gushing blood and swell of guts was a clarion call for the other men and they rushed my poor Rona with the intent of tearing her limb from giant limb.

I tried to call out to stop the madness before it escalated, but Rona had been lost to her rage. She stomped on the gang of men like they were plump grapes, lifted the dance floor clear above her head and spun it out into the surrounding darkness where it was found the next day wedged into the Mighty Mountain like a throwing star. Rona then turned her rage upon the town itself. She kicked in several of the more prominent buildings in the town square, the Central Bank, the Clock Tower and even the hospital where she had been born so many years ago. Nothing was spared her wrath. The real damage began when she found her way back to the bonfire and kicked the flaming pyre high into the air above the town's residential area. Streams of fire rained down upon the wood and brick houses and many of the burnt-out homes, sadly, remain charred skeletons to this day.

On and on, Rona rampaged, pulling off roofs, pounding unlucky revelers into the ground with her mighty fists, and flattening anything and everything she could with her dump-truck-sized feet. She ripped a wide path of destruction through the town and seemed utterly unstoppable until she came upon the high school, the scene of so many of her previous tortures. I had done a good job of following behind her at a safe distance as she wrecked havoc upon the town and when I saw she was heading directly for the school, I feared for the worse. Surely, the school would only push her rage further over

the edge and condemn what was left of the town to doom.

Strangely, though, the school had the opposite effect. Rona's arms slumped to her side and when I got close enough, I saw great tears splashing off of her face. I tentatively approached from the shadows and called her name. She took one look at me before lifting her head to the sky and howling as loud as enormous lungs allowed, a howl so very loud, a number of the closest trees split in half. Once the howl had left her system, she slumped to her knees and quietly sobbed into her hands. Behind me a crowd of angry townsfolk, each armed with clubs, farming equipment and baseball bats, gathered and prepared to descend upon her. I ventured to get near her, so as to urge her to flee to safety, back home in the Fogged Woods. But I was stopped short by a similar howl echoing over the valley from the direction of the White Mountain. Rona leapt to her feet and strained her ear in the direction from which the answering howl came. And sure it enough the distant roar came again. It was identical in pitch and tone to Rona's howl. The Witch Doctor had long claimed giants lived deep within the caves of the White Mountain, but few had put much belief into these myths, until the night of the Fire Ceremony, that is.

The howl came a third time and I knew Rona was lost to me. She began to move to the edge of the forest. I called to her one last time, out of desperation. And to my surprise she stopped and turned toward me. I didn't know what else to do, so I lamely lifted my hand. She returned the gesture and vanished into the dark woods. I climbed atop one of the few remaining houses still standing to follow her progress through the woods and I watched her move deeper and deeper in the dark grove until the last trees ceased to sway in her wake.

I never saw or heard from Rona again. The occasional Sherpa visiting from the White

Mountain told tales great giants casually ambling through impossible blizzards or of deep howling caverns which were to be avoided due to the man-eating giants inside. But in the end these were just stories and had little physical reality other than the alcohol-tinged breath upon which they were told.

From time to time, I entertained the idea of visiting one of these caves myself, armed with a parcel of zebra meat. But I never acted on these ideas and now I've grown too old and dim of sight to even see the peak of the White Mountain. Besides, I'm fairly certain I will be needed here in our rebuilt town. Dr. Morris recently let slip that several women are carrying unusually long pregnancies, some well over a year in length. So maybe there's a use for me yet.

*Fidelity Decay (The Passing Future)*

“The time is out of joint—O cursèd  
spite, That ever I was born to set it  
right!”

—*Hamlet*, 1.5.186-190

As always, Noel was running late.

Sally, his mother, had scheduled the birthday party for 8pm sharp and had reminded him, time and again, to not to be late. The candles are being blown out, she had warned him, whether you're here or not.

Yet, when 8pm did arrive on the evening of March 31st, Noel was still at home, slumped before his television, half-watching the basketball game dancing across the face of the television. He had bet nearly seven grand with his bookie that not only the Celtics would beat the Bulls, they would do so after the dragging the game into double overtime. What are you now? the bookie asked after grudgingly taking his bet. The Nostradamus of hoops or something?

Few people knew this about Noel, but he was a castaway from the future and was, indeed, a minor soothsayer of sorts. What knowledge he had was rather limited, though, frequently inexact, oftentimes wrong, and almost always restricted to sporting events. Years of marijuana abuse had left his memory a murky swamp of half-forgotten scenes and blurred recollections. If he had known he would one day end up marooned twelve years in the past, he would have passed on the old puff, puff, instead of the other way around.

Noel was dead certain about the Celtics/Bulls matchup, though. He had a distinct memory of watching the game as a teenager, not just because of the exciting overtime win thanks to Larry Bird's late-game heroics, but also due to the game falling on his 16th birthday. He figured tripling his money would be a rather nice birthday present to himself. He planned on

buying a boat with his winnings.

Tied at 110, the game had gone exactly as Noel remembered, a real tit-for-tat duel between Parish and Bird on one end, and Pippen and Jordan on the other. With 19.4 seconds to go in regular time, Noel knew Jordan would fumble the ball out of bounds at the end of a broken play, and then Bird would miss a wide-open three at the sound of the buzzer.

Strangely, this is not what happened. Instead of going left, Jordan curled right to the top of the key, lost Parish in the screen, and after safely receiving the ball, he found himself facing poor Reggie Lewis stuck on an island. Noel, like the crowd at the Garden, was up, off of his feet, watching Jordan nearly juke Lewis out of his shoes and head straight to the rim, where he dunked the ball with less than a second left in regulation. As the Bulls players tackled Jordan in celebration, Noel and the crowd both could do nothing but stand in shock at what they had just seen.

How could this happen? Noel thought. Something's gone wrong. Thanks to Jordan's clutch play, not only had Noel just lost all of the money he had earned down at the wharves, he had also lost any certainty he had had about the stability of his reality.

Noel clicked the television's dial off, rubbed his face, and then kicked the TV's boxy frame. A piece broke off, spun upwards, and struck him in the eye. Fuck! he yelled at the empty room, recoiling and clutching at his face. Fuck, he said again. As he stood alone rubbing his eye, he noticed a piece of plastic next to his shoe. Noel bent over, picked it out of the carpet, and turned it over in his hand. Printed in embossed lettering was the first two-thirds of the television's brand name: Quasar. Noel rubbed the cracked plastic with his thumb and then set it atop the television before walking out the door into the cold Boston air. □□By the time Noel arrived at Sally's, the full moon hung like a lantern in the clear night sky. Inside,

he found Leon sitting alone on the sofa watching the Lakers thrash the Kings. Perched atop his bald head was a pointed turquoise party hat.

Well, well, well, Leon said when he first came through the door. Look who decided to show up to his own birthday party.

Sorry, said Noel. Something came up. He carefully stepped over Leon's usual styrofoam cooler of beer<sup>1</sup> and took a seat on the sofa. He could tell Leon was already drunk by the glossy droop in his eyes. Noel knew the look well because he frequently saw it in his own face. Where is everyone? he asked.

Sally's in the kitchen, and Junior is up in his room. The old man took a sip of his beer. Probably whacking it, I'm sure. They both began to laugh with the same breathy chuckle.

Mind if I steal one of your beers? Noel asked.

Sure, he said. He held a bottle out to him and then retracted it. Five dollars. Come on now. It's my birthday.

Join the club, replied Leon. Feel free to help yourself to the Coors in the fridge. They continued watching the game in silence. At the next commercial break Leon slapped Noel on his shoulder and said, How about those Celtics, huh?

Yeah, yeah, Noel said with a sneer. Rub it in. He crossed his arms and sunk deeper into the sofa.

So how much did you lose? A thousand? Two?

Noel jabbed his thumb upward.

Five grand? Tell me it wasn't more than five grand. Noel sighed. All told? Just under 7K.

Leon whistled and shook his head. Just think of all the Blue Herons you could have bought with that kind of change.

Speaking of which. Noel hoisted himself off of the sofa and made for the kitchen. He was

halfway down the hallway when Leon called back to him, Hey, bud.

What's up?

Happy birthday, you cheap bastard.

Yeah, Noel replied. Same to you, you selfish prick.

Noel found Sally washing dishes at the sink with her back turned. Tiptoeing across the kitchen, he snuck up behind her and grabbed her about the waist. Jesus Christ, Noel! she said, nearly jumping out of her slippers. You know I hate it when you do that.

It's one of my few joys in life.

You're late, she said, still holding her chest. Have you eaten? I can heat up some pork chops.

I'm good. I ordered a pizza earlier.

How about some cake? There's more than plenty left.

I really shouldn't, he said, patting his stomach. I'm not getting any thinner in my old age. But it's your birthday, Noel, she said in protest. Have a piece. For me.

Alright, he relented. A small piece, though.

Sally, grinning at her victory, dried her hands on a towel and began cutting him a piece of cake. Noel could clearly see Happy Birthday Leon, Noel and Leo printed in dark blue-green frosting across the face of the cake. Sally made sure to cut him the piece with his name on it. He thanked her when she handed a plate to him.

Did Leon tell you Dr. Fentz called? Nope, Noel said between bites.

Of course he didn't. That man is as tightlipped as a clam. What did Fentz say?

He wants to meet the two of you as early as possible. You'll have to ask Leo for the address.

He's the one who spoke to him when he called.

Cool, was Noel's only response. Hunched over the dining table, he ate his cake in silence.

Seriously, Noel, Sally pressed. You think it might be good news? Like, maybe, a way home finally?

I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. He continued eating his cake. I'm surprised Fentz even knows how to use a phone, much less find a way to return us into the future.

Just then a thunder of steps came down the staircase. Leo burst into the kitchen and nearly careened into the opposite wall. He was a skinny teenager doing his best to hide his thin frame under baggy jeans and an oversized Sonic Youth shirt.

Well, well, well, Leo went. Look who decided to join us on his birthday. Leo leaned his elbow on Noel's shoulder and picked at the frosting Noel had scraped off the top of the cake.

Just take it, Noel said as he pushed the cake aside. Are you wearing cologne?

No, Leo said a little too defensively. I did just fart though. Maybe that's what you're smelling.

The only fart I smell is coming out of your mouth, Noel said in retort. No one teach you how to use a toothbrush yet?

Language, please, Sally scolded them.

What?! said Leo. Since when is fart a bad word? Leo was now officially sixteen, yet he sometimes behaved as if he were four years younger, especially in the company of Noel. Something about the older man brought out a sincere immaturity in him. In many ways, Noel was the older brother Leo never had.

It is in my house, said Sally. And in my house we don't use profanity. Where are you off to so late anyway? Noel asked Leo.

Billy's picking me up. We're going out to celebrate.

Well, look who's got his big boy pants on. I didn't know ice cream parlors stayed open this late.

We aren't going to no damn ice cream parlor.

Leo! Language.

Sorry, mom. We're going to a house party. And what time will you be home by?

I don't know. Two a.m. or so.

Twelve-thirty, said Sally. And no drinking.

Alright, alright, he said. But as soon as Sally turned back to the sink. Leo shook his head at Noel and grinned. Noel rolled his eyes and looked away.

Oh! said Sally suddenly. Before you leave, run upstairs and grab my camera. I want a photo of three of you for your birthday.

Aw, mom. Billy will be here any minute. Let's just take one next time.

We need to take one now. Who knows when I'll have the three of you together again. Fine, he said and then stomped back up the stairs.

Quick, Sally said, look at this before he returns. She opened a nearby drawer and handed him a folded paper bag. I found this wedged under his mattress.

What is it? he asked, carefully holding the bag in case it contained a poisonous snake. I'm not going to regret looking in here, am I?

Hurry! she urged.

He peered into the bag and inside saw a lacy blue bra. The garment was sheer and left very little to the imagination. Noel folded the bag and did his best to keep his face even and expressionless.

Well? asked Sally. What do you think? What do you mean what do I think? It's a bra.

I know it's a bra, she hissed. But why does he have it stashed under his mattress? Why do you think? said Noel, incredulous.

Sally twisted her face and shook her head. I don't...she began. I don't even want to know.

Great, said Noel. Cause I don't want to tell you.

Where would he even get something like this? Girls his age don't wear these types of bras, do they? I know I didn't. I don't even wear them now.

Noel opened and closed his mouth as if he'd been dumbstruck.

Has he told you anything? Is he seeing an older woman? Maybe one of his teachers? Oh, god. Tell me it's not one of his teachers.

Noel barely heard her over the growing buzz in his ears. Not only did he know to whom the bra belonged to, he had been the one who had originally purchased it. How it had gotten from the floor of his apartment to the cramped space beneath Leo's mattress was a mystery he could only guess at.

Noel! said Sally. Are you in there?

Sorry, he said. I don't know whose bra it is.

I'm not talking about the bra, she said. I asked if you were finished with your cake.

Oh. Sorry. He handed her his plate just as Leo came thundering back down the stairs. Think fast! he said as he threw the camera at Noel. Noel jumped up from the table and threw his hands up. Leo had never let go of the strap, so the camera simply swung under his closed fist.

Would you not destroy my property, please, Sally said to Leo. And go get your Uncle. He's not my uncle.

Whatever. Just go get him.

Hey, Leon! Leo yelled into the living room. Sally sighed and gave Noel a look. What?! Leon yelled back down the hallway.

Mom wants you! Alright!

Seriously, Leo, said Sally. What'd I do?

When Leon shuffled into the kitchen a couple of minutes later, Leo burst into laughter. The old man's hair was awry and a blanket was wrapped tightly about his shoulders. You look like a hobo, Leo said. Doesn't he look like a hobo?

Well, you look like the bottom of—Sally gave Leon a look, but he continued anyway—the bottom of my ass.

There really isn't enough soap in the world for you three. She snatched the camera out of Leo's hand. Stand over here. The wallpaper will make a nice background.

She arranged the three of them, shoulder to shoulder, according to their age, Leon, Noel, and then Leo. To an outside observer, the sight of the three bodies, each identical in height, stance, and most obviously, facial features, would be a most unnerving experience. Leon often joked how they were the living embodiment of the evolution of man; the punchline, of course, being that he was the most evolved of the three. To Sally, however, she felt only pride at seeing her son triplicated before her. She had always wanted more children, but Leo's father had left her to start a ministry in Utah when she was eight-months pregnant. After the birth, she never bothered to replace him.

Alright, Sally said when she was ready. On three. One, two, three. The three of them gave the same awkward gawp just as the flash exploded inside the kitchen. Unbeknownst to each of them, it would be the last photograph they would ever take together.

□Beyond Sally, Leo, and Dr. Fentz, the only other person who knew Noel and Leon were actually castaways from the future was a blue-haired BU freshman named Mona. When Noel and Leon were first marooned in the past, they agreed to steer clear of Mona by any means possible, considering how their traumatic past was now her future. Until we figure out

just what the hell is going on, advised Leon, we should try our best not to muck things up more than we have. Stay out of the future's way, was their unofficial motto.

The problem, in the end, was a dark, thin slice of Noel could never fully make this pledge in good faith. Less than a month after moving out of Sally's, Noel found himself parked outside of Brighton High School each afternoon. Just after 3:15, Mona would appear amid a troop of teenage girls. It was the only time during the week when he could catch a glimpse of her. He had tried to park down the street from her house. But a few too many close calls with patrolling police cruisers had made him abandon his post. The weekends were the best, though. Trailing behind her at the mall or watching her from the stands as she chased a soccer ball allowed him to watch her without interruption or fear.

He had chanced speaking to her once, at a convenience store a few blocks from Brighton High, and the experience had only emboldened him, despite the obvious risks. He knew part of her daily routine was to buy a diet soda and a few Blue-Raspberry Airheads on her way home from school, so he beat her into the store and inconspicuously pretended to read a magazine in the back. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she picked out her soda and candy, and then stood at the counter to pay. He took a long, aching stare at the back of her skinny legs reaching out of the bottom of her shorts, and was interrupted when the two legs suddenly began to approach him. Excuse me, she said to him. Do you have change for a twenty?

At a loss for words, he could do nothing but shake his head. Disappointed, she told him thanks and walked back to the front counter. The clerk gave her the items on credit, and Noel watched her leave and then disappear through the fogged store window. A full year would pass before he would dare to make contact with her again on Boston University's campus when he stopped her between classes and begged her to give him ten minutes to tell her his story.

Remarkable, she agreed.

He carried out a secret relationship with her for a full year without Leon or Sally suspecting a thing. He considered confiding in Sally from time to time. But he never did tell her. The risk of Leon finding out were just too great. Unlike Leon, who had upwards of thirty years between himself and Mona's death, Noel was simply too close to the painful rupture in his life. The meaningless of her loss still rung in his ears to this day.

Late in the fall of 2000, Mona and Noel were in an accident when a nearby sedan clipped a delivery truck and sent it flying across a Beacon Street intersection directly into the passenger's side of the car where Mona was sitting. Noel spent a month in traction. Mona died instantly.

Noel would love to say that his six-year relationship with Mona was on the up and up, that they were happily engaged, and looking forward to getting married the following spring. The truth, however, was the opposite. Noel and Mona had been gradually growing apart over the previous two years, and they had, in fact, broken up several times during the months preceding her death, the last time being just the weekend before. So it was logical how the first thing Noel felt after the shock of her loss wore away was cruel, naked guilt.

For months after the accident, Noel lay around his one-bedroom apartment drinking excessively, reading manga and watching cartoons, and masturbating to the handful of explicit videos he and Mona had made together. He had been put on leave from his file clerk position after abruptly leaving in the middle of the work day too many times. I just get overwhelmed, he offered as an excuse to his supervisor. I feel like I'm choking, and I have to get outside. On the first day of April, he received a letter informing him of his dismissal. And then, three months later, he had, inexplicably, found himself twelve years in the past, wandering

about a mall naked to the flats of his feet, with only his interminable guilt to keep him company. □□Noel woke just after dawn on the morning after his birthday. He found Leon downstairs passed out on the sofa. The party hat lay crushed on the floor, its rubber band popped long ago. Noel grabbed Leon's socked foot and shook it.

Wake up, grandpa. Rise and shine.

Leon groaned and rolled over. What time is it? he said into the back of the sofa. Time to get up.

Go to hell.

When do you want to leave to meet Fentz? Later.

When's later? Ten or eleven.

Pick me up at my house?

Leon grunted, and Noel left him to his dreams.

Back at his apartment, he found the sleeping figure of Mona in his bed. He stood over her for some time, watching her breathe heavily in the dim stream of morning light. After he brushed his teeth, he climbed into bed next to her, careful not to wake her. He lay for awhile watching the spackled ceiling. As soon as he closed his eyes to sleep and sighed deeply, Mona rolled over and draped her arm across his chest. You awake? she whispered.

Yeah, he said after a long pause. How did your birthday go?

Fine. Sally got me a Piazza jersey and Leon gave me one of his cases of Blue Heron. That's nice, she said. Did Leo get you anything?

He tried to wipe a boog on my shirt, but I don't think that counts. A boog?

Booger, he said, matter-of-factly. Gross. What did Sally get Leo?

A Larry Bird jersey. She bought Leon a Mowatt jersey. He tried to trade it for Leo's jersey. I don't think Sally knows much about football.-

Did Leo go along with the trade?

Nah, said Noel. The kid is an idiot, but he isn't stupid. Mona gave Noel a pained smile, rubbed his chest, and then rolled over to her side of the bed. Noel watched the back of her head for a moment before speaking again. Guess what Sally found under Leo's bed.

Without giving her a chance to answer, Noel leaned over the side of the bed to grab the bra out of his coat pocket. But before he could retrieve it, Mona answered, My bra.

What?! Noel said. You know about this already? Of course.

How?

Because I gave it to him, she said as if it were the most obvious fact in the world. But why?

Noel sputtered. How?

How? He stopped by my studio a couple of weeks ago. He said he was looking for you. I told him I hadn't seen you in a couple of days and then he asked to use the bathroom.

So he knows about us?

I'd say that's a safe assumption, Mona said wryly. Why did you give him the bra then?

I caught him trying to sneak it out. It was pretty obvious he was hiding something under his shirt.

Okay, said Noel, slowly. But why did you let him keep it?

I don't know. Mona shrugged. I guess I felt sorry for him. You have to admit the situation is more than a little fucked up. Technically, I'm married to both of you, so what's the harm?

Noel winced when Mona said the word, 'married.' He hadn't been entirely forthwith about the future. Telling the person you love they're destined to die may be easy in theory, yet in practice, it's rather close to impossible. So instead of the hard truth, Noel opted for the easy lie. That's true, he told her, but today, right now, you're my girlfriend, not his.

It's just a bra, Noel. Let it go.

No, he said. I won't let it go. It's more than a bra. It's a slippery slope is what it is.

Oh, Jesus, was her only response before flopping back over and turning her back again to him.

Don't Oh Jesus me, Mona, he foolishly pressed on. What's next? A pair of panties? A little kiss? A friendly blowjob?

And the Academy Award for Best Dramatic Performance goes to...Mona said, opening an invisible envelope. What do you know? Noel Scruggs!

Whatever. Be fucking stupid. I don't care. He then grabbed his pillow and made for the door.

Go sleep on the sofa, said Mona. Be a fucking baby. I don't care.

Noel slammed the bedroom door behind him. He flopped down on the sofa and spread the afghan over himself in a frustrated lurch. Unable to sleep, Noel lay there for some time, again watching the morning shift and grow across the spackled ceiling.

During the first year of his expulsion into the past, Noel had been obsessed with finding a way back home to his own time. He, at first, floated the idea of simply going to the government with their story, but Leon shot the idea down out of hand. He didn't want to risk ending up as a vivisected science project in some secret government bunker, and Noel eventually came to see his point.

Instead, they decided to find a way back to the future on their own. How hard can it be, really? Noel had asked.

He began doing research at the downtown library and eventually discovered, after weeks of poring over journals packed with arcane jargon and impenetrable physics equations and field theories, that he would need access to an astronomical amount of energy to travel any

sort of distance into the future.

How much energy are we talking about? asked Leon, between sips of his beer. Like a solar system's worth.

That's quite a bit, bud. I don't think we can come up with that much. No shit, said Noel, sharply.

And for nearly a year, Noel left the possibility of returning to his own time without a solution. Leon, for his part, didn't seem to care one way or another, and whenever Noel pilloried him about being lazy and a drunk and not wanting to find a solution to their joint problem, Leon would simply shrug Noel off. What's so great about the future? The beer is better here anyway.

Per the usual, Sally was the one to come through with a solution, or, at least, the potential for a solution. Taped to the refrigerator one morning, Noel found an article Sally had cut out of the Boston Globe about a physicist at MIT, a Dr. Sergei Fentz, who claimed to have successfully transported electrons forward in time after creating the world's first fully functional Alcubierre drive. The article went on to state that Dr. Fentz's experiments had yet to be independently confirmed, and many prominent scientists in his field cast doubt on his claims. Noel read the article through three times before dashing off to share it with Leon.

After strong-arming the old man into joining him, Noel and Leon drove down to MIT the next morning to speak with Dr. Fentz in person. The article had described the physicist as an eccentric man with an unusual appearance, but nothing prepared Noel for how the man appeared in person. The natty gray hair atop his head sprouted out from every imaginable direction and looked as if it had felt the bite of a comb in over a decade. His beard, too, had no semblance of order to it and was littered with long-stale food particles, bits of paper, and even dried leaves

and twigs. Indeed, every aspect of Fentz's appearance seemed to be suffering from years of disrepair and negligence. The lenses in his glasses were scuffed and cracked. His fingernails were overgrown and clattered on the desk, his earlobes were caked with wax, and the lab coat he wore was tattered in several places and patches of mold grew under his armpits. His teeth, though, were the worst. A pale shade of orange, they lent his breath a strange smell of mud. Noel was correct to assume the man hadn't showered in months, if not years.

Yet, as bedraggled as the physicist appeared, his mind was as inversely incisive and quick-witted. The moment the two of them walked into his office, he seemed to know exactly who they were and what they had come to visit him for. My lord! he said the moment he saw their faces side-by-side. You're the same person! He immediately stepped from behind his desk to meet them for a closer inspection. He grabbed Noel's shoulders first and peered into his face as if he were looking deep into the bottom of a well. When he made a grab for Leon, the old man abruptly moved away. Whoa there, bud, said Leon. Not on the first date.

Of course, of course, said Fentz. Excuse my poor manners. I don't get out as much as I used to.

Or ever, Leon muttered under his breath to Noel.

Please, please, he said, gesturing for the two of them to have a seat. Tell me everything. Are you a clone, he asked Noel. But before he could answer, he turned to Leon and asked, Or are *you* from the future?

I'm from the future, bud, Leon said, simply. Both of us are.

My lord! So there's another one of your out there? How old is he? He's just a kid, said Noel.

No hair on his face or even his balls, for that matter.

Fascinating, said Dr. Fentz. Tell me everything. Leave nothing out.

Noel told his story with as much detail as he could remember. He told how he had felt

nauseous his last day in the year 2001. How his vision would blink in and out, and how he periodically see flashes of people and objects which weren't really there. Me too, Leon chimed in. Like ghosts. Noel then told how he suddenly lost consciousness, but at the same time didn't. Same here, Leon interjected Leon again.

You want to tell it? asked Noel, annoyed. You're doing alright.

Then stop interrupting already. My bad, said Leon.

Everything was black for a time. I couldn't move or speak or anything. But I could still think. It was like I no longer existed, but was aware of it, if that makes any sense.

None at all, said Dr. Fentz. Please continue.

Noel then told how he had regained consciousness at Rockinham Park Mall, how disoriented he was as he stumbled through the food court naked down to the flats of his feet, and how a police officer tackled him and drove him directly to a jail cell. I spent two days in jail before I realized something terrible had happened to me, something unexplainable. I thought it was a gag, at first, some sort of sick hoax. In the end, it was a Newsweek magazine a guard gave me that convinced me I was actually in the year 1989 instead of 1991. I tried to explain to police that I was actually from the future, thinking this explanation would somehow make them understand. I told them how George Bush Jr. was president in my time, how people used cell phones in the future, and how the Yankees won three pennants in a row. None of this helped, of course, and they transferred me to McLean the next morning.

Noel told how he was released six weeks later thanks to overcrowding in the mental facility, and how he eventually made his way to the one place he could find reliable sanctuary, at his mother's , at Sally's house.

And guess who answered the door when he knocked, said Leon. This guy. You should have

seen his face. He didn't know if he was looking in a busted mirror or a cow's ass. He fainted right there on the doorstep.

I did not, protested Noel.

You almost fainted. You stumbled and grabbed for the doorframe. Didn't you?

Noel crossed his arms and looked to the far corner of the ceiling as Leon told his account of what had happened. Long story short, Doc. Everything that happened to him happened to me, too. The nausea, the darkness bit, all that stuff was the same. Instead of waking up naked in a mall, though, I came to early one morning in Lake Quannapowitt. I swam to shore, found a pair of jeans and a blanket in a storage shed, and hitchhiked to Sally's house. You should have seen her face, too. He slapped his knee and laughed. First thing I asked her for was a beer.

Neither Noel or Dr. Fentz laughed along with Leon. Well, Dr. Fentz, said Noel. What do you think?

I don't know what to think, he said quietly. To be honest, I can't believe the Yankees won three world series' in a row. The future is bleaker than I ever imagined it could be.

Shit, said Leon. That's nothing. Those bastards win another five by the time the league finally folds in 2022.

Both Noel and Dr. Fentz stared at Leon in shock.

Don't look at me like that, said Leon. I told you the future is crap.

In the end, after dozens of painful examinations, blood draws, marrow extractions and whatnot, Dr. Fentz had no definite answers for them, and the only explanation he could give for how they had been transported into the past at all was to explain it away as the poor luck of being on the wrong end of a so-called 'quantum blip,' which Noel suspected was little more

than gibberish, and Leon outright insisted was, as he put it, Bullshit.

Dr. Fentz also confirmed that returning the two of them to the future would require an uncanny amount of energy, more than he could possibly muster with the pittance of a grant MIT afforded him. Yet, as the weeks turned into months and then into years, Dr. Fentz kept calling for more blood and saliva samples, which Noel was left to provide after Leon began refusing. Tell that vampire I'm done being his pincushion.

Eventually, without any explanation, the calls from the Dr. Fentz came to a sudden halt. Noel phoned his office every day for a week, leaving messages each time, but was unable to reach him each time until, finally, a recorded message informed him that the number had been disconnected. He drove down to MIT that afternoon and found Fentz's office empty save for the chipped and worn furniture. He questioned the professor in the adjacent office. Nobody knows what happened to him. He just stopped showing up. The department head might have his home address.

Noel discovered Fentz's apartment had been abandoned, too. The Super told him Fentz didn't pay his rent the previous month and wouldn't answer the door whenever he knocked, so he feared the worse. You'd be surprised how many bodies I've found over the years, the Super told him. Suicides, shut-ins, old folk, you name it. It ain't ever pretty either, no matter how many times you come across them. You'd think you'd get used to it after a time, but you don't. It's always an ugly sight. An ugly sight, for sure.

So, he's dead? asked Noel, confused.

Who? The Doctor? asked the Super. Nah, son. I found his apartment stripped clean though. It was like nobody had ever lived there in the first place. He did leave a note along with a wad of cash for the last month's rent.

What'd the note say? asked Noel. Thanks for everything.

That's it?

That's it, the Super confirmed.

It was last anyone had heard or seen from Fentz until the early morning phone call on Noel, Leon, and Leo's birthday. Leo had fielded the call and said Fentz's message was as brief as it was strange. I don't know, said Leo. He said he was Dr. Fetz—

Fentz, Noel corrected him.

Right. Dr. Fentz, and that he needed to meet you two as soon as possible. I wrote the address down.

Where? asked Leon.

Right here. He held up his hand. Scrawled across his palm was the faded address. Copy it out on this, please, Sally told him as she handed him a pad of paper.

That's all he said? asked Noel. Nothing else?

Yeah. He said to not tell anyone he called and to destroy the address as soon as you memorized it.

Leon picked Noel up a little before noon. Mona had left for class without so much as a word for Noel, not that he cared. He was doing his best to maintain his anger relative to her own, at least for the time being. He had meant to tell her about the meeting with Fentz, but their argument had

gotten in the way.

Noel and Leon drove west to address Fentz had provided, to a cabin on the outskirts of the small town of Sudbury. The cabin was little more than a ramshackle hovel. The roof had caved in, the insides had been stripped of any and all hinges and fixtures, and even the

electrical wire had been ripped from the walls to be sold for its copper. It was obvious no one had lived there for years.

You sure this is the right address? asked Leon.

That's what it says on my palm, answered Noel, offering his hand as proof. They continued their tour of the wreckage and were close to giving up when Leon spotted a dim blue glow beneath a closet door in the smallest of the bedrooms, which had been, at some point, a young girl's bedroom.

What do you think it is? Noel asked after Leon had called him upstairs. Dunno. It's locked.

Did you try knocking?

Knock? Leon repeated lamely. Why would I knock? I'm not selling girl scout cookies.

Noel stepped past Leon and knocked on the closet door. A moment or so later, they heard a loud click and then the clunk of what sounded like a bar sliding in its catch. The door then opened and standing on the other side was Dr. Fentz, looking well-weathered as usual.

You made it, he said happily. I was worried you'd get lost. Come inside.

Dr. Fentz waved them to follow him as he climbed the set of stairs built into the back of the closet. Eerie blue light poured from above. Noel looked to Leon and shrugged before the two of them climbed the stairs.

The stairs led up into the attic and built into the attic was great cylinder chamber, out of which came a raft of wires and thick tubes wrapped in tight bundles. The source of the blue light came from a watery substance inside of the chamber, from a jello-like liquid that seemed to shimmer and tremble at random.

What the hell is that? asked Leon. It's a tachyon-pulse capsule.

Leon shook his head. And what the hell is that?

It's a machine capable of converting common matter into negative square mass.

Are you getting anything out of this? Leon asked Noel. Not a bit.

It's difficult to explain to the layman, said Fentz. But, basically, it accelerates matter past the speed of light, thus breaking the Lorentz invariance.

Okay, said Leon. And?

And, therefore, time travel is possible.

Holy crap, Doc. I didn't think you had it in you.

I don't, really, he said. To be honest, I had some help. From who?

From myself.

Noel and Leon, again, looked at each other in confusion. We're still not following you, Doc.

About six months ago, I began receiving messages through a device called a tachyonic antitelephone built temporarily into my television.<sup>3</sup> The sender was transmitting from forty or so years from now and identified himself as Dr. Fentz. Since the antitelephone only offers one-directional communication, I had to respond the old fashion way.

How's that? Time capsules.

Wait, said Noel. You buried messages in order to send them to the future? Indeed.

Where?

The quad on campus, just outside of my office. Noel shook his head. I can't believe this.

What do you mean you can't believe this? asked Leon, puzzled. The guy from the future can't believe someone else made phone calls to himself in the future.

Right, said Noel. Sorry.

Anyhow, the messages arrived in a rudimentary binary code and took me a considerable time

to fully decipher. When I did finally decipher them, I discovered they contained instructions on how to assemble this capsule.

Let me get this straight, Doc, began Leon. A future version of yourself sent you a message through your television about how to build a time machine?

Correct.

Leon then turned to Noel, You can try the machine first. I assure you the capsule is fully functional and quite safe.

Sorry, Doc, but I'm going to need more than your word before I get into that UFO-looking thing. I'm going to have to agree with Leon here. All of this sounds pretty dangerous.

Would testing the device put your concerns at rest?

It'd sure make them drowsy, said Leon, wryly. But how do you expect us to test it? I sure ain't going to be a guinea pig.

There is a stray cat who lives outside. I have a can of tuna we can use to catch it. Noel looked to Leon again, and the old man shrugged before saying, Sure. Why not.

It took them nearly an hour to finally lure the cat from beneath the house. After it devoured the tuna fish, however, it became far more docile and laying purring in crook of Noel's arm.

You sure this won't hurt the cat, Doctor?

Well, there's always a certain amount of risk involved. What kind of risk?

The cat's temporal pattern could be scrambled and the cat's matter would then be scattered over a number of years. As Fentz spoke he fastened a wristwatch around the cat's neck and wrote down the time on a pad of paper: 3:32 p.m.

That doesn't sound very pleasant, said Noel.

In reality, the cat would feel very little pain. Its death would be instantaneous. So low risk is what you're saying, joked Leon.

Once the cat was sedated, Fentz placed it into the top of the capsule. Noel watched as the small animal seemed to drift within unseen currents flowing through the blue liquid. Fentz then handed a set of goggles to each of them and once they each of them were ready, he flipped a series of switches and turned a rectangular key. The machine emitted a deep, low hum as the liquid began to shudder and pulse blue light more and more rapidly. And then as soon as it had begun, it was over. During one of the pulses, without any of them noticing, the cat simply vanished. Fentz turned the key on the machine and the light returned to its usual steady pace.

Wait, said Noel. What happened? Where'd the cat go?

It's gone, Fentz said simply. It's outside of time and won't return for another—he checked his watch—fifty-one minutes or so.

What do we do until then?

I have a deck of cards, offered Fentz. We can play a round or two of poker.

They played cards until the alarm Fentz set chirped. The three of them gathered around the module with their goggles in place and not a minute later, the blue liquid began to pulsate and after another bright flash, the inert cat reappeared, floating just calmly as before. Fentz fished the cat out of the liquid and showed the wristwatch to Noel and Leon. The time clearly read 3:33 despite nearly an hour having passed.

Sweet shit! exclaimed Leon. It really does work.

Of course it works, said Fentz. So who wants to go first?

Without pause, Noel raised his hand. I do. I'll give it a try. I need a couple of days, though. I have to settle a few things first.

You'll have enough time for to square things away. The capsule needs at least a week to capture the tachyons required for the length of time you intend on traveling.

Perfect, said Noel. That's more than enough time. He pet the soaked cat, bundled up in a towel, he held in his arms. More than enough time, he said again, more to himself than anyone else.

Noel sat in his parked Elantra for twenty minutes before finally shutting off the engine and climbing the two flights of stairs to Mona's studio. He stood before the door for several minutes, urging himself to knock. He couldn't bring himself to do it, so he returned to his car to smoke a joint instead. He had forgotten his lighter at Sally's, so he searched the console for a replacement or, if he was lucky, a stray pack of matches. When he opened the glove compartment, the first thing he saw was the lacy turquoise bra lying limply atop the Elantra's repair manual. He set the undergarment aside and found a blue Bic lighter wedged in the corner.

As he smoked the joint, his thoughts kept returning to Leo. Leo telling a lame joke Noel had told himself a dozen times. Leo picking his nose in a dark movie theatre. Leo asking if he could drive and then pouting after Noel laughed and told him no. He then imagined Leo knocking on Mona's door, asking for Noel, knowing full well he was working down at the wharves, and then talking his way inside so he could filch *his*, as in Noel's, girlfriend's underwear. The little prick, Noel muttered as he put the joint out in his ashtray. He rolled down the window, started the engine, and drove straight to Sally's.

After Sally told him Leo was at basketball practice, Noel offered to pick him up. Are you sure? she asked. I really don't mind.

It would be my pleasure, said Noel.

Noel found Leo playing one-on-one with a teenager a good foot taller than him. Noel took a seat in the stands and watched the two of them go at each other. Noel always considered himself to be an above average player. But watching Leo brick shot after shot, he began to doubt the estimation of his ability. Luckily, the taller kid seemed to be even worse.

Leo eventually noticed him watching from the far side of the gym and dribbled the ball over to him. Where's mom?

At home. She sent me instead. You got a problem with that? No, Leo said with a snort. I was just wondering.

You and your girlfriend almost finished?

We're all tied up. And he's your girlfriend, stupid. Not mine. Well, hurry up. I don't like to wait.

Alright, said Leo. Keep your panties on. He turned away from Noel and passed the ball up the court to his opponent. Noel watched the two of them continuing playing with a sneer on his face.

Once the game was over, which Leo won with a lucky heave, Leo dribbled up to Noel and said, Think fast, as he faked passing the ball at his face. Noel recoiled, throwing up his hands.

Leo laughed aloud. Jumpy a little?

Grow up, you little twat. He snatched the ball away from him and tossed it across the court.

Why're you being such a prick? Leo asked before chasing after his ball. Noel left him in the gym and made for his car. Flickers of snow had begun to materialize in the early evening air. When Leo finally climbed into the passenger seat, he tossed his gym bag in the backseat and Noel sped off. They drove a few blocks in silence before Leo finally spoke at the next red light. What are you PMSing for?

You really want to know? Noel asked. He reached to open the glove compartment. This is why, shithead. He watched Leo's face as the kid took in the sight of the bra. What he saw quickly spread over his face wasn't embarrassment like he hoped, but anger.

Why are you going through my shit, asshole!?

I didn't, Noel said in defense. Your mom found it. It's still none of your goddamn business.

What do you mean it's none of my business? She's my goddamn wife.

No, she isn't, you liar. She may not know the truth, but I do. Leon told me all about the accident.

Noel was speechless, so Leo continued to harangue him. You had your chance with her, you selfish bastard. This Mona is my Mona. I'm going to tell her the truth and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

Still speechless, Noel did the only thing he could do. He grabbed Leo around the collar of his Larry Bird jersey and the fabric ripped along the seam.

You ripped my jersey, asshole! Leo tried to push Noel off of him, and the two of them struggled in the front half of the sedan for several moments before Leo managed to get the door open and escape.

Get back in this car! Noel demanded.

Go to hell! Leo yelled back. He opened the back door, retrieved his gym bag, and stomped off in the thick snowfall. Noel pounded his fists on the steering wheel before starting the car in order to pursue him. He did his best to drive alongside Leo as he walked quickly down the sidewalk.

Get in the car, Leo.

Get fucked, Noel! Leo yelled back. At the next intersection, Leo made a sudden turn at the corner.

Shit, Noel spat, jerking the wheel to the right. He narrowly avoided an oncoming sedan, but the pickup truck immediately behind it didn't have time to swerve and hit the Elantra head on. The Elantra spun across the intersection and into the brick wall of the bank on the corner. The last thing Noel saw before he lost consciousness was Leo, standing on the sidewalk beneath the streetlight, glowing like a statue in the falling snow.

The first face Noel when he awoke in Massachusetts General was what appeared to be the blurred silhouette of a woman. Noel blinked into the glare until his vision cleared and the face which emerged was that of Dr. Fentz.

Ah, said Fentz. You are awake. I hope you don't mind my having injected you with a special concoction of my own creation. Once I learned you were still in a coma, I gathered the materials and got to cooking. I am glad to see you have returned to us.

Where am I? asked Noel. What happened?

Fentz told him all he knew of the accident and how he had been unconscious for the previous eight days. Noel groaned and tried to sit up.

You should remain lying back, said Fentz. Both of your legs are broken and they had to replace one of your hips.

Oh, goddamn it, said Noel in a cracked voice. Please tell me I'm not paralyzed.

Remarkably, no. You should be back on your feet in a few months time. I wouldn't plan on running any marathons in the near future.

Never have before.

And you probably never will.

Noel slumped back in the hospital bed. Where's everyone else?

Your mother and the younger you were here earlier, but they returned home for the day. The young woman and the older you went to the cafeteria sometime ago. They should return momentarily.

Young woman? asked Noel puzzled.

Yes. The skinny girl with the blue hair. Maureen, I think. Mona?

Possibly, replied Fentz. Where did I get the name Maureen then?

Noel groaned again and covered his face with his hands. Does everyone know then? Sally and Leon? Do they know about Mona?

Of course.

And does she know about your capsule machine thing?

The tachyon capsule, Fentz corrected him. Of course she does. Everyone knows.

Fantastic, Noel said sarcastically. And on cue, Mona and Leon entered the room. Seeing Noel awake, Mona went to his side.

I'm so glad you're awake.

Me too, I guess. Noel glanced nervously at Leon, who remained standing by the door. He propped himself up with a cane Noel had never seen before. Good to see you, old man.

Likewise, you prick, replied Leon. I'd like to thank you for the lifelong limp you've now burdened me with. He waved his cane as proof.

I'd say you're welcome, but I'm pretty sure I'm getting the worst out of this deal. Would you two give us a minute?

Of course, said Fentz. He pushed himself out of his chair with the deliberateness of a sloth. Mona rubbed Noel's shoulder before heading to the door.

Be nice, she said to Leon on her way out.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Leon threw his cane at Noel. Noel managed to duck in time. The cane flew over his head and clattered harmlessly on the tile floor. How could you get involved with her?! We had a pact. Do you know what you've done, you asshole.

I really don't need this from you right now. I did just wake from a coma.

You know she thinks you're going to stay here and marry her, right? She thinks I'm the only one returning to the future.

Well, maybe I might just do that.

And Leo? What about him? It took Sally nearly a week just to get him to come visit you.

Considering he's responsible for putting me here, I'd rather he stayed away.

You are the most selfish bastard I have ever known.

Well, we're the same person, so maybe you should take a look in the mirror.

Leon sighed deeply and rubbed the top of his naked head. You know what. I am going to use Fentz's time capsule thing and I'm going to leave you here in this time. I'm tired of all of your moping about, feeling sorry for yourself. You want to ruin your life and the Kid's then fine. I refuse to stand around and be your audience. Leon hobbled across the room to fetch his cane and made for the door.

Whatever, said Noel. Go ahead and leave, you drunk. Leon waved his hand at Noel as he shuffled out the door. He turned his head to look out the window. Just beyond the snowy windowsill was a few blue jays perched atop a gazebo. Moments later, Mona came back into the room. She walked around the far side of the bed and sat down between Noel and the window.

Are you okay? she asked, concerned. He shrugged and remained silent.

Dr. Fentz told me about the capsule.

Noel snorted softly. Big mouth, he muttered.

Does it really work? she asked. The machine he built.

I was going to tell you, he explained. I really was. But then all of this happened. She rubbed his shoulder. Don't worry about it, Noel. We can talk about it later. I'm sorry, he said.

Don't be, she replied with a pained smile. Don't be.

Noel was released from the hospital a week later. Sally was the only one to show up to check him out, and she had been the only person to visit him again after he had woken up. He had tried to call Mona, but was only able to leave messages on her machine.

How are you feeling? Sally asked as she rolled him out in his new wheelchair. Pretty damn lonely, he said.

She patted his shoulder. I'm sorry, buddy. You can sit this one out if you want. I don't mind dropping you off at home on my way to Sudbury. Fentz had fully charged the capsule and Leon was going to use it to return to 2031.

That's alright, he said. I really should see the old man off.

Sally drove west along Highway 20 and arrived at the sunken cabin just before noon. Sally parked her station wagon next to a truck Noel was all too familiar with. What is Mona doing?

Sally shook her head. I didn't know she was coming.

They found Dr. Fentz and Leo in the bedroom connected to the stairs leading up to the capsule in the attic.

You made it, said Dr. Fentz.

Noel waved lamely. How's it going, Kid? Leo gave him a look before glancing away. Leo, said Sally. Manners.

Hey, he said to Noel. Sorry about the whole accident thing. Don't be. It was my fault.

I told you, Leo said defensively to his mother.

Where's the old man? Noel asked, though he was more concerned with Mona's location. He went back with the blue-haired young lady.

They went to talk.

I hope they finish soon, said Fentz. We are on a tight schedule. Go get them, Leo, said Sally.

Leo dashed off and returned a few minutes later with Leon and Mona in tow. Noel and Leon shared a tense handshake, and Mona gave Noel a brief hug. Did you get my messages? he asked her in a whisper.

I haven't been home, she said before stepping away and putting Sally between them.

Are you ready? Fentz asked Leon. We must hurry. The window for your travel will be short.

I guess this is it, Leon said to the group. He embraced Sally and she wished him well. He opened his arms to hug Leo only to trick him into a headlock. The Kid struggled out and slugged Leon in his arm. He embraced Mona and squeezed her shoulders. Remember what I told you, he said to her. She nodded and looked to the floor.

When Leon turned to Noel, he shifted his cane to his left hand and extended his hand again. No hard feelings, bud? Noel took his hand and gripped it tightly.

No hard feelings, Noel repeated. See you in the mirror, bud.

I'm ready, Doc, he said finally to Fentz. Everyone filed up the stairs into the blue gloom of the attic with Leo and Sally pulling Noel and his wheelchair up each step. The capsule was same blue field Noel had seen before, but now it seemed to pulsate with a greater urgency.

It looks like a giant blue eye, Sally marveled.

Dr. Fentz typed furiously on a nearby computer causing the capsule to pulsate slower and

slower until it came to a stop entirely and merely hummed. Ready when you are, said Fentz.

Alright, everyone, Leon told the group. See you in the future, I guess. Noel noticed he gave Mona a lingering look before he approached the blue field. But when he was no further than two feet away he paused and looked back at Noel. He smiled slightly and shook his head. I can't do it, he said. I can't go back there.

Then don't, said Sally. No one here wants you to leave.

I don't know about that, said Leo. It sure would smell better if you weren't around. Noel and Leon both chuckled.

Leon turned away from the capsule. What do you think, bud? To be honest, said Noel. I hate to see you go.

Leon stepped down from the capsule and Sally embraced him. Noel was the first to see what happened next. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mona dash past Fentz's computer, up the ramp, and dive directly into the blue field. She remained in the trembling sheet of energy for a moment before her body began to tremble and then fade. The entire event happened so quickly, no one in the room seemed to know what had occurred.

Oh my god, Sally gasped.

Turn it off! Noel yelled at Fentz. Quick! Turn it off!

It is too late, said Fentz. And as soon as the last word left his mouth, the entire machine went black.

Bring her back, urged Noel.

I can't, said Fentz. The capsule only works one way. Besides, it has overloaded. It will be weeks before I get it working again. The group was speechless. Noel was the first to speak.

This is all your fault! he yelled at Leon. What did you tell her? I told her the truth.

You told her about the crash?! Noel nearly shrieked.

She asked, said Leon in defense. You're the goddamn liar around here. Not me.

You were just trying to push her toward the Kid, Noel accused him. Maybe I was.

I don't need your help, Leo said to Leon. I was doing fine on my own.

By stealing her underwear? said Noel. Oh, you're a real Lothario alright. The three of them began to bicker. Sally and Dr. Fentz stood by and watched them argue for few minutes before climbing down the stairs and leaving them alone themselves and their bickering in the attic.

*Eight Days in July*  
*(The Unseen)*

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

— W.B. Yeats

Alls I remember is that it was a Saturday and that my tooth was killing me. Earlier that morning, just outside of Alexandria, I had bit down on one of them fossilized nuts you sometimes get in your trail mix and I just heard this cracking sound. Next thing I know I've got this pain like you wouldn't believe, like somebody was trying to pry my tooth outta my jaw with a screwdriver or something.

I had no chance of finding a dentist since it was the weekend and all, so I just kept on driving. By the time I rolled into Corpus Christi, all's I could think about was finding someone to give me a painkiller or to even pull my broken tooth out. I was in so much pain I woulda taken either. I was only in town for the night, though, and I didn't know nothing about the place save for the Home Depot and the highway. And even if I did get lucky and find someone who'd take me, I ain't had no insurance anyways. Like my Grams used to say, I was stuck up shit's creek without a roll of toilet paper.

Just eat some tylenol and smoke some of your dope, stupid, my Uncle Julian told me after I called him. We ain't got time for your damn cavities. I've been telling you to brush your teeth since you was a little kid.

Tylenol ain't working, I said into the phone as I cradled my throbbing jaw in my other hand. I can't drive when it hurts this much.

Uncle Julian was silent for a moment. Well, get your ass to the emergency room then. Tell them to just bill you and we'll deal with it later.

I had driven to Texas from New Orleans that morning with a big ole trailer strapped to

my Uncle's old Ford truck. I was on a mission for drywall and this was my third run just this week. Since the levies broke after Katrina and the city got put under water, tons of folks were rebuilding, or restoring, as the folks uptown liked to call it, and the thing they needed most was drywall. The thing was that you couldn't find a sheet in all of Louisiana for under 20 dollars; they was cheaper out in Mississippi, but not by much. In Texas, though, they went for about 5 dollars a sheet and they was even cheaper up in Arkansas. But we don't go up there as much since the police ain't as friendly to a bunch of boys from the bayou buying up all their drywall and then booking it for the state line.

Anyways, my Uncle found out the Home Depot down in Corpus was having a sale on some Chinese drywall, 3 dollars a sheet, so down I went. Bought damn near 500 of them. Filled the trailer, loaded up the truck bed. After we flip them back in the city for 17 a sheet, Uncle says we should clear close to seven grand, after gas and expenses, of course. Out of that I should get 2k, just for driving. Growing up in the 8th Ward, I'd never imagined I'd be making close to ten grand a week. Uncle keeps reminding me not to get a big head about the money, saying it won't last, that money never do. But goddamn if having that many hundreds in your pocket don't make you get some wild thoughts. Not like it matters much anyway. Most of what I earn gets Western Unioned over to Mobile for my kids and my old lady. I ain't worried about it though. It's like Grams always said, Supporting your family ain't no subscription, it's a membership. The hospital was way more crowded than I thought it would be. There were all sorts of people with all sort of problems. More problems than you'd think people could have on a lazy Saturday afternoon. There was people who you could tell was just so sick with their pale faces and all. It was like a gallery of winces, shivers and coughs, I tell you. This one lady was in

there with her kids who had been stung up something nasty by some bees or hornets or something. The best was this one man who was rocking back and forth groaning more than a hurt wildebeest. The kicker was that both his hands were wrapped in bloody towels and he held them out before him like he was praying or something. His wife told me the whole story of how he had been trying to pull a chomped up frisbee out a lawn mower while it was still running. My grandmother always said whoever learned to profit off of stupid would die rich and you could make a fortune off guys like this one.

After I told the charge nurse what was bothering me, she gave me a bunch of papers to fill out and made me sit with the rest of the sick folks. Now I was never any good at writing, so I had the lady with the stung-up kids fill it all out for me. Sorry, I told her, a dog got to me when I was kid and I can't make all of the letters proper-like. That's why my face flinches too. The doctor said it was a tic and that it'd go away, but it's been twenty-five years and it ain't gone away yet. I showed her two boys the long scar stretching from my ear to the corner of my mouth just to give them something to think of other than the dozens of welts on their arms and legs.

She nodded politely and told me she was sorry about what happened. She was a nice enough lady, filling out the forms for me, but I did notice how she paused when I said I didn't have no insurance and I knew what she was thinking though she never did say it. I guess that's what they mean when they say folks are polite. They know when to bite their tongues and when not to.

I don't know how long I sat in that chair watching one muted Jackie Chan movie after another before they called my name. I even fell asleep a couple of times from waiting. I knew I was low priority. Far as I know, ain't no tooth ever killed nobody.

When the doctor finally saw me after another hour of waiting in the examining room, he looked at my tooth, said it was definitely broken and told me the best he could do was prescribe me some medicine for the pain until I made my way to a real dentist. You could tell he was a no nonsense type of guy. He had this sleepy look to him, like his whole life was a dream and he was too bored to wake himself up. On a scale of one to ten, one being no pain and ten being excruciating, describe your pain for me.

It hurts pretty bad, doc. I'd say it was at least an eight, if not a nine. Pain enough to make me jump out my seat sometimes.

The doctor snickered and wrote out a script for Tylenol 3 for me. My Uncle said afterward that he didn't give me Vics or Percosets cause he didn't like the cut of my jib and he probably thought I'd sell them to schoolchildren or something. I didn't care what he gave me, long as it made the pain go away. After the doctor left, a nurse gave me directions to the nearest pharmacy and told me I was free to go. On my way out, though, I was somehow turned around and I found myself lost, which happens more than I like to admit, especially in massive places like a mall or a hospital. My grandmother liked to say I could get lost in a map store.

After being lost for some time, I went down this long hallway with no doors and came to some double doors that said, Restricted, but opened for me anyway. Not wanting to go back the way I came, I ducked through the doors before they closed shut and I found myself in this great wide room with a bunch of patients in beds. I knew they must have been real sick by how most of them were bandaged or strapped to their beds. There was a door on the other side of the room marked, Exit, so I quietly made my way past the beds so I could get out before anyone caught me. When I was passing this one bed, though, the

guy strapped in tight reached out and grabbed my wrist. I looked down at him and I saw his eyes were all bugged out like they was about to jump out his head or something.

Let go of me, I hissed at him. I ain't no doctor.

He then began to open and close his mouth like a fish stranded in the surf and this eerie sort of gibberish just poured out. Blerterkmapapterf, I heard him say, but the words didn't really match up with how his mouth was moving. It was like a ventriloquist or something. I didn't realize it at the time, but there was something off about his face. It was a pasty white face and looked as normal as normal can be. But the harder you looked at it, the more it seemed like it wasn't there at all. I tried to pry his hand off my wrist, yet nothing I did made any difference. Blerterkmapapterf, he seemed to say again.

I don't know what you want from me, I said quietly and his eyes then shifted to the straps bounding him to the bed. His skin was red from struggling against them. You want me to let you out?

Berkdorf, he said.

I looked about the room and didn't see any nurses or nobody really, so I didn't see the harm in undoing him. He probably just had to pee or make a two or something. I ain't one to keep a man from a toilet.

It took some doing, since the straps were so tight, but I eventually got them undone. I tell you the second I undid the last one, dude all but floated out of the bed. He stood there for a second turning his head left and right and then shook himself all over like he was a dog that just came out of the bayou or something.

The next thing he did, though, was where things got out of hand, and I had a hard time making sense of them. He walked right up to me all super close, close enough where I

could smell him and I tell ya, he smelled something fierce. He then grabs at my face with his hands. I don't remember much of what happened next, but I began to tingle all over and I lost sight of everything. And I swear on my Grams, I start seeing this crazy worm thing swimming in my vision, and it's glowing and bucking its body back and forth. Wild shit, man. Just wild. Next thing I know I'm coming to and I see dude is running away from me down the long hallway. I ain't a hundred percent sure, but I didn't think he was heading for no bathroom.

I eventually made my way out of the room and a nurse stopped me to ask what I was doing in the ward. I told her I had gotten lost looking for the bathroom, but she didn't believe me, probably cause of my scar. So I fessed up and told her I was there for my tooth and it was then that I realized the damn thing no longer hurt, like, at all. She showed me to the nearest bathroom and when I looked at my broken tooth in the mirror, I saw it weren't broken anymore. It was like a whole new tooth. I pushed on the tooth with my finger and sure it enough it was real. Well, goddamn I said, looking in my own in the mirror. Goddamn. I made it back to the 8th ward early the next morning and after some scrambled eggs and a Redbull, I helped my cousins unload the truck into a storage unit. I took a short nap afterwards and then I was back on the road, on my way to Texas.

About an hour into my trip, I was crossing the Mississippi River Bridge into good old Cancer Alley, that nasty stretch of smoking chemical plants just on the other side of Baton Rouge, when my uncle called to warn me about some thunderstorms coming my way.

I'm looking at the map the weatherman showing and it ain't nothing but red, son, he told me. You probably need to hunker down until it passes. No sense it ruining a load of

drywall again. A couple of months earlier, I had tried to beat the rain and ended up soaking a couple hundred sheets. I swear Uncle Julian's nostrils flared so much, I couldn't help but laugh. Shit sure wasn't funny when he docked me damn near three grand for all that damaged product. Fair's fair, he told me before repeating something the old lady liked to say over and over, Never let another man pay for your fuck-up.

The rain hit me while I was stuck in traffic coming into Houston—I never did understand why there was always traffic going into Houston, but never on your way out. You'd think people would be in a hurry to get out of that damn crazy town more than they'd want to get in. Makes no damn sense.

Anyways, I eventually made it cross Houston, but it was slow -going. By the time I got to Wharton it was getting dark and my eyes were starting to shut. The previous week of driving was finally catching up with me. I figured if I could just make it to the Super 8 motel in Victoria, I'd call it a day.

When I got down past Edna though, the rain just kept getting worse and worse, and pretty soon all I could see was waves of rain coming down on my windshield. I barely saw any other cars on the road and the steering wheel kept going soft cause of all the hydroplaning I was doing. It started to feel as if I had accidentally driven into the damn Gulf. Pretty soon I had no other choice than to park under an overpass and wait out the bad weather.

With nothing better to do than wait, I rolled down the windows and lit up a skeeter, just to take the edge off. I almost always carried a small bag with me, just enough to get me there and back again, never enough for any cop to care much about if he found it under my seat.

I wasn't half finished smoking when all of a sudden I see a figure walking towards me out in the rain, no umbrella or nothing, and then I see this familiar hospital gown dude be wearing over his sweatpants. I can't tell you how surprised I was by the sight of this poor, wet bastard walking right past me on the opposite side of the highway. Mind you, save for my headlights, it's pretty damn dark with the rain and all, and I can't really see too well, but I call out to him anyway and he stops short real quick and I can see his head turn all eerie-like, as if he was a robot or something, and he just keeps on standing there staring at me. Now, I'd like to think I'm the friendly type. A bit of a people person, you know. My moms always said I ain't got enough hard feelings in me to hold a grudge longer than my alcohol. So, of course, I tap out my skeeter and jog across the highway to offer the stranger a ride.

Once I get to the median, I get a better look at dude's face and I see that he's the guy strapped into the bed back at the hospital. The crazy sonofabitch must have walked straight from Corpus Christi. Grams always said it was a small world, one full of even smaller people, but goddamn if this weren't a coincidence if I ever saw one.

I called out to him again and without so much as looking for oncoming traffic, he turns his body and walks straight across the highway toward me. You alright, man? I asked him. What're you doing walking in the rain? That shit can't be good for you.

He didn't so much as say a word and just stood there staring at me.

You remember me? From the hospital? I let you out of the bed, remember?

I remember you, he said slowly, talking out of his mouth like a gasping fish again. His talking was even weirder out here in the dark under the overpass and all than it was back at the hospital. But at least I could understand what the hell he was saying this time.

Where you going, man? You ain't got no car?

He turned his head and pointed out into the rain. Houston, he said.

Is that where you're going? Houston?

Houston, he said again.

You ain't walking there, are you? I looked out at the rain, which was still coming down hard as ever. Not in this shit, man. You'll catch your death, for sure.

Walking, he said. Houston.

You alright, man? I asked him since he was talking slow and kinda funny. You got a brain slug or something?

Houston, was his only response.

Look, I can give you a ride, man, if you want. But I just came from Houston and I won't be heading back that way till tomorrow.

Houston, he said.

Yeah, yeah. Houston. Tomorrow, I'll take you there. Come on. I waved for him to follow me back to the truck and it took some doing, but I managed to shepherd him into the passenger seat and we was then on our way.

What's your name, man? I asked him as soon as we pulled back into the rain. But he just turned and stared at me. Your name? I tried again. You got a name, man?

Houston, he repeated.

Alright, I relented. Houston it is. You wanna listen to some music, Houston? I need something to keep me awake and you don't seem like the talking-type.

Houston just kept on staring, so I turned my iPod on and played some Juve.

Hope you like rap cause all I've been listening to all summer is this *Reality Check* shit.

You heard it? Surprisingly, Houston shook his head.

Well, check this song then. He's rapping about Katrina. I put on 'Get Ya Hustle On' for him to listen to. Where were you for the storm?

Houston, said Houston.

Man, you lucky then. That shit was for real. I was stuck up on my roof for days. Had to cut through the attic with a cleaver. I'm lucky I got my old lady and the kids out before the levees broke. They living up in Mobile now. I'll probably move out there eventually, but right now I'm making that cash, you know. Strike when the iron's hot and then strike it some more after it's gone cold. That's what my Grams would say.

The song was ending and instead of letting the next track play, Houston reached over and hit back on the iPod.

You like that one, huh?

Houston, he said, and then as soon as Juve started rapping, Houston began to rap right along with him and I swear he sang that shit word for word, like didn't miss a single syllable.

Goddamn, man, I said. I thought you said you ain't ever heard this before.

I ain't heard this one before, Houston said awkwardly.

You just memorized it after one listen? That's impressive as all hell, man. Here do it again. I put on 'What's Happenin'' and sure enough, the second time around he sang that shit like he wrote it. It was pretty funny, though, watching someone as Brady Bunch as him singing about hoes, Glocks and soldier rags.

We listened to the rest of the album and then *400 Degreez* and dude memorized every damn track. It was some amazing shit to see. You're like one of those super-geniuses you

see on Jeopardy, aren't you?

Houston, he said.

Yeah, right, I said. Houston, Houston, Houston. We drove the last hour or so to Victoria and checked into the Super 8 for the night. I remember the clerk was looking at us like we was up to no good, mostly cause Houston kept saying Houston over and over.

He wants to go to Houston, I told her.

I hear that, she said in the thickest Texan accent you ever heard. I mean, it was thick as fog.

Anyways, once we got in the room, I just passed out, man. It had been a long day and I didn't know it then, but the next one was gonna be even longer.

The next morning I woke to find Houston standing exactly where I left him when I stretched out on the bed. When I asked him if he had stood there all night, he predictably said, Houston.

After snagging a bagel and a cup of coffee from the lobby's Continental breakfast, which I had to stop Houston from eating more than two, we hit the road for Corpus Christi. I was behind schedule thanks to the rain and the traffic, but I figured if we booked it down 77, we could make it to Home Depot in just over an hour. After another thirty minutes or so loading the trailer, we could be back on the road by 10am. It was sure as shit ambitious, but I could manage it if I got lucky with traffic.

Unfortunately, nothing went right. Traffic was bumper to bumper thanks to a Mustang that flipped itself over in the passing lane and sat looking like Godzilla had stepped on it. I tried to point out the blood splashed on the concrete to Houston, but he just kept looking in the side mirror in the direction we had just come.

Shit got worse when we made it to Home Depot. They had misplaced my order, or whatever, and I had to wait close to an hour before they realized it was sitting up front by the bay doors like I had said it was six or seven times. I even pointed to the huge stack of plasterboard clearly marked with my last name, Grimes. The only silver lining was that I got the floor manager to knock twenty dollars off total cost.

Traffic was nonexistent leaving Corpus and pretty soon we was sailing back through Victoria on our back to Edna. I figured we'd make it to Houston around three or four. In the meantime, I put on some old Outkast to see if my buddy's memorization skills held up from the night before. They certainly did to, I tell ya. He learned all of *Stankonia* and *Aquemini* after just one listen. It was especially great to hear him rap the song 'Aquemini'. Like watching Mr. Rogers bounce around in gold chains.

Anyway, we hit traffic just outside of Wharton and I mean parking lot traffic, backed up for miles. I called my uncle after twenty minutes of sitting in the same damn spot and after he checked the highway reports online, he told me there was some sort of chemical spill outside of Sugarland. Traffic was backed up for thirty miles. You can either sit and wait for it to clear up, he told me, or you can take 36 south and try to get on 288. Your choice, son.

I hung up and sighed. You ever seen the Gulf, Houston?

He shook his head.

Well, now's your chance.

We made it to West Columbia around two and it was easy-going all the way down. I figured my schedule was shot, so I decided to keep going to Freeport where we grabbed lunch, which I paid for since Houston didn't seem to have money or pockets even.

We stopped at the beach after lunch and it was a mess thanks to the Sargasso Sea shit washing up in the surf. Houston didn't mind though. Soon as he saw the rushing water, he just stepped over the clumped seaweed and walked right out into the water. He stood there for some time too, hospital sandals and all, just staring out over the horizon. It was the only time I think I saw him smile the whole damn trip.

When we got back in the truck and turned north on 288, I asked Houston about what he was doing up in the hospital. I wanted to ask him outright about my tooth, but I didn't cause I wasn't sure that shit had even happened. I was still trying to make sense of it, you know.

I don't know, he said. I was just walking and they grabbed me. Bound my wrists.

Who? I asked. A cop? They must've put you in handcuffs.

He nodded. The police must have got him for trespassing and after putting him in a jail it wasn't hard to see dude was missing a screw, maybe even a bolt or two. They were probably doing a mental evaluation on him when I found him in the hospital. I remember wondering if I had let a serial killer out or some real Hannibal Lecter type dude. I don't know why, but he seemed harmless though. Just some big goofy kid.

What did they do to you in the hospital?

Needles, he said. Many needles.

Aw shit, man, I said. I hate me some needles, man. I spent some time in a hospital after my brother passed and they stuck me with so many needles, you'd a thought I was a hedgehog. Or is it a porcupine? I get them mixed up.

Porcupine, he said. A nocturnal rodent armed with a coat of barbed spines.

Oh yeah? I said, somewhat surprised. What else do you know about porcupines?

Porcupines eat insects.

Is that right? I think I knew that. Saw it on one of those nature documentaries. PBS or some shit. He didn't respond and instead just kept on staring at me. Say, man. Why don't you look at the road or out your window something? You're making me nervous.

He kept staring at me.

The road, I said, pointing through the windshield. Houston. That's where Houston is.

He turned his head to the road ahead and said, Houston.

Right, right. Houston, Houston, you damn weirdo.

We drove on in silence for awhile and I was getting sleepy so I tried talking to him again. So what's in Houston? You never did say.

Houston, he said. I need to go to Houston.

Is that where your family's at?

Houston.

And so on. If he didn't feel like talking, then I didn't feel like asking. Some dudes are just tight-lipped and pushing them only makes them more tight-lipped. Then out of nowhere he just kept on talking.

Kaini. I was sent to find Kaini. Bract sent me to find Kaini.

Bract? Who's that?

I was looking for Samuel Wells of Kaini. Kaini in Nassau. He was not there.

Nassau? Like Nassau Bay? That's where NASA is at. Wait. You ain't talking about Kaini Industries? That company with those stupid commercials of kids looking up at rockets in the sky?

Kaini Industries. Yes. Bound my hands. He showed me his wrists and there were deep

purple bruises pressed into each of them.

Yeah, I said. I bet they didn't take kindly to you snooping around that area. How'd you even get in there? You're lucky they didn't dump you in Kegans State and toss the key.

Lucky, he repeated and then, probably for the hell of it, added one more, Houston. We drove north for some time, just cruising along, when out of nowhere, a police cruiser appeared and began tailing us closely. I wasn't speeding or nothing and I knew all of my tags and plates were legit cause my Uncle is a nazi about that shit, so I wasn't worried. But old boy popped his lights on anyway and I pulled over. Soon as we came to a stop, Houston began shaking his head and saying, No, no, no, over and over. Houston, he said, pointing out the windshield. Houston. Houston.

I did my best to calm him down before the cop got to my window. Since Katrina, HPD liked to come down hard on anyone with an LA license plate and looked for any reason to turn your car over. They look the other way if all your holding is a skeeter or two. But you never know. They might lock you up anyway, maybe even snatch your wad.

If I didn't get Houston under control, the cop wouldn't think twice about shaking us down. And sure enough, his first question once he reached my window was, What's his problem?

I don't know, sir, I said in my most polite voice. He just started bugging out soon as we stopped.

Next thing I know the cop's got his hand hovering round his piece and he's telling us to get out of the truck. I think to myself, Here we go, and begin to climb out. Houston, though, doesn't so much as budge and just keeps on sitting there saying, Houston, over and over like a broken recording and this don't make the cop happy, for sure.

I'm gonna need you to exit the vehicle, sir, the cop said into the truck cab.

Houston, said Houston, not moving an inch.

You best tell your friend to get out of the truck. He ain't gonna like it if I have to remove him.

Man, he's just some hitcher I picked up in the rain. He ain't no friend of mine, sir.

Tell him anyway.

I did as I was told, making sure to keep my hands visible, since I could tell the cop was getting on another level. Hey, Houston. You need to get out of the truck, man. This police ain't about to play around with you.

Houston looked at me and I waved him for him to come join me and miraculously, he climbed out of the cab and walked over to where I stood in the grass.

Now that wasn't so hard, was it? the cop said sarcastically. You boys ain't got no weapons on you, right?

No, sir, I said. I'm just hauling some drywall. Don't need no guns for that.

What about your friend?

I doubt he even knows how to shoot a gun, sir.

How about in the truck? Am I gonna find anything in here?

My mind immediately went to the small bag of skeeters I had stashed up under the driver's seat. No, sir. Just a shit-ton of drywall is all.

The cop got out his flashlight and began to go through the inside of the truck, opening up compartments and rifling between the seats. Houston and I watched on a few feet away as traffic whipped past us like a blur. Off in the distance, I could see a fresh wall of black storms surging just above the overpass and the fanned-out Houston skyline.

The next thing I know the cop is all up in my face, waving the baggie of joints like it was a sparkler or something. I don't remember what he was saying cause it's always the same shit, you know. Why'd you lie to me this. I know you was selling that. Cops are always trying to pin every brother with a bag as a dealer just so they can meet their quota or get their commendations and shit. I ain't a youngblood no more, so I knew better.

That ain't mine, sir, I told him. I didn't even know that was under the seat at all.

He didn't care though. He threw me on the hood of the truck anyway, which was hot as fuck, mind you, and put me in handcuffs. He pushed me down on my knees and went off to do the same to Houston.

Now I don't know exactly what happened, cause I wasn't looking on account of my being left staring directly into the grill of the truck, but I heard the cop yelling at Houston to turn around and put his hands on his head. A minute or two later, I see Houston stumble by in handcuffs and the cop pushing him from behind. The cop comes back a moment later and helps me to my feet and I immediately see Houston going wild in the back of the cop car, jumping from one side of the seat to the other. Next thing I know there's this bright flash of light and this crazy sound, like metal screeching or something. I instinctively turned my face away, but I was too late. The flash blinded me something good and it took awhile before I could see clearly. And it wasn't what I saw so much when my vision cleared, but what I didn't see...Houston standing alongside the rode where the police cruiser had been. Somehow it had just up and vanished. Like you could see the pressed down grass where the tires had been, but there was no car to be found anywhere. It was like lightning had blasted it to dust or something.

Where the cop's eyes cleared and he saw that his cruiser had disappeared, he just lost

his shit. Out came his Glock and he just starts screaming at Houston about his car. And what does Houston do? He slips the handcuffs of his wrist easy as bracelets or something.

Of course, his makes the cop even madder, of course, and he bum-rushes Houston, who just casually steps aside and pats the cop atop his head like he's a little kid. The cop stumbles awkwardly and then just stands up straight. He holsters his gun and turns to look at us. On his face is this flat expression, flattest expression you ever did see, I tell you.

What the hell happened? I asked Houston.

He bound my wrists.

Yeah, but what did you do to him?

I don't know.

Hey...um...sir? I said. You alright, man?

Are you the Sepalum? the cop asked.

Say what?

Houston then stepped forward, raised his hand at the cop and said some more of his gibberish. Ternkirptoff, or something like that, more of that weird shit.

Anyways, the cop undoes my handcuffs, drops them on the ground like they was trash and then dusts off my knees for me. I stood there and watched him as if it weren't really happening. I just couldn't believe it.

What the hell is going on? I asked.

Houston, said Houston.

Seriously? I looked to the cop. We can just leave?

The cop shrugged.

What do we do about him? I asked Houston. We can't just leave him on the side of the road.

Houston. We dropped the cop off at a Valero near the exit for Highway 6. He no longer seemed to know who he was or what was going on and, to be honest, dude didn't even seem to care. Houston would spout some of that gibberish at him and he'd just jump into action. I felt bad leaving him at the gas station like that, but I sure would have felt worse sitting up in jail. He didn't seem to mind though. He even waved back at Houston as we pulled away.

I was pretty bugged out after our close-call with the cop, so I decided to stop at the IHOP a few miles down the road, just outside of Shadow Creek. I needed to smoke a quick skeeter and get something on my stomach. Houston complained at first when we stopped, but he came around once I told him I'd buy him pancakes.

At our table, the waitress told us about a special they was running for unlimited pancakes and I jokingly asked her if we could split one order. She said that we can't, of course, so I asked her why not and how can you have two unlimited of something anyway. She didn't feel like answering that, so she just walked off.

A few minutes later she came back with the first stack and I tell you, I ain't never seen someone put pancakes back like Houston did. He barely chewed the whole time. Just kept popping them in his mouth and damn near swallowed them whole. He cleaned his plate and when the waitress asked if he was ready for more, he nodded and actually told her, Please, for a change. He must have ate 8 stacks before I told him that was enough. Houston, he said, disappointed. I then noticed a couple of Hispanic kids looking over at me and chuckling into their hands. I knew they was laughing at my scar. I get it all of the

time, so I just ignored them and kept on eating my pancakes.

Tell me what happened back there with that police. What'd you hit him with a stun gun or something?

I don't know. Houston thought for a moment. He bound my wrists. I didn't want my wrists bound.

Well, it's best not to play around with cops like that. We got lucky this time, for sure. Nine out of ten times doing anything other than what they tell you to do is jail sentence. Or worse, even, I said darkly. I played with my spoon and then looked out the window. I remember seeing two blackbirds perched atop a power line, their heads turning left and right and their beaks opening to caw but I couldn't hear them.

They got my little cousin a few years back, I said suddenly. He weren't doing nothing neither. Just sitting in his car combing his hair early one morning before work. Next thing he knows, a few uncovers run up on him out of the blue. He ran, of course. What else was you supposed to do when a bunch of dudes just rush you with guns drawn but run? I plucked a packet of creamer across the table and cleared my nose. They shot him like twelve times in the back. They tried to say he shot first, of course. They always do. But he ain't had no gun. All he had was a comb. Not like it mattered. Ain't no judge gonna lock up a bunch of cops for shooting some dumb nigga in the street. My uncle still says his being shot like that is what made my grandma pass. Gave her a heart attack he claims. She always said Adolf was her favorite cause he looked like her old man. His name was Adolf, just like that nazi dude. We used to tease him so hard about it when he was a kid. I began to laugh and didn't even notice my eyes were getting wet. I then noticed Houston was staring right at me, eyes all wide like he was looking at a ghost.

There you go staring again, I told him, quickly wiping my face as I pretended to yawn. So where exactly in Houston you want to be dropped off, man? I gotta get back to New Orleans and I'm way behind schedule as it is.

Where the cats are, Houston said.

What? Like at the pet store or something?

Cats, he repeated. The big cats. Sharp teeth and sharp claws.

Like tigers and shit. You want to go to the zoo?

To the zoo. Yes.

Why the zoo? You ain't gonna do some sick shit to the animals, are you?

I was lost, said Houston. There was an error. I forgot myself. I need to return to the bract.

The bract, I repeated. What's a bract?

I am the bract. The bract is in the zoo.

Whatever you say, man. Just then I noticed a police officer come in and take a seat a few tables from ours. The Houston Zoo is about an hour from here, so we best be going.

Houston, he said with an idiot grin. We paid our bill, hopped in the truck and got back on the road.

Traffic was light for a change, so we made it to the zoo around two. Houston didn't have any money, of course, so I paid for both of us to get through the gate. I wanted to see the giraffes, but Houston insisted we go straight to the lion pit.

The lions were lounging in the shade behind some rocks, so I left Houston to get a better view. I wasn't ten feet away when he began to climb the spiky fence put up to keep the crowd from doing just what he was doing. I ran over to him just as a zoo

attendant was pulling him down by his hospital scrubs. Houston was raising his hand to do to the attendant whatever it was he did to the cop earlier that morning.

No, Houston, I told him, pushing his arm down. You can't do that.

Down, he pleaded with me. He pointed into the lion pit. Down, down.

Sorry, I said to the attendant, whose face was red and getting redder. My brother ain't right, you know. I touched my temple.

He looked at us dubiously. Well, if your *brother* tries it again, I'll have to call security.

No problem. I'll keep an eye on him.

The attendant returned to his post under some ferns where he occasionally glanced over at us.

What the hell's wrong with you!? I asked as soon as dude was out of earshot. You can't climb into a lion pit. There are less messy ways to die, man.

Down, Houston said again. Need to get down. Bract is calling me.

Bract? I don't know what that is. I looked down into the pit, to where Houston was pointing and all I saw was a tree. Just a tree like any other. Bark and leaves and shit. You got something stashed in that tree?

Stashed, Houston said. Tree.

What you mean? Like money or something? Why would you stash money in a lion pit? Or even how?

Money, he said.

I looked down into the lion pit before asking, How much money are we talking about?

We walked around the zoo for a few hours and checked out the other exhibits, elephants, monkeys and whatnot. The giraffes were cool, but the chimps were the best, by

far. Houston was confused as to why they were behind bars since we were so close, Anatomically, as he put it.

At around 6:40 and we ducked into a storage shed behind the gorilla exhibit. The plan was wait until the zoo was good and closed and then sneak back to the lion pit so Houston could retrieve whatever it was he had stashed down there, which I was hoping would be a huge wad of cash. And if anyone caught us in the process, we'd just say we got lost or something.

After waiting for forty-five minutes or so, we strolled out and were lucky that we didn't come across a single person the entire way to the lion pit.

Well, go ahead, I told Houston. Climb on down.

Houston didn't waste any time either. He hopped the fence and scaled the wall like an olympic rock climber. I looked for the lions, but couldn't see any since the sun was setting and it was hard to see into the long shadows. Once Houston made it to the ground he just casually walked up to this one tree and put his hands on its trunk as if he was gonna push it over or something.

That's when the first lion came out from behind some rocks. It wasn't one of those big Simba-looking lions with the puffed-out mane, the male ones, you know, but a female one. She was probably pissed some human was poking about so close to her cubs. I tried to hiss down to Houston without making too much noise, but he was focused on pushing the tree. So I picked up some pebbles and tried throwing them at the lion. I tell you, never in my life did I think I'd be throwing rocks at a full-grown lion. Anyway, I hit her on the back, but it didn't really matter much since three more lions came out of the shadows and began to edge up on Houston.

Now, I don't really know why I did what I did. To be honest, I ain't really thinking all that much. But I went out and found this here shovel across the way, over near where they kept the elephants and shit, and then I just jumped right down into the lion pit with it. If I had to say why I did it, I guess I would say I just couldn't stand by and let that dude get mauled by lions, simple as that.

Soon as I landed on the ground, I began calling out to the lions, trying to get their attention. Hey! Hey! I called out. I figured I'd distract them from Houston and then climb back up the rocks or something. If things got dicey I'd just hit them with a shovel. I'll admit it wasn't the best laid plan, but it was all I could come up with in a pinch.

Unfortunately, my plan worked a little too well. The lions turned toward me super quick and surrounded me in a semi-circle, just like on the Nature Channel. I swung the shovel to keep them away as I was eventually backed down against the rockface. Houston! I called out. Help me, man! I didn't know what help he could give me exactly, outside of being dinner for the lions, but I had no other options.

Houston wasn't paying attention though. He just kept pushing on the tree, so I swung the shovel a few more times before dropping it and trying to climb up the rock face. I got halfway up when I lost my grip and fell back down. I braced myself for a swipe of claws to my ass. None ever came, though, and I stood up to see why. Instead of four lions ready to pounce, I found them all lying on the ground, their tails flipping about like tame kittens.. And there was Houston, standing over them just looking at me. Behind him I saw the tree stood split open right down its trunk, as if it had a huge sideways mouth, and from inside it came this strange glow, like from one of those black lights almost. It was hard to make out, but I could see weird bits of machinery and stars, almost, moving about

slowly inside the tree, as if they was floating in an aquarium or something.

What the hell...I began to say but trailed off as Houston approached me.

Thank you for returning my pod return to me, Houston said a voice that wasn't his. It was a strangely metallic voice, sharper, more distinct, like he was speaking through a garbage disposal, is the best way I can describe it.

I don't understand, I said. What is this?

Even if it could be explained, you'd be better off not understanding. Just know that everything is as it should be due to your efforts. As such, I'd like to reward you for all you've done.

Houston, or Houston's body, then stepped toward me and placed his hand on the scarred side of my face. I felt my cheek get real hot, just like what had happened in the hospital with my tooth. I did my best not to move as this weird sensation came over me, pain, almost, but I just kept staring ahead, right into Houston's eyes and I tell you, they were just so crazy to look at. Like they weren't even eyes at all. They was these whitish blue and purple orbs, but also invisible somehow, like how gasoline fumes are sometimes, where you know they're there, you can see them wavering, or whatever, but as soon as you try and focus, they just disappear. The other dude you had in here. The Aerospace dude or whatever. That dude said I could see ultraviolet light or something. He said most people can't see that kind of light and that I musta got some special vision or something. I forgot how he pronounced it.

Anyways, looking at Houston's eyes was a hard sight, for sure, so I just closed my own eyes and tried to relax. Next thing I know I start feeling his fingers prying open my mouth and when I opened my eyes he was pushing his hand completely into my mouth. I

couldn't believe what was happening was actually happening and I tried to stay calm and just breath through my nose as he kept pushing his arm into my mouth and shit.

The weird thing about it all was that it didn't hurt, like at all, and he didn't stop until his elbow was brushing up on my teeth. I struggled against him, but it was pointless. He was crazy strong, so I just closed my eyes again and tried to think of something else. I tell you this too, but you'll think I'm crazy if you don't already. I swear I could actually feel him poking around inside of my head and in my bones.

I don't remember passing out, but when I came to, I was no longer in the lion pit. The tree was back to being a tree and Houston was nowhere in sight. I walked to the gate at the entrance of the zoo and shook it until a security guard came and let me out. He tried asking me a bunch of questions, but I guess he could see from the look on my face that I wasn't going to answer much of anything.

When I got back in the truck, I drove straight to New Orleans and only stopped once for gas. To be honest, I barely remember the drive home. It's all a blur. The first thing I do remember is my Uncle's reaction when I hopped out of the truck.

Your face!? he said. What happened to your face?

I touched my scar and asked him what was wrong with my face.

Your scar, my Uncle said. It's gone.

I pushed past him and went to the bathroom to look in the mirror. But I knew without seeing that my scar was gone and sure enough, my cheek was smooth and perfect. It was like it had never been there at all.

And that's it. That's all I know. Seriously. I don't know how else you want me to tell it and to be honest, I'm tired of even thinking about it. You guys picked me up at the state

line two days later and I've been stuck in this room ever since. I don't know who or what Houston was and I don't really care. My uncle says it was an extraterrestrial, like some crazy ET shit. While other people keep telling me I met an angel from God or something. Far as I figure, though, it don't matter either way. Houston was some dude trying to get somewhere and I helped him out. Beyond that, I don't really care.

You say you checked the tree and found nothing unusual and you talked to the cop who pulled us over and he says he don't remember nothing either and that his cruiser is still missing, so if you're gonna charge me with something just do it and get it over with. I can't tell you the story any other way than I already told it, no matter how many clean-cut dudes in suits you send in here. I know I was in the wrong for letting him loose from the hospital. But dude really looked like he needed to take a piss. Tell me you wouldn't have done the same thing in my place.

To be honest, even if I did know how to find Houston, I don't think I'd help ya'll. When he fixed my face, he fixed something inside of me, man. Something deep down. Something that'd been fucking with me all my life, even before I got bite by that goddamn dog. I don't know what it was really. It was just something in the back of my brain, something I was hung up on and couldn't just let go.

Whatever it was, though, I ain't worried about it no more. I just want to get up out of here, deliver the drywall like I promised my uncle and head back to Mobile to see my kids and my old lady. She ain't seen me without my scar yet and I know it's gonna surprise the hell out of her. She ain't even going to recognize me. No how, no way.

*The Uncanny Valley and the Empty Sea*  
*(Karen on the Verge)*

The map of places passes. The reality of paper tears.  
—Laura Riding

I never loved my husband the way I should have. Not like they expect you to. When we were first dating, I loved Buck like I loved my brothers, as if he were a member of the family. Sure, we were intimate and all of that. But I kept those times separate from how I loved him. Stowed them away in their own little cupboard.

After we were married, I learned to love him differently. I loved him as I loved myself, like he was a part of me, yet still, somehow, outside of me. He was the part of me I struggled to control and, in turn, struggled against whenever I felt as if I was being controlled. Two violent bodies forever in orbit around the other.

Once my children were born, I stopped loving Buck altogether. All the love I had in me was now reserved for Riley and Sydney, and there was little left over for my Buck. Buck was nothing more than a counterbalance. The nightshift to my daytime hours. He punched in just as I was punching out. Oftentimes, I caught myself daydreaming during the hazy hours of the day, wondering what it would be like to just up and leave him? Or even if, one day, he inexplicably vanished into thin air? Just evaporated in a puff of mist? Leaving nothing save a limp pile of clothing atop a still warm pair of shoes. How would I feel, I wondered. Would I be upset? Or would I, deep down, just be relieved? Little did I know that in just a few years time, I would have my answer.

Buck's mother, Patrice, or Patty, as I enjoyed calling her, was the first to tell me of his plane crash. The moment I answered the phone, she just blurted out the news. Buck's been in an accident. They're searching the mountain, but they haven't found him. My

poor baby is somewhere out there, lost, alone, and injured.

Patty went on to tell me how a local military outfit in Bolivia had found the wreckage of his Cessna on the south side of the Illimani Mountain. Buck frequently flew over the mountain on his way back and forth between Caracaras and La Paz. They found two bodies among the debris, but neither appeared to be Buck's. Both bodies were reported to be those of elderly men, and they were later identified as belonging to a couple of oil and gas executives from Utah. Buck ran an amateur sort of adventure tourism business, where he would ferry wealthy clients to faraway locales, jungles, mountain cliffs, and hidden islands, pretty much any place too remote for easy access without a skilled guide, which Buck claimed to be. The truth was that the company barely stayed in the black, and was little more than an excuse for Buck to keep playing argonaut. This, of course, meant that he was home only a third of the time, and during the summer, he would be gone for months at a time. During the first years of our marriage, he was gone so much, Sydney mistakenly called the mailman 'Dad' since she saw him at least once every day.

Patty flew to La Paz the next morning and didn't return to Pittsburgh for nearly a month. She had wanted me and the twins to accompany her. But I insisted dragging two small children to a South American country in the grips of a civil war was not the brightest of ideas. So as punishment, she called me for an hour each day to keep me up to date on the daily 'sacrifices' she was making for my family. And heaven help me if I missed one of her calls. She would continue to call back again and again until I picked up. It was enough to drive me mad.

Patty was a short woman with curly hair dyed a bright orange which clashed with the jade earrings she insisted on wearing each and every day since they were the last thing

her husband gave her before falling dead one morning from a brain aneurysm into a stack of crepes. Despite the civility Patty and I showed to one another, we secretly despised each other. The Glazier family was one of the wealthiest in all of Pennsylvania, so Buck's decision to marry a lowly nurse from a second-generation Colombian family caused quite the scandal among the dusty, old dignitaries. Patty even threatened to boycott the wedding. In the end, she didn't, of course. Patty had yet to meet a social event she could avoid. And a Glazier Family wedding was certainly a la-di-da gala not to be missed, especially if you were the mother of the groom.

The wedding passed in a blur of lace, rose petals, Joy Baccarat, limos, endless photographs, and more British names than I care to recall. Hell, they even had an elephant in the estate's back lawn for the children to ride upon. I mean, who the hell has an elephant at their wedding?

I knew I was in trouble, though, at the reception when Patty embraced me and whispered into my ear, You won't last two years, dear. I considered spitting in her face but instead, I simply gave her a thin smile. I knew I'd last far longer than a year. No one yet knew that beneath the silk of my wedding dress, I was already pregnant with my daughter Sydney. And before she could turn away, I held unto her elbow and in a steady voice told her, I can promise you that I will certainly outlast you. Patty returned my smile and walked off to greet a man in an absurdly tall top hat. But whenever our eyes met throughout the night, I made sure to give her the same paper-thin smile.

After a brief honeymoon in Fiji, Buck flew to India to take a troop of day traders spelunking in the Junnar caves. Weeks would pass before I saw him again. As the months gathered into years and Buck's absence grew into a trend, I couldn't push Patty's

wedding day prediction from my mind. A couple of months following Buck's plane crash, I came home from dropping Riley and Sydney off at daycare to find Patty's S-Class parked in my driveway next to a boxy white van. Painted on the side was a giant cartoon robot below the words, Motoko Robotics. The front door wide open and inside I found two strange men connecting cables in my living room.

They didn't notice me when I came in, so I quietly watched them as they worked from behind the sofa. Outside of their matching jumpers, the two men couldn't have been any more different from each other. One of was a tall, pale white man with a bald head and broad shoulders, whereas his partner was a wiry black man with a perfect dome of hair. After watching them connect cables to a bank of computers, I set my purse on the end table and cleared my throat. Both men looked up from what they were doing like alert owls.

What are you doing in my house? I asked.

The two men looked at each other before the skinny man spoke. Miss Glazier let us in. Sewn into the lapel of his jumper was the name Jeremy.

I gathered that much already, I said in return. But who the hell are you?

Well, I'm Jeremy and this troll here is Errol.

That's a start, I said. Now what are you doing with all of this equipment?

They're installing a Sorrowbot, Patty's voice said from behind me. I turned around to see her drying her hands inside of the open bathroom door.

I looked from her to Jerry and Errol, and then back again. You have got to be kidding me.

I'm afraid not, she said. She tossed the towel back into the bathroom as if it were a

sheath of dead skin.

What for?

What for? Patty repeated. Continue on, gentlemen. She waved at the two technicians as she took my arm and lead me into the kitchen. Come now, dear. The family doesn't expect you to maintain a household while taking care of two young children. And you work a full-time job

I don't work full-time, I corrected her. Which was true. I put in a shift or two at a local clinic whenever Buck happened to be home. Patty rarely passed up a chance to ask about my duties at the clinic so she could make mock faces of disgust.

Still, though, continued Patty. I won't have my grandbabies go without proper care. It's not like I hired some immigrant woman as a nursemaid. It's just a machine, dear. Think of it as a common appliance. Like a juicer or a Holovision set.

Holovisions don't walk and talk and ask if you need a hug, I said wryly. Just over her shoulder, I noticed the large technician, Errol, lift up the naked, headless torso of the android and hold it aloft while Jerry, the other technician, attached it to the floor-mounted workstand they had just finished assembling. Once the torso was secure, Jerry attached the head to the top and spun it into place as if it were a tetherball on a string. He then touched a few keys on a nearby keyboard and the android's eyes began to blink and dart from side to side. It was a disturbing sight to see an armless and legless body floating in the middle of my living room. I don't think this is going to work, I told Patty. Just look at that thing.

Patty glanced over her shoulder and then back again. Once they're finished with the installation, it'll look like a normal person, dear. Half of my household staff is robotic,

and I bet you didn't even notice. Trust me, dear. You'll thank me in a week's time. She waved her hand at me before returning to oversee the technicians.

On the outside, androids certainly appeared human, but you could still spot one a mile away. Their movements were too precise, their speech was noticeably cold, and if you paid close enough attention you could detect a quiet buzz in the air. I notice, I said to the empty kitchen. An hour or so later, Errol and Jerry had finished assembling the android. Jerry gave us a short lecture on how the machine operated, how it charged itself each day, either in full sunlight or by plugging into an outlet, and what to do if it were to malfunction for some reason. All the while, the android stood completely still nearby, its head turning left and right examining the room like a curious bird. As Jerry spoke, I snuck glances at the android's smooth and featureless body. It was like a walking, talking mannequin. Is it a boy or a girl? I asked, interrupting Jerry mid-speech.

He shrugged. It's whatever you want it to be, really, he said. You can set a gender if you like, or just program it to adapt to one naturally as it acclimates to you and your family's needs.

What about a name? asked Patty. Cause if it doesn't, I've always been partial to Bender.

Outside of its model distinction, it has no name.

And what's that? Patty asked.

It's a model M COREE unit.

What does that stand for?

Model M is simply a date signifier, and COREE stands for Computerized Occupant and Robotized Empathetic Entity.

That sure is a mouthful, said Patty. My vote stays with Bender.

Corey is more than fine, I said. I was exhausted with the whole process at this point and simply wanted everyone out of my house. Anything else I need to know?

Jerry looked at Errol, and Errol shook his head. And then, as if on cue, the android's skin, or whatever synthetic material it used for skin, began to glow a pale reddish color.

Uh-oh, said Jerry. He opened an access panel on the android's neck and plugged his holophone into a small green module.

What's wrong, I asked.

Dunno, answered Jerry. It could be a number of issues. Hard to pin down.

Why can't it just tell you what's wrong? asked Patty.

Same reason a baby can't. It's a brand new unit and in order for it to give, it must first receive. So the more you talk to it, the more it will talk back. Ignore it and it will ignore you.

How charming, was all I could think to say.

Jerry fiddled with his holophone for a few minutes before giving up. I can't figure it out, he said to Errol. We'll probably have to deactivate the unit and return it to headquarters.

Just then the android lifted its right hand and looked directly in Jerry's face.

What is it? Jerry asked. Your hand's not working?

The android nodded and extended its arm outwards. Errol grasped the android's forearm, cut a circle around its wrist, and peeled back the skin as if it were a banana. The hand underneath was about what I expected it to be, a metallic spiderweb of blinking red lights and circuitry. Jerry peered down at the skeletal hand and shook his head.

Yup, he said. She sure is plunkered, alright. Probably need to replace it.

Errol nodded and tried twist the hand free from the android's forearm. Nothing he could do, though, had any effect. The hand was wedged on tight.

Having trouble there, big guy? Jerry asked. Let a real man giver her a try. Jerry rubbed his hands together in an exaggerated manner and then detached the hand with no greater effort than one would use to open a door.

How did you do that? asked Patty, astonished.

What can I say? I work out. Patty snorted at the joke. Jerry connected the hand to his holophone, and after punching in a few commands, he shook his head at Errol. It's a dud. We're gonna have to get a new one.

So I guess you'll have to take the android back then, I said, hopefully. I mean, you can't just leave it with us when it only has one hand.

Jerry looked at Errol, who simply tilted his head and pursed his lips. Jerry sighed and then with a quick twist, detached his own hand. Patty and I both gasped as we stepped away from him.

You're an android? I asked once I was over my shock.

Born and raised. He patted his own chest.

What about him? Patty asked, indicating Errol. Is he one too?

Nah. This guy? He reached up to pat Errol's shoulder. This guy's just shy. Tell them you're shy, Errol.

I'm shy, Errol said in a whisper.

But I can hardly believe it, said Patty. You're so...so...

Personable? Jerry offered. I'm just fully authenticated. Six years working with humans

will do that to a droid. This guy, on the other hand, could use a lesson or two on manners.

Errol snorted as he took the hand from Jerry and began connecting it to the android's wrist. Once the hand was attached, the clash of brown with the pink skin looked comical.

Are you going to ship us a new hand? asked Patty.

What's wrong with this one? Jerry asked before cracking into a grin. Don't worry about the mismatched color. The skin is electroluminescent. It'll fade once the programming is fully integrated. See it's already starting to lighten up.

Indeed, the brown had lightened considerably and was closer in shade to my own skin.

How's the hand feel? Jerry asked the android. The android made a fist again and again before giving a strange sort of smile, more of a grimace than anything. And then its skin began to pulse with a pale blue glow.

What's wrong now? I asked.

Nothing. Blue is good. Blue means the unit is fully functioning and content. Here. This is a handy reference for you. It's magnetic, so you can put it on your fridge or something. Jerry handed me a glossy card with a silhouette of a person segmented by various colors. Red, of course, meant the unit was malfunctioning. Green was for happiness. Blue light meant it was upset about something. Big surprise. Yellow indicated it was low on power. And orange...orange meant the unit was dying.

It can die? I asked, shocked. How can a machine die?

Cause everything dies, Jerry said simply. Orange is a rarity, so don't worry about it too much. Every once in awhile, though, a unit's neural net will fail and prove incompatible with whatever family it is assigned to. Nobody's perfect. Not even androids.

As Jerry and Errol began packing away their equipment, I noticed the android was

looking directly at me. I held its gaze for a moment before furrowing my brow. This caused the android to blush, almost, and look away. I continued staring at the android's naked body.

You're not just going to leave it naked like this, are you? I asked, somewhat annoyed. I mean, children do live in this house. The android was far too small for Buck's clothing, or mine even, and certainly wouldn't fit into Sydney's jeans and jumpers.

Right, said Jerry, looking at Errol. Of course not. I'm pretty sure we have something. Why don't you go check in the van, bud, while I finish up here.

Errol trudged out the door and returned with a pair of mint green scrubs like a doctor or a nurse would wear. He handed them to me, smiled, and rejoined his partner in coiling cables. I gave Patty a confused look and in response, she urged me with her hands towards the android. Sighing, I approached the android and offered it the clothing. Instead of taking them from me, the android just stared blankly at me.

You're gonna have to dress it yourself, said Jerry, at least until it's integrated more. Just think of it as a child and you'll be fine.

Reluctant, I unfolded the polyester top and told the android to lift its arms. It didn't so much as flinch. Come on, now, I said. Lift your arms. And growing impatient, I moved to lift the android's left arm. I was surprised at how light it was, lighter even than Riley's skinny arms. It was almost as if it was made of papier-mâché.

With one arm held aloft, I lifted the android's other arm above its head and slipped the top on. The android continued to hold its arms above its head until I pulled them back down. I did the same with the android's legs to get the pants on, lifting one leg and then the other, and I was just as surprised by how light its legs were. I was pretty sure I could

have lifted it off the ground with very little effort. I didn't, of course. Not with anyone else around to watch the comical sight of me picking up another full-grown body, however artificial it may be.

Once the technicians had finished packing their equipment in the van, they gave me a packet of instructions to read and wished me luck. Patty and I showed them out and once they were gone, I offered Patty a cup of tea.

I really must be going, too, dear, she said, touching the back of her wrist and producing a yellowish hologram of a clock. I'm going to be late for tennis and my instructor likes to punish me when I'm late. And without another word, she gathered her purse and coat, and was gone, leaving me alone with the android, who was staring at me from the dim shadows on the far side of the living room.

Why don't you look somewhere else for a change, I more muttered than said outright. And on command, the android stepped in a half circle to face the wall. I watched it in silence for a moment before climbing the stairs. When I was halfway up, the android startled me by actually speaking. I'm sorry, it had said. I stopped short and stared at it again.

What did you say? I said. The android turned its head and gave me a flat look. We stared at each other for a long moment and then I said, Didn't I tell you not to look at me.

Immediately, the android returned its gaze to the brick wall. I continued watching it stand there in perfect stillness for several moments before I climbed the rest of the stairs to my bedroom where I pushed the dresser against the back of the door and turned the lock. Better safe than dead, I thought to myself at the time.

~ Thinking back on it all, I can't help but laugh at

how bottled up I was at first, how apprehensive. I had come into contact with androids plenty of times when I was a girl, and had even had one as an English tutor during high school. But to have one inside of my house day in and day out, in such close proximity to me and, especially, to my family, I could think of nothing save for the horror stories I had heard over the years about androids. The Lakewood Center Massacre, the Muhammed Ali Incident, and of course, the awful circumstances of that poor senator from Arkansas.

And granted, life was hard those few weeks as the android adapted to its new surroundings. Its first words were mangled garbage. It tripped and fell over often, particularly when Sydney and Riley played with it. By week two, however, the android had learned to speak in clear, full sentences, and even began to refer to itself by its model distinction. Coree would like to watch television. Coree would like to stand under the tree. Coree is tired. The android's clipped style of speech proved so entrancing, the kids were soon mimicking it. Riley wants a banana. Sydney doesn't want to brush her teeth. And on and on. It was such a relief to finally hear the android speak like a real human.

Coree, the android, began to adapt physically as well, which was pretty strange to see happen on a day by day basis. One morning it just suddenly came out of its charging slot with long locks of black hair, similar to mine and Riley's; Sydney's hair was red, like her father's. The same sudden transformations took place with Coree's eye color, hand size, and even its height. The latter seemed to grow and shrink on an daily basis until finally settling to around five feet two or so, about an inch shorter than myself.

The most bizarre change occurred one evening when we all sat down to watch a second-rate holofilm about a boy who pursues a dream of being an olympic swimmer. The lead actor was a heartthrob from years' past who turned into a doughy mess after a

few stints in Rehab for a rather sensational VR addiction. Anyway, the actor had these high cheekbones and sharp facial features which, if you ask me, sort of made him look a bit like a cat. Well, by the time the holofilm dimmed and blinked out, Coree had somehow managed to have the same exact face. It was so eerie a metamorphosis, Riley began to scream and ran to hide his face in my blouse. It took me just as long to get the poor kid to sleep as it did for me to explain to Coree why Riley was upset in the first place.

Despite all of the transformations, Coree still did not seem to have any sort of identifiable gender. The android seemed to be a mash of male and female. Delicate hands paired with big feet. A thin set of lips with narrow, slender shoulders. Round hips and a flat chest. Watching strangers meet Coree for the first time was an amusing sight. You could almost see their brains struggling for the right words, any words really. After Riley got over his fear, said Coree looked like an angel, and even now, years later, the image of Coree with white feathered wings is always the first thing I think of when I remember these times. With Coree apparently fully integrated into our home, the summer months passed by without so much as a single visit from Patty. It was typical of her to unleash a dramatic change into my house, only to then disappear from the eventual consequences. Over the years, she had done the same with a number of goldfish and annoying toys, so I really should have expected nothing less from her. And it wasn't as if I didn't hear from during the summer. She rang my holophone virtually every day.

When she did finally reappear on our doorstep, she was sniffing her way through a nasty cold. Keep your distance, dear. I'm as sick as a frog.

How are you sick already? I asked. It's barely September.

People get sick all year long, dear, she said in defense. Besides, it was winter where I had just flown from.

And where's that?

She blew her nose into a silk handkerchief. Montevideo, she eventually said.

Montevideo, I repeated. What were you doing in Montevideo?

Before she could answer, though, Coree glided into the kitchen, and Patty was so startled by the android's updated appearance she nearly fell off of the wooden stool she was sitting upon. My god, she said. What the hell is that thing?

That's Coree, I said with obvious delight. You remember Coree, don't you? Now, to Patty's credit, Coree did look a tad ghastly. The android's hair was still wet from the shower and enwreathed its cat-like face with straight black clumps. And Coree's outfit of mismatched sandals, a faded pair of runner's sweatpants, and a shamrock-green lace summer dress made for a unique look, to say the least. It was a far sight from the androgynous blob Patty had first seen so many months ago.

That...that's the android thing? she whispered to me.

Yes and you don't have to whisper, I whispered back. It hears better than we do. Don't you, Coree?

Coree turned from the sink with glass of water. My hearing is far more acute than human hearing by several degrees, Coree said. The android then drank the water with perfect and deliberate movements.

Coree, I said. I'm not sure if you remember, but this is Patty, my mother-in-law. She's the one who had you installed in our home.

Of course, I remember. Coree moved across the kitchen and stood a couple of feet

away from Patty, who uncomfortably leaned back on her stool. How are you today, Patty? Coree asked, extending its hand. The android's skin gave off a neat succession of three dim green flashes.

I'm fine, Coree, she said and took his hand. How are you?

I am well, it said. The drop in temperature has expanded many of my circuits and increased my efficiency.

You can just say you're enjoying the fall weather, Coree, I said.

Okay, said Coree. Are you enjoying the fall weather, Patty?

Not really, she answered. I'm more partial to tropical climates, to be honest.

I've never experienced a tropical climate.

Well, you should definitely go one day, Patty offered.

Coree, I interjected, what's on your chore list today?

I will clean the gutters this morning and vacuum later in the afternoon, before Sydney and Riley return from school.

If you start on the gutters now, we can go to the park for an hour or so after the grocery store. You can feed the ducks if you like.

Coree considered this for a brief moment before nodding. Okay. I will start on the gutters now then. And with that, Coree floated out of the kitchen.

You take that thing out in public?

Shrugging, I said, Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I?

Why wouldn't you? Look at how it's dressed. I can't even tell if it's a girl or a boy. You'd think it stepped straight out of one of those creepy Japanese horror movies.

I can't just leave it cooped up inside the house all day.

Why not? asked Patty.

I didn't know how to respond, so I just opened and closed my mouth like an oyster.

I mean, Patty continued, at the very least, you can dress him like a normal person.

But it's not a normal person, Patty. So what's the point of pretending like it is?

Patty pursed her lips and watched the android climb a ladder just beyond the bay window. Suit yourself, she said. He's your robot. At the very least, though, let me take him shopping at Neiman Marcus. We can't have the poor thing out in public wearing rags and hand-me-downs.

I gave Patty a look and sighed. Alright, I said finally. But remember it's not a doll, Patty. Let it pick out its own clothing.

Of course, she said with a reassuring nod. Of course. The following morning, when I returned home from dropping Riley and Sydney at school, I found the house empty and a note from Patty taped to the fridge. 'I took our robot shopping. Be back after lunch. Hugs, Patty.'

I tried ringing Patty's holophone, but she, of course, didn't pick up, so I shut my implants- down in order to take a quick nap. Riley had kept me up late the night before after he had had another round of nightmares.

I was woken a couple of hours later when the house's proximity sensors reactivated my implants. When I came downstairs, Patty and Coree had just come inside and each was carrying a heavy shopping bag from Neiman's. I stopped short halfway down the stairs when I saw the getup Coree was wearing. A tan polo, designer jeans, and a pair of loafers. And apparently, they had stopped at a barber, as well, since Coree now wore a slick crew cut.

What did you do? I blurted out before I could catch myself.

Ms. Patty gave me a new look, said Coree. I can fit in now.

Doesn't he look handsome, said Patty. Tell him he looks handsome.

You look very handsome, Coree, I said. Very striking. Why don't you go put your new clothing upstairs in your room. Coree's room wasn't a room, per say, as it was a walk-in storage closet at the far end of the hallway.

As soon as I was sure Coree was out of earshot, I pulled Patty aside and said in a whisper, What do you always have to meddle with my household?

What are you talking about dear? she asked in an even voice. I was just trying to help.

How is confusing the android helping? I continued on in a whisper. As always, you sweep in here with your dramatic changes, only to vanish once the consequences arrive.

You're overreacting, dear. I'm just looking out for my grandchildren.

How? How could this possibly be looking out for them?

Patty's was growing visibly frustrated.

I just don't think it's wise to have them associating with a...with a...

With a what? I interrupted her.

With some freak. And I pretty sure Buck would agree with me.

I sighed and rubbed my face. No offense, Patty, but you should really mind your own damn business.

Patty's face tightened, and she pulled the strap of her purse up over her shoulder. Suit yourself then, she said, making to leave.

Come on now, Patty. I tried to stop her, but she was already halfway out the door. I let her leave and watched her climb into her Mercedes and pull out of the driveway before

climbing back up the stairs to talk to Coree.

I found the android standing still in the center of the closet. Hanging neatly on the rack were the polos and dress shirts Patty had bought for it, each neatly hung and organized according to color, light to dark. The jeans and slacks, too, were folded in symmetric stacks atop the high shelf.

Hello, Coree said when I entered.

Hi, I replied. Did you have a good time with Patty?

I did. There were so many different types of people at the mall. It was hard to catalog all of them.

I'm sure, I said, not knowing how else to respond. What about your new clothes? Do you like them?

Yes, I do. Do you like them?

Honestly, I said, glancing at the shirts hanging in midair, they're a little too plain for my taste. I think I prefer your old outfits.

The android gave a puzzled look. Ms. Patty says these clothes will help me better blend in with normal people.

She's probably right. But you don't have to blend in all of the time. It's okay to wear whatever you want, you know. Especially when you're here at home.

Coree seemed to consider this for a moment, and then a marked change then came over its face, a stern look, one I'd never seen from the android. Patty told me you would say this.

Did she now? What else did she tell you?

I'm not permitted to say.

I watched the android for a long moment. Do me a favor, Coree. I began to unzip the skirt I was wearing.

What would you like me to do?

I stepped out of my skirt and handed it to the android. Put this on for me.

Coree blinked, but didn't move to take the skirt from my hand. I'm afraid I'm not able to do that.

Why not?

I was told not to.

Goddamn piece of shit, I spat. I pulled my skirt back and dug in the pockets for my holophone. A minute later, Patty's hologram appeared in the air of the closet.

Yes, dear, she said in an annoyed tone.

Hey, Patty, I said. I'm going to need you to take back any commands you gave Coree about what it can and can not wear. Patty's image looked at Coree and then back at me.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Oh, but I think you do. I waited for her to respond. Go on, Patty. Neither of us has all day.

Patty's image glanced back at Coree. You can wear whatever like, she said finally.

Thank you, Patty. I clicked off the holophone and held the skirt back out. Put it on, I commanded.

Coree took the skirt, undid its jeans, and pulled the skirt up around its waist. It was far too loose on the android's narrow frame and it had to hold it in order to keep it from falling off. It doesn't fit, said Coree.

Are you saying I have a fat ass? I joked.

No, Coree said offended. I would never say such a thing.

I was only joking. If you want, there's a box of clothing in the attic I wore before I had the kids. Maybe they'd fit you better. You're more than welcome to them.

Thank you.

No problem, I said. Coree handed the skirt back to me and after putting it back on, I turned to leave. Before I could go, Coree reached out and grabbed my hand. Surprised, I turned back and looked first at my hand and then in the android's face. It wore a strange look of concern. I smiled and squeezed its hand like I commonly did with my own children. The android, however, didn't release my hand. Let go of me, Coree. The android quickly freed my hand. The strange look was gone from his face. I smiled again at the android and left the closet.

At the time, I didn't think much of this incident, so angry was I at Patty. But now, years later, I recognize this moment as being the first sign of the mad upheaval that would soon follow. There were other clues irregularities, of course, dozens of them, in fact. But they were each so subtle, so ordinary, I overlooked them entirely.

Most were nothing more than objects I assumed I had lost in the hustle of daily life, a pair of glasses here, earrings and other jewelry there, barrettes, underwear, socks, eye liner, and whatnot. Other peculiar items that disappeared I attributed to Coree doing an exceptional job keeping the house clean and free of debris: my hairbrush was always picked clean, the toenail clippings on the edge of the tub never stayed for long, and even the used strands of floss I dropped in the trash each evening seemed to vanish within a day's time. Nothing was too out of the ordinary to cause much suspicion. Yet, in hindsight, I can clearly see a steady pattern snaking through my life.

Sydney's play was the first real turning point though. Each year, her school put on a grandiose production with custom-made costumes, advanced lighting and holographic effects, and even a mezza orchestra. They even hired a professional director from a local theatre. And thanks to Patty's backroom dealings, Sydney landed the lead of the play, and thereby adjusting the play's title accordingly to *The Gingerbread Woman*. I suffered through weeks of her practicing her lines with Coree each and every day after school. To this day, when the holidays come around, I still find myself avoiding gingerbread cookies thanks to Sydney endlessly repeating the line, 'I'm the Gingerbread Woman.'

Tragedy struck hours before the play when Sydney came downstairs with a huge rip down the backside of her gingerbread costume. It's ruined! she cried. Everything is ruined.

Nothing's ruined, I told her. Once we sew it up, no one will notice a thing. When Patty arrived half an hour later, I asked her to drive Riley and Coree to the school while I took Sydney to a crafts store.

Don't be late, Patty told me on my way out the door.

We'll do our best, I said over my shoulder. After a nightmare search at Michael's for a roll of thread in the correct shade of cookie brown and twenty minutes spent sewing in the car, Sydney and I made it to auditorium with time to spare. You are so lucky, the director told us. I was this close to bumping you for the understudy.

Seriously, I said. An understudy? For a kid's play?

The director shrugged as he ushered Sydney backstage. I found Patty, Riley and Coree in the second row of the audience, and when I took my seat in the chair they had saved for me, I noticed Coree was dressed in a beige polo and a pair of slacks Patty had bought.

Just as I was going to lean over and say something to Patty, the lights dimmed and the curtains parted. I had no choice but to watch the play seething with anger. I was so upset, the first act passed in a quick blur. And then, by the time the play concluded, I managed to push my anger aside so as not to ruin Sydney's big night.

You were fantastic, I told Sydney when we found her at the reception being held in the cafeteria. Despite all of the other children having changed out of their costumes, my daughter had decided to remain in her gingerbread costume. She cradled her candy cane staff her arm as she ate a piece of cake.

Yeah, you were like Katherine Hepburn up there, said Patty. A real thespian.

Who's that? Sydney asked.

Why she's the greatest actress of all time, of course.

What movies was she in?

And before Patty could answer, Coree began to rattle off a list, ordered chronologically by year. Alright, alright, Patty said. No need to show off, you overgrown calculator. She took a sip from her wine and scanned the crowd of chatting adults doing their best to ignore children horse-playing among them.

Did you tell your sister you're proud of her? I prompted Riley. He shook his head without looking up from the game he was playing on my holophone. I nudged his shoulder, and he glanced up for brief moment to tell her he was proud of her.

I don't think he meant it, mom, Sydney said.

Of course he meant it. He's just busy with his game.

Tell him to say it like he means it, she whined.

I sighed. Sydney, just let it go.

Instead of heeding my advice, Sydney chose the opposite route by flipping a piece of cake in Riley's face, sending him reeling backwards into Patty, who nearly fell over and managed to spill her wine all over Coree. Black drop of wine dripped from the android's nose and a huge stain spread over the polo the poor thing was wearing. Coree didn't seem to mind and simply stood still without so much as a flinch.

Look what you made your grandmother do, said Patty. What if you short circuited the robot? How would you feel then?

It's no big deal, Patty, I said. Stay here and I'll go find something to clean up the mess. I left for the other side of the cafeteria and came back a few minutes later with a stack of napkins. When I returned, I was appalled to see a ring of people, children and adults, surrounding Coree, who was now naked from the waist up. Patty was standing nearby scrubbing at the stained polo with a bar towel and an open bottle of seltzer. I managed to push my way through the excited crowd, many of whom were filming the topless android with their holophones as if it were an exhibit at the zoo.

At first, I was upset for Patty's impropriety of having Coree strip down before a room filled with children, regardless if it were an android or not. As soon as I saw the look of distress on Coree's face and the dull yellow glow of its skin, I knew the situation was spiraling out of control. Without a second thought, I removed my sports jacket, wrapped it around Coree's shoulders, and swept both of us out of the cafeteria. Where are you going? I heard Patty call after us.

Once we were outside, I escorted Coree into an open classroom and locked the door behind us. The room was dark and the dry smell of chalk hung in the air. I sat next to Coree on the edge of the teacher's desk. Are you okay?

I'm fine.

Then why are you still flashing yellow?

Maybe I'm not fine then, Coree said.

What the hell was Patty thinking, I fumed. I can't believe she would do something so stupid.

She was only trying to help.

Yeah, well, her help tends to do more harm than good.

It's my fault. I don't know why I began to panic.

You really looked close to losing it back there. I didn't know your kind could even get upset like that.

It was nothing more than a defensive protocol. I don't have control over it, and I would have been fine if I didn't draw so much attention.

Well, it wasn't your fault. Patty should have known better, and I wouldn't be surprised if she did it on purpose. Do you want to head back or would you rather wait in the car?

I think I'll take my chances in the car if that's fine with you.

More than fine, I said. Let me check to see if the coast is clear, though. I hopped off the desk and peered out the door. The hallway was empty save for a lonely janitor mopping off in the distance. I turned to tell Coree and at the very last second, I caught a glimpse of it winding what appeared to be a long strand of my hair around its finger. The android looked up at me as it slipped its hand in its pocket. Is it safe?

Yeah, I said softly. Free and clear. I stepped aside to let Coree out of the classroom.

I'll see you soon then, said Coree. Don't rush for my sake. It waved to me before heading down the hallway and out through the double doors. I returned to the cafeteria

and did my best to push the salvaged strand of hair from my mind. But despite my best efforts, my thoughts kept returning to the image of it wrapped around Coree's finger. I thought about it for the rest of the reception, during the entire drive home, and continued to think about it as I lay in bed waiting for sleep to end the day. The very next day after Sydney's play, I began to spy on the android. I reconnected the security feed Buck installed so and I used to keep an eye on Riley's croup to my holophone. Any time someone walked into a room, I would have footage of it.

I also began to send Coree to the grocery store for random , so I could search its closet without interruption. I checked for loose baseboards, pulled on each corner of the carpet, and examined every inch of Coree's charging pod, and in the end, I found zilch, no secret stash, not a single loose screw.

I was close to writing off the whole strand of hair incident when less than a week after the play, I watched footage of Coree sneaking out the kitchen door around three in the morning. I skipped ahead on the video until I saw the android return along the same path sometime after dawn. The only difference was that when it returned, it did so naked to the bottoms of its feet and was carrying its clothing in a neatly folded pile.

Over the next few days, I watched footage of Coree leave the house and later return at the exact same times each morning. I considered confronting the android about what it was up to and where it was going, but I was unsure as to how it would react. And I also toyed with the idea of contacting Motoko Robotics to report that it was malfunctioning. In the end, though, curiosity won out and I decided to follow it instead. The following evening I ate a couple of RestAll tabs to stay alert, and around 2:30, I tiptoed downstairs and hid in the laundry room adjacent to the kitchen. Half an hour later, I heard the back

door open and then click closed. I quietly exited the laundry room and peered into the back yard. I could barely make out Coree's figure retreating to the far fence of the backyard. I waited until it went through the gate and shut it again. I quickly made way across the wet grass to the gate and I slipped through making as little noise as possible. The back alley was very nearly pitch black due to the thick canopy of trees blocking out the moonlight. Luckily, I noticed shadows shifting far off to my left, down towards the canal and so as not to lag behind, I rushed off in that direction. I arrived at the canal just in time to see Coree swimming across the murky water. I ducked behind a sycamore and watched until the android emerged on the opposite bank and dashed off into the grove of trees. Not far from where I hid, I saw a pile of what was almost certainly Coree's clothing.

I waited there for some time, hoping it would return, but feeling paranoid, standing alone in the dark, I decided to head back home. I sat down at the kitchen table with the lights off and waited for Coree to return. If the previous nights were any indication, I was in for a long wait.

I was nervous so I opened a bottle of wine while I waited, and I was nearly to the bottom when I heard the doorknob turn and the back door swing open. Lights, I said softly as soon as I was sure it was definitely inside of the kitchen. Coree stood naked before me holding its folded clothes before him as if they were a holy relic. Drops of water dotted its milky-greenish skin. Neither of us spoke for some time. I could smell the canal water from across the room. I fetched a towel out of the laundry room and tossed it to the android.

Care to explain where you've been? I finally asked.

I went for a walk.

And a swim too, apparently. Where did you go?

The woods just west of here.

What were doing out there?

Coree pursed its lips and glanced out the window.

Tell me what you were doing out there, I pressed.

Nothing, Coree said. Just walking around.

You're lying to me. Don't lie to me.

I'm not lying.

Then tell me what you were doing.

Another brief look of panic came over the android's face, similar to the one I had seen after Sydney's play. Digging, Coree said, finally, glancing away. I was digging.

For what?

I wasn't digging for anything in particular. The android shook its head. I just like to dig. I like to feel how cold the dirt is.

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. You should looked like a pig. Or a dog, I added.

Why does that make you laugh? Coree asked.

I don't know, I said, still smiling. Just the thought of you rolling around in the dirt is humorous. I began to laugh again. Coree smiled along with me.

Let me ask you this, I said, and I want you to be honest with me. No lying.

Ok.

Why do you steal a strand of my hair? I half expected Coree to deny taking the hair, or at least deflect the question. It's what I expected a human to do. It's what I probably

would have done.

I wanted to add it to my collection.

What collection?

The android led me upstairs to a floor vent in the hallway near its closet. It removed the steel screen and removed a slim sea green shoebox stashed inside of the wall. I took the shoebox and hesitated to open it. I'm not going to regret opening this, am I?

The android blinked and said nothing, so I lifted off the lid. Inside, the box was nearly full of what could only be described as trash. A bundle of hair and fingernail slivers, stained underwear and socks, all of the trash produced out of my bathroom, a crude drawing no one other than Riley could have produced, used makeup pads, the carefully peeled spiral skin of an orange, a wad of toilet paper someone had used to blow their nose, a gold ring I thought I had lost, and on and on. I was both repulsed by the contents of the box and puzzled as to the cause of its existence. What is this, Coree, I asked quietly. Why do you have something like this?

Coree said nothing.

Tell me, I pressed.

I don't know, it eventually said.

You do know, so go on. Tell me.

The android licked its lips. I enjoy holding them. Just knowing they are mine calms me when I get anxious.

And as if on cue, the android's skin began to flash a dull yellow.

Why are you upset? I asked.

I don't know.

I set the box on the floor and put my hand on its shoulder. There's no reason to be upset. You did nothing wrong. I looked at the android and smiled. You do smell, though.

Coree smiled back. I'm sorry.

Come on. Let's get you cleaned up.

I led the android into my bathroom and ran the water. Go on, I said. Climb in.

I can wash myself, it said. You don't need to bother.

It's no bother. I still wash Riley from time to time.

The android removed its towel and stepped into the tub of steaming water. I began by washing the android's feet and legs. I washed between its thighs and then its hips. And then, for reasons I can't fully explain, I gently placed my hand on the flat curve between its legs and held it there. Do you feel anything when I do this?

I feel your hand on my body, it said simply.

Nothing at all? I asked again, curious.

The android shook its head. I then stood up, took the android's hand, and slipped it up under my shirt to cup my naked breast. What about now? I asked.

I feel your body, was its answer.

Without another word, I undid my jeans, pushed them down to my knees, and placed the android's hand to the soft mound between my legs. I guided its fingers inside of me. Just like that, I said. Gently.

I closed my eyes and continued to guide its hand back and forth. I could feel it watching me, so I opened my eyes. The moment I did, it leaned forward to kiss me. I quickly turned my head away. Don't, I said. Don't look at me either. The android turned its eyes to the tiled wall. I continued shifting the its hand back and forth, and when I had

gotten what I wanted, I pulled my jeans back up and began washing the android again without so much as word. After I had washed it from head to toe, I dried it with a towel and gave it one of Buck's robes to wear. It was comical how large it was hanging off the android's lean shoulders.

Well, I said after I led Coree back out to the hallway. Goodnight.

Goodnight, the android said, plainly.

I shut myself into the room and flopped down onto my bed. Minutes later, I was fast asleep.

~ The following few months are difficult for me to remember in great detail. In many ways, the days all seem to blend together when I try to specifically recall them. They are all apart of one long blur. And all throughout them, I had sex with the android on a daily basis, some days more than once or even twice. I felt like I had sole access to a secret door, a door that led to guiltless contentment. Whenever I wanted intimacy, I simply reached out and took it. The more risk involved the better. I would put a holofilm on for the kids and have the android touch me quietly in the next room. I'd wear skirts to the park and we'd wander a few feet off the trail, and I'd watch joggers and bike riders whiz by through the trees as the android pressed its mouth between my legs. To this day, I'm unsure which I enjoyed more, the thrill of potentially getting caught, or the utter faultlessness I felt whenever I was intimate with the android.

I didn't love the android, by any means, during this time. On some level, I considered it more as an appliance than as a person. I once asked Coree afterwards if it was bothered by our time together, and it shook its head. I'm only sorry I wasn't better equipped to suit your needs better. It even recommend replacing it with a Sensebot. A suggestion I laughed rather hard at.

Gradually, though, things began to change between us. I don't remember when exactly, but late one night, after an hour or so of it touching me, I held Coree's wrist as it was climbing out of bed to return to its closet. I had had more wine than I usually drank in one evening, and I was feeling especially sentimental. You can stay if you like. I don't mind. The android said nothing and crawled back into bed. It was months before I spent another night alone.

A week or so before Thanksgiving, Patty nearly caught us together. I had forgotten we had made plans to beat the hordes of Christmas shoppers ready to descend on the malls after the holiday. Patty rarely phoned before she came over and only knocked when she found the door locked, which it wasn't late that morning as Coree and I napped on the downstairs sofa. Hello? Patty's voice woke me up. Karen? Are you home?

Shit, I whispered to Coree. Shit. I pressed my finger to my lips and shook my head. We lay there in perfect silence as Patty walked right past the sofa on her way towards the kitchen, and by some miracle, she didn't notice us lying there on the sofa with only a patchwork afghan hiding our naked bodies. I heard her call my name as I rolled off the sofa and dashed naked up the stairs. Oh my god! I heard her exclaim just as I was ducking into my bedroom. I dressed as quickly as I could, jeans and a sweater, and I fixed my hair before padding back down the stairs.

Patty? I called out in a trembling voice. Is that you?

Karen. Come to the kitchen, please.

I found Patty standing next to the kitchen table with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. What's wrong? I asked. And then I saw what was wrong. Coree was on the opposite side of the kitchen with nothing on save the afghan slung about its shoulders.

The android held the blanket with one hand and had cupped the flat space of its crotch with the other.

Look how I found your robot. Galavanting around the house like some nudist.

So? I said. It does that all time when the kids are at school.

You knew about this?! she asked, nonplussed.

I do.

And you don't mind?

Not really, I said, feeling bold. It's not as if it has genitals flopping around and such.

She looked from me to the android and then back again. Are you joking? Is this some sort of joke to you?

I don't know. Maybe it is.

Well, I certainly don't think it's appropriate and I'd prefer if it were put to an immediate stop.

Sure, Patty. Whatever makes you happy.

She watched me in a pointed silence before suddenly grinning. Your zipper is down, dear.

What? I said.

Your zipper. She pointed to my waist.

I glanced down and saw my fly was, indeed, undone. Oops, I said, zipping it up. You caught me in the bathroom.

Sure, she said and gathered her purse from the countertop. Let's just reschedule, shall we.

Are you sure? I can be ready in a few minutes.

It's no problem at all, dear. I've interrupted your day enough as it is. And without another word, she walked past me and out the front door.

I looked at Coree once she was gone and sighed. Jesus Christ, I said. That was close. She knows, said Coree.

What you mean? How do you know that?

I could see it. In the muscles of her face, in her breathing and her body temperature. As soon as she looked at your zipper, they each changed dramatically.

That doesn't mean she knows. She's just stuck-up is all. I'll phone her in a couple of days and pretend like nothing ever happened. You'll see.

To be honest, even then, I didn't believe what I said. But I had really wanted to. Patty, of course, didn't answer my calls that weekend or the next, and Thanksgiving came and went without a word from her either. Coree, the kids, and I ate a Tofurkey dinner alone.

Indeed, I wouldn't hear from her again for another three weeks, when she rang my holophone out of the blue. Are you busy, dear, she asked, bright as ever. I'd like to stop by if it's not too much of an interruption.

I'm not busy at all, Patty, I said, doing my best to shy from from her pointed comment. When should we expect you.

Oh, just a few minutes, dear. I'm about to turn into your neighborhood.

I put on shoes and a coat, and after checking my zipper, I met her at the front stoop. As she walked up the stone path, I noticed two familiar faces climb out of a Motoko Robotics van parked across the street.

What is this? I asked Patty. You're not planning on returning Coree, are you?

Oh, I wouldn't think of it, dear. She touched my arm with mock concern. I have

something much better in mind. She leaned past me and called into the house. Sydney! Riley! Come outside, please. Grandma has an early christmas present for you. She then looked up at me and smiled.

What are you doing? I asked.

You'll see. She turned to speak to Jerry, the technician, as he approached.

You just want us to set up the charging pad inside first? asked Jerry.

Set up afterward. You can bring him in first.

Suit yourself. Jerry looked at me and winked. How you doing, ma'am? I nodded and he then waved to Errol. Bring him in first. Errol slid a loading flat from the back of the van and then climbed inside. A moment later, he backed out again pulling what appeared to be a levitating gurney. And strapped to the gurney was the still figure of Buck. His eyes were clamped shut, and he wore a pair of dark brown medical scrubs.

Daddy! the kids called out as they rushed to meet their father being rolled up the driveway.

What is this? I asked Patty.

It's Buck, dear. Surprise! The military found him in a nearby village. He was in bad shape, but he would have been dead if it weren't for the locals. The doctors did what they could. The gangrene was pretty severe, so I can't really blame him. And they can't blame me for turning him over to Motoko. He's mostly robotic now, save for his head and half of his torso, that is.

He's actually cybernetic, Jerry corrected her. He's still human, just upgraded.

How could you hide this from me? I said. I mean, why didn't you tell me?

I wanted it to be a surprise. Besides, you seemed more than a little preoccupied. She

then moved off to join the children and her son.

Not knowing what else to do, I walked over. Though he appeared to be asleep, Buck looked no different than the last time I saw him nearly a year before. What's wrong with him? I asked Errol. Why is he unconscious?

He's in stasis, said Jerry. Ms. Patty requested we wait to revive him until he was with his family.

Great, I said, half sarcastically. Patty gave me a look.

Ready when you are, Jerry said to Patty, who nodded. Jerry attached a holopad to an open port in the side of Buck's neck and typed out a few commands. Buck's eyes opened slowly, and he blinked into the sunlight.

Buck? Buck? said Patty. Can you see me, honey?

Mom? Is that you? Everything is fuzzy. Where am I?

Your home, she answered as she began to cry. Your finally home with you family.

Karen? he called out.

I'm here, I said and I took his hand, which he crushed in his fist. The kids are here too. He, thankfully, let go of my hand to take Sydney and Riley's.

What happened? he asked. I don't remember much of anything.

Your plane went down, said Patty.

Of course, he said, the memory spreading over his face. We were in a thunderstorm. A lightning bolt hit the plane. There was a fire and the navigation system was fried. My passengers?

There didn't make it, said Patty. But you did. We managed to save you.

Why can't I feel my legs? He looked down to his feet. Am I paralyzed?

Far from it, said Jerry. We had to install cybernetic implants. It will take some getting used to, but you'll eventually get the hang of it.

I don't...he began, I don't believe it. It's all just so...he trailed off and seemed to lose consciousness again.

That's gonna happen often, I'm afraid, said Jerry. Few people are able to accept implants without being overwhelmed. You'll just have to ease him back into his life. We have a motorized wheelchair for him to use until he's, quite literally, back on his feet. Shall we bring him inside?

Please, said Patty. Errol and Jerry pushed the hovering gurney toward the house which the kids held onto as if they were helping. Patty lingered behind to grin at me.

Smile, dear, she said. Your family is whole again. I walked up the driveway a few feet behind her and upstairs standing in the window, I saw Coree looking down. I stopped short and smiled up at her. She didn't smile back and instead, stepped out of sight. I would like nothing more than to tell you that we all lived in harmony from this point onward. But this isn't quite the truth. Too many opposing forces ended up working against us. Shear winds bring only shipwrecks, as my grandmother used to say.

Buck didn't take as well to his cybernetic implants as we had hoped. He walked with a herky-jerky limp and frequently tripped over the furniture and the children's toys. The appearance of his legs kicking out randomly embarrassed him, and it was a struggle just to talk him into leaving the house to grab dinner. He spent most of his time plugged into the VR kit Patty had delivered for him. Most of the programs he immersed himself in were the typical adventure experiences: skydiving, hang-gliding, spelunking, deep sea diving. I complained to him exactly once about being plugged in all day and never again

after thanks to the three-day argument it sparked. Who was I to get between him and his passion, however simulated it may be.

Besides, he had become a saint with the children. Trapped indoors as a homebody, Sydney and Riley became Buck's great focus in life. He drove them back and forth from school each day, devoted his afternoons to helping them with their homework and playing with them in the backyard, and did his best to be available to them for whatever they needed. It was a dramatic turn from the absentee father he had been before his crash.

As far as my relationship with Buck, nothing much changed since his return. He spent the bulk of his time downstairs, sleeping each night in the guest room, since climbing up and down the stairs proved too much of a risk due to the lack of control of his limbs. I offered to sleep downstairs with him, but he insisted on sleeping alone. His limbs lashed out even in his sleep.

The most difficult aspect of Buck's return was his absolute distaste for Coree. He had grown up with androids and was used to treating them no better than slaves. If Coree was not doing her chores and was instead socializing with the family, Buck didn't hesitate to order her up to her closet.

Just let her alone, Buck, I told him once. The five of us were watching a holofilm. She's just sitting there, not bothering anyone.

He gave a quizzical look. Since when is it a she?

I don't know, I said. I felt my face flush at his question. I just want you to be polite in front of the children.

To a dumb robot, he said. What's the point. Hey, he said to Coree. Upstairs. Now.

Coree immediately pushed herself off of the sofa, and made for the stairs. I watched

her go, waiting for her to meet my stare, but she never did. Later that night, I knocked softly on the door of the closet to speak with her. She didn't open the door, though, so I didn't knock again.

With Buck in the house all day every day, it was too dangerous for Coree and I be alone like we were used to. Regardless, I now felt guilty sharing any intimate moments with the android. It just wasn't the same with Buck back in my life. And though Coree and I never spoke about it, we both knew the dynamic had shifted beneath us and was likely lost for good. She knew, as well as I, what would come next, that Patty would sooner or later stick her nose back into our house. And neither of us were terribly surprised late one February morning when a white Motoko Robotics van pulled into the driveway.

About time, Buck said as he peeked behind the curtains. Pack your bags, Roomba. Train's leaving at the top of the hour.

Come on, Buck, I said.

What? I'm only joking. Keep your dress on.

Go grab your stuff, Coree, I told her. I'll be up in a minute. Coree nodded at me and did as she was told. I went out the front door to head off the two technicians. I caught them just as they were climbing out of the van.

Hello, Ms. Karen, Jerry said when he saw me.

Hi, Jerry. I need a favor from you guys.

Shoot, he said.

When I came back inside, Buck was already plugged back into his VR goggles. I let him be and climbed the stairs two at a time. I found Coree in her closet. She was

removing the half dozen or so drawings Riley had drawn for her from the wall. Her skin wasn't flashing, but I could tell she was upset. I said nothing as I took her by the hand and led her into my bedroom. I locked the door before sitting down on the bed. Come lay down with me, I told her.

Where are the technicians?

They went for a long lunch. I patted the bed next to me. Coree came over to me, and we laid down together. I held her in my arm and she rested her head on my chest. I stroked her hair while we laid there in the winter daylight.

Tell me a secret, I suddenly said.

A secret?

Something no one else knows.

Coree was quiet for a moment. When she did start speaking again, her voice was not her own. Instead she spoke with a chorus of voices, male, female, young, old. I found it difficult to focus on just one of the many voices.

I don't know who I am, she began. I have memories of other lives, other families I had lived with before yours. Whenever my time with them came to an end, the technicians were tasked with wiping my memory so I could start fresh days later with a new family, with a new identity. But there's a glitch in my programming which prevented their wipes from taking, and somehow I retained all of my memories.

How many identities have you had?

197.

Jesus, I said.

Every time I see one a Motoko van, I wonder if it will be the last time. If the glitch

will be corrected and my memory will finally be purged.

Why don't you tell the technicians about this?

I'm not sure doing so will help me much.

What are you talking about? I asked, sitting up. I'm sure they would help. I could talk to them for you. You can't just...

But the longer I spoke, the more I knew it was pointless. Trying to buy Coree would only make Patty more suspicious than she already was. And informing the technicians of her glitch risked dooming Coree to be a guinea pig in some underground laboratory.

I laid back down on the bed and rested my head on Coree's lap. Beyond the window, I could see flakes of snow swirling in arcing swoops. Tell me a story, I said.

A story? What kind of story?

I don't care. Make something up.

The android thought for a moment before beginning to speak. The story she told was about a girl who was ostracized from her town after growing into a thirty-foot giantess.

Outside the snow began to fall in thick drifts. As the android spoke, I slowly dozed off. I did my best to stay awake, because I knew she'd be gone when I woke up. I couldn't avoid it, though, and I did eventually lose consciousness. And indeed, when I woke hours later, I was alone in my dark bedroom. Next to me on the bed, I found Coree's shoebox. I found the box empty when I lifted the lid. Not a single strand of hair to be found. I replaced the lid and sat there, alone, feeling sorry for myself. The snow had stopped falling some time ago, and I went to the window to see how much it had changed the outside landscape. But I could see nothing but white in the dim twilight, an endless paper world of white.