

**THE SWEETNESS OF HONEY**

## OTHER BOOKS BY PETRONIUS JABLONSKI

THE ANNALS OF PETRONIUS JABLONSKI

*An Odyssey of Historic Proportions and  
Priceless Treasure of Philosophy*

MOUNT SILENUS

*A Vertical Odyssey of Extraordinary Peril*

SCHRODINGER'S DACHSHUND

*A Novel of Espionage, Astounding Science, and Wiener Dogs*

SOME CALL IT TRYPOPHOBIA

# **THE SWEETNESS OF HONEY**

*A Novel of Vengeance, Honor, and Bobbleheads*

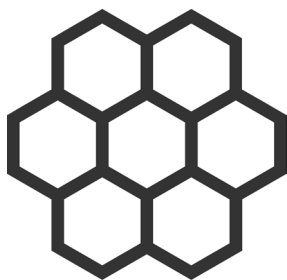
**PETRONIUS JABLONSKI**

THE SWEETNESS OF HONEY:  
A NOVEL OF VENGEANCE, HONOR, AND BOBBLEHEADS

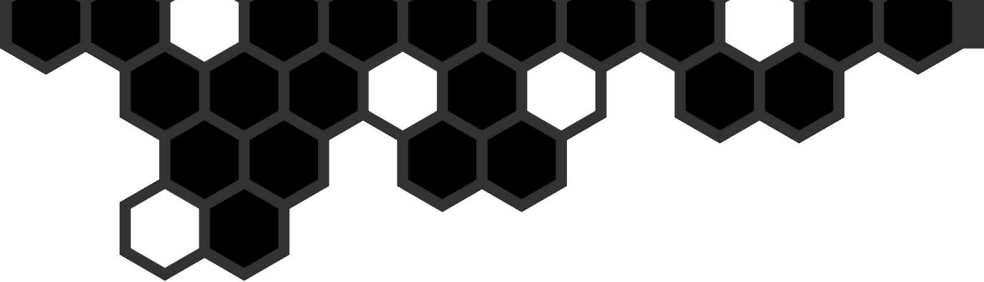
Copyright © 2018 by Petronius Jablonski

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.







## ONE

### *Requiem for Gorillas*

“He will be remembered for his sense of humor, his smile, how he loved to fish,” says the priest, as if citing an obscure beatitude. Blessed are they who cast their line from crowded piers. Memory of their deeds shall endure. Bonus points for smiling.

A hulking police officer walks across the altar and whispers in his ear. They confer, a pantomime of confusion and urgency. The officer takes the microphone like a reluctant karaoke singer. “I regret to inform you that we need to vacate the church. Starting with the back row, everyone please head to the parking lot across the street.”

A man scrambles from the first pew and stands before them. His suit leaves few details of his physique to the imagination, a reasonable goal for bodybuilders, which he is not. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve received a bomb threat,” says the officer.

“Is it real?”

“The people who call them in never say they’re fake. Wouldn’t be much of a threat.”

“This is Duncan Brandle,” says the priest. “It’s his father’s funeral.”

“Our concern is the rest of the gathering.”

“Who’s it from?” says Duncan.

“Mr. G. Lotine. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Clouds of incense swirl above the departing bereaved, tied by a stained glass window where Michael the archangel tramples Satan. If victory is assured, the game is rigged. What's the point in playing? Two representatives of Schroeder & Sons push the casket toward the door.

"He's not at any risk," says Duncan.

"That depends on the blast," says Schroeder Jr.

"Only the Althea Deluxe is designed to withstand explosions," says Schroeder Sr.

"It would be disrespectful to leave him," says the priest, putting a hand on Duncan's arm. Center stage to all acts in the burlesque of life, a classic venue almost giving them respectability, the church is soon empty, no different than it would be after a baptism or wedding. The show must go on.

Beneath a neon taco across the street, a dark veil of mourners shrouds the hearse. Duncan stands on the curb watching cars drive past. To everyone else this is just another day. Blaring rap and dragging its muffler, a rusty Honda parks in the lot. A man with the body of a chicken emerges like some mythic creature the ancients neglected to chronicle, its deeds eclipsed by centaurs and gryphons. It attaches a chicken head and retrieves balloons from the trunk and skips toward the gathering honking an air horn.

A cloud absorbs the sun. Gasps from the crowd could be mistaken for the hissing of its extinguishment. The Schroeders study this unusual expression of grief. Is it a form of denial, anger, bargaining, or an eccentric cousin from New Orleans? Hard to say. The path of life offers no guidance for the impending cliff, only distractions.

"Is there a Duncan Brandle here? I'm Chirp the chicken."

Some cultures acknowledge the shame of misfortune. Some pretend not to. Duncan sees the others watching, feels the third-degree burn of their judgment. "Who sent you?"

"Are you Duncan? Turn that frown upside down." The balloons it releases expand and diminish like Jellybeans thrown



into a pool. It blasts the horn and hops around on scrawny legs wrapped in yellow spandex.

When it squats and shits a silver egg two officers run across the lot and tackle it. "This might be the bomb," shouts one. "Everyone get down!"

An armored man from the bomb squad waddles toward the egg. His partner circles it on a Segway scooter. Splayed bodies surround the hearse like linemen after a botched play. An ant crawls across a sliver of sun on the concrete beneath Duncan's arms, from darkness into a patch of light back into darkness. Sound like anyone you know? Others follow, their paths labyrinthine, their obscurity abrupt.

Navigating a gully between Taco Hut's parking lot and Walgreens, five adolescents peer over stacks of boxes. "Who ordered the pizzas?"

Duncan stands and removes his jacket. Sweat stains have transformed his shirt into the globe of another world. Drops trickle down his sunglasses, leaving crystal footprints. "Where are you supposed to deliver them?"

"The party outside Taco Hut. We had to park a block away. The cops got half the street closed off. Double anchovies and pineapple, right? They're paid for but you can't get them until you say hurray for Peppy's."

Duncan removes his shades. Red capillaries surround black holes with blue halos. He rubs his eyes as if massaging a sprain. What's the right thing to do, or is this a singularity where social norms no longer apply? "I'm not saying it."

"You have to. The guy who paid used the promotional coupon."

"Did he leave a name?"

The boy puts his boxes on the ground and rips a label off the topmost. "It reeks like something died," says one of his fellow deliverers.

"Anchovies are foul," says another.

An elfin woman with white hair puts a vein-mapped hand on Duncan's shoulder and apologizes for leaving. He apologizes for her need to apologize. Schroeder Jr. says he'll take care of the pizza misunderstanding, says that's what he's here for, says, "Hurray for Peppy's."

"I don't want the damn things," says Duncan. "Who's going to eat them?"

"Some people like anchovies."

"But not pineapple."

Like a tortoise trained to walk on its hind legs, the armored man places the suspicious egg in a metal drum on a trailer with a long hitch. He goes across the street where the police are interrogating Cluck. One officer speaks to the priest. The arched entrance of the church dwarfs the two watchmen, sentinels of different territories. Through a bullhorn the officer calls everyone back.

Duncan walks behind the others, alone with his thoughts like a blind man in a stampede. Some wonder why his father is dead, why now rather than in ten years, why this type of cancer instead of another. No one asks why he was alive, or why anyone is. Perhaps the ceremony quells the anarchy of Reason, the way coronations prevented revolutions.

The priest extends a hand to Duncan. "Come on inside," he says, mouth agape, his eyes captive to a hijacker demanding an impossible ransom from his senses. Duncan turns to the source but the discreet elements fail to congeal.

Some things are not the sum of their parts but only the parts and cannot be melded by our minds or caged by our concepts: a gorilla, a pink tutu, a safari hat, handfuls of glitter. "Sorry I'm late. Is there a Duncan Brandle here?"

"That would be me," says Duncan, looking over the ape's shoulder at a Walgreens employee smoking a cigarette and playing with her phone. The day Icarus fell from the sky was just another day too.

“I’m going to do a little dance, then I want you to try.” The mourners form a semicircle. The gorilla does the Boogaloo, the Swim, and the Mashed Potato. Duncan watches as though mesmerized by the shaman of some primeval tribe.

Far above, illumining ants and primates alike, contingent and transitory as both and cursed with the fragility this entails, the cluster of gasses recently nicknamed *the sun* seeps across the boneyard of Time toward its own demise.



## TWO

### *The Patterns of Tyler*

Paintings extrude from the walls of Java Junction like bright fungus. Folk songs blare from the stereo in French, Polish, possibly Latin, ignored by a herd of free spirits gaping at laptops and phones. If only these enchanted devices had been available to Romans in the fifth century. They too would have been children of a golden age.

Waiting for his browser to connect to a series of encrypted proxies, Tyler watches the froth on his espresso. Why are bubbles never square or triangular? It's easier to draw a square than a circle. This might be a clue, concealed evidence of some Cosmic Maker. He enters a password to access an anonymous account and composes an email:

“Sir”

I specifically requested FOUR strippers. You assured me this would be no problem. I have reason to believe only TWO performed. Being paid with a money order is not an excuse to rob me. Regarding your last email. The propriety of entertaining a funeral brunch in this fashion is none of your business. The dancers were paid in full despite the response they generated or the duration of the performance. In death, as in life, it's the thought that counts.

. . .

So what if they're round? They have to be some shape. A phone behind him plays "Locomotion." Another blares "Born to be Wild." He sends the email and reads the news. The *Milwaukee Journal Online* is outdoing Sophocles through sheer quantity. A tragic shooting is the city's 5,089<sup>th</sup>. Alcohol may have played a role in a tragic car crash. Random teen violence resulted in a tragic fatality. In these tragic times even the weather is tragic, making the concept redundant. Is this lack of tragedy not tragic, doubleplustragic?

Tyler reaches for his cigarettes and stops. SMOKE-FREE ZONE, NO SMOKING ALLOWED, and SMOKING PROHIBITED signs only make them sweeter, but the leper colony is at the end of the block, the distance deemed safe as of last week. Soon he'll have to descend a staircase to the center of the earth.

The bubbles on his drink divide and multiply, increasing in complexity, becoming more adapted to the environment. Throw a trillion years at it and who knows what you'd have: DNA, dragonflies, Danica Patrick. Only someone distracted by a gadget could believe that and not be horrified. The origin of life is a cosmic Reese's Cup and anyone who questions it is a knuckle-dragging oaf, as if the inauguration of a journey has no bearing on its course and destination.

A girl two tables away gazes at her screen and puckers her lips. Fingers with long pink nails clasp a pen. Her thumb strokes the top, clicks it, strokes it. She brushes blond bangs out of her eyes but they fall back, enabling her to repeat the rite like a sorceress casting a spell. Unknown to Tyler is how all animals look up to check for predators after a drink. The ones that didn't were less likely to have offspring who shared their disregard. Even in a palace of the mind like Java Junction the instinct abides. Her lips no sooner leave the cup when her green eyes beam on an actor who's forgotten his lines. Tyler looks down. A tragic fire has left six homeless.

*If you don't go for this when you're young you'll regret it someday.*

*The old man I might become is not the Judge I answer to.*

*He will be. And he'll spend every waking moment cursing you. Give the old bastard something to grin about or he'll get even.*

That obnoxious voice within, whose side is it on? Why can't it come with a volume control, or at least the option to change it to a soft-spoken female with an Irish inflection? Tyler clicks a link about the Brewer's tragic season.

"Do you mind if I use the plug next to your table?" says the girl, her scent intoxicating like some spiced opiate. "My battery's almost dead." Her beauty did not increase proportionate to her approach but exponentially.

A conviction not transmitted through the frayed wires of sensory perception tells Tyler there is nothing wrong with the battery and she knows he knows. *What would an alpha male do?*

*He would have approached her an hour ago. Fail.*

*I'm making her prove her worthiness. Now I need to remain aloof and give her a backhanded compliment.* "No. Sure. I mean I don't mind."

Thirty years away an old man groans. What's worse than not getting the ball? Fumbling it.

"I like this place," she says, sitting across from him.

"Yeah. It's nice. You're a ... newcomer."

*Smoooooooooooooooooooooooooth.*

"I'm only here on weekends." An eyebrow ascends. "Unfortunately it's only for business, not pleasure."

He compares the potential of several alpha male responses: 1) Today's your lucky day. 2) You came to the right table. 3) Your battery's not the only thing you can charge here. 4) Pleasure is my business.

"So you travel a lot."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. I had a chance to intern at channel twelve, but I was in debt so I went into sales."

"That's a shame. Their coverage of the latest thugs gunned down is second to none. Channel six spends more time on it per

newscast, but twelve always interviews the hysterical mothers. They do a close up the instant she says, 'He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.' *The cynical malcontent, less romantic than an open sore, you went almost a full minute before letting him out of his hole.*

Her dimples, bookends of an artificially whitened library, what becomes of them when she's not smiling? "But that's what news is. I had a professor who said if you question it you're in the wrong business."

Tyler closes his notebook and sits back and uncrosses his arms. "News is bunk. It's all trivia. The number of drug dealers shot tragically on any given day is no more relevant than how many people fed peanut butter to their dogs. Which tidbit is more representative of the world? And says who? Delivering bad news gives people a sense of importance. Deciding which arbitrary factoids are included in a thirty minute gospel turns overpaid communications students into doomsday prophets."

"So you dated a news girl. She must have really hurt you."

"It's not that," he laughs, talking with his hands, behaving spontaneously rather than trying to. "The news used to depress me. I thought it was an accurate synopsis of the day. It's a fraud. How many people do you know have been shot?"

"A friend of my cousin's friend. It was by her jealous ex."

"How many people do you know have fed peanut butter to their dog?"

Her smile sends a beauty mark on a collision course with her cheek. "Me and my sister gave it to our Irish Setter. We pretended O'Ralphie was talking, the way a ventriloquist would."

"So tell me why stories about people you don't know who were gunned down are a more accurate summary of the world. Your own experience refutes it."

"What about national and world news?"

"Famous people are making fools of themselves. The country will soon be headed in the right direction. We're winning the war—all seventy of them. Jobs are being created. Random teens

are randomly engaging in random acts of random violence tragically. There you go. Ten years of news in ten seconds.”

“You should start a show that features dog eats peanut butter stories.”

“Would you be my anchor woman?” *Could this be going any better?*

“How about cat stories?”

“Guinea pigs love it too. Our first undercover exposé will compare creamy to chunky. How’s sales treating you?”

“I don’t know anyone in this town.”

In a place idyllic for reflection, reading, and solitude, cell phones squawk and chime, evocative of extraterrestrial mating calls. “Maybe we could discuss our news program over lunch,” he says. “Somewhere quiet, like a firing range or runway. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Do I have to wait?”

“Waiting is tragic.”

“I should drop my stuff off at my motel first. It’s up the block.”

They walk past the remains of snow banks covered with filth and debris. The gray of spring, formerly a foul sludge to be endured or ignored, becomes the insulation of a fantastic current pulsing from the earth through Tyler. Something beyond the horizon yanks him forward, as if the residents of the future control the present, forcing hapless chumps to bring them into existence.

She stops and looks up. “It’s all blue above them. Pure blue,” she says, astonished like some visitor from a world bereft of clouds.

“You’d make a good motivational speaker. That can be hard to remember this time of year. It’s the best news I’ve heard all month.”

“Do you think dogs look forward to summer?”

“Why wouldn’t they?”



"They've only seen the seasons change a few times," she says. "They might not expect summer to always follow spring. It could be a surprise."

"If they expect a Liver Snap after they sit they can figure out that rolling in the grass comes after running through the snow. My pooch looks forward to fall."

"He doesn't like the summer heat?"

"He likes football. When I have company he gets six hours of belly rubs and treats."

"What kind of dog?"

"Bigger than a Clydesdale, meaner than a gargoyle, smarter than a Nobel laureate." Tyler holds the door for her. The motel's aroma, redolent of ecstasy and continental breakfast, opens forgotten passages to parties in high school and romantic dalliances before he had his own apartment.

"My name is Tamara, by the way."

"I was enjoying our conversation so much I forgot the intro part. Do we need to go back to Java Junction and start over? We'll have to yell."

"We're good." She puts her laptop on the dresser and opens the drapes, illuming the sparse room of a modern nomad.

Tyler looks down on a Wendy's parking lot. "What a spectacular view. Does the gift shop have coffee mugs or shirts with this on them?"

She stands in front of him. "At night you can see Burger King. You still haven't told me your name." She puts her finger to his lips. "Too late. I'll guess it. Later."

Whether kissing is a custom or instinct is settled for all time. They fall on the bed and writhe like snakes shedding colorful layers of skin until reaching a pale one, pulling and squeezing as if breaching the boundary separating them. Those crude and diminutive monikers—*make love*, *coitus*, *fuck*—are as insufficient as the strings of letters and numbers used to name star systems. She takes hold of him, seizing a lightning bolt made

flesh, but recoils and stands and pulls up her skirt and fastens her bra and inhales like she's about to speak but says nothing.

"What's wrong?"

"It's not you. It's me. It's probably because my last boyfriends were ..."

*Abusive jerks. Impulsive rebound come to papa. You have to reel in different fish at different speeds.*

"Big."

"What?"

"It's a kink, a fetish. I should be ashamed. I'm more accustomed to—I just thought with your height and feet you'd be—I'm sorry." She buttons her shirt and picks up her laptop. The door closes behind her.

Tyler stares between his legs. "I am smack-dab in the middle of the bell curve. According to Wikipedia I'm slightly above average." He stands at the window. Like the thumb of a bipolar emperor his erection changes its verdict on the spectacle below. The gray enshrouding all things insulates them from any meaning they might transmit, segregating every article of reality unto itself. Each contains only its own worth and purpose, which in the absence of a greater context is nothing.

The infinite divisibility of Time dissolves his moment to moment existence, forsaking him in a dark gorge between nanoseconds, immunizing him from the bitter palliative that in a million years all artifacts of this day will be buried. If nothing matters then the fact that nothing matters loses its active ingredient. It doesn't matter either.

He ignores the phone. What caller from the land of the living could understand the groans in the netherworld of room 347? Upon what common ground could they converse? Here there is no weather, no sports. Healthy human life requires cheerful expectations of the future, ceaseless revisions of the past, and complete ignorance of doomed beings rejected and abandoned in motels overlooking Wendy's.

The phone continues to ring, making it less and less probable that the beautiful Tamara is calling. For what would she say, that the shower rod won't support his weight if he ties a bed sheet around it, that a fall from three stories is rarely fatal? The phone quakes his first impression of the room, shattering it, revealing the absence of personal artifacts in a new light. A saleswoman isn't necessarily a minimalist. Wait a second. No woman is a minimalist.

The next fifty rings replace his anguish with relief, rage, and admiration. The loci of embarrassment shifts like a tectonic plate. He departs the scene of a colossal failure, though not the one he feared, and stops at the desk.

"Room 347?" says the clerk. "Miss Gotcha just checked out."

Tyler walks outside and joins the rest of existence. Each part is wretched in its own way but no longer separate from a greater whole, which by virtue of its sheer complexity isn't obviously worthless.



## THREE

### *The Sorrows of Nelson*

An ancient sage said no man should own more than he can carry. Clutching a Hefty bag and watching the dawn rain brimstone on Milwaukee, Nelson makes a virtue of necessity. One of his boots has no laces, forcing him to favor the other leg, signaling a weakness he doesn't have. If consciousness is a stream, compassion is a rivulet that appeared yesterday and could dry up this afternoon. Don't count on it during droughts. Don't count on it ever.

He walks behind a drugstore and leans against a dumpster and searches through his bag and pulls out a pair of jeans. Is the split in the seat too big to be worn in public? Once upon a time. Not now. Amazing how standards change, like a yardstick warped by humidity. The ragged cuffs don't reach his ankles, but they're less awful than what he was wearing. He folds those sour shreds and places them in his bag, a tomb of Bethany from which they will one day arise with new life, when the jeans by comparison are worse.

Sunlight oozes over walls painted with cryptic symbols and spreads an orange growth in the alley, irresistible to a one-eyed cat. It makes a pact with gravity and plunges from a windowsill. On its back it stretches and writhes, in the throes of a feline vision quest, perhaps napping with a pride of elders. Contrary to popular belief, pleasure is the absence of pain. Blink and it's gone. Don't blink and it's gone too.

Back on the street Nelson limps with great resolution. In lieu of rage or bewilderment or resignation, the remains of dignity smolder in his eyes. Avoid the inference. If it can happen to him ...

He stands across from a bank and studies the digital clock, outraged by its testimony as if arriving from a place where Time's obscene striptease is prohibited, the wanton display not tolerated.

Drivers watch him. *Disgust* hops from one host to another like some condemnation from a Universal Mind using individuals as vessels. It inflames a young man driving a pickup, possesses a woman in a Camry, then fills the faces in one shiny vehicle after another until Nelson yearns for the paradise of invisibility or at least the stupefied indifference of his fellow homeless travelers. With what talisman do they deter this demon or aren't they superstitious?

Funny how you care what others think even when critical issues vie for precedence. A wise man said consciousness is an illness. Then being concerned with the consciousness of others is a fever in a funhouse.

A yellow Mustang detonates hip-hop tremors across the pavement. The passenger inspects Nelson and looks away as if recanting belief in his existence. A hybrid runs the light to avoid idling next to him. For *this* they're saving the planet? Should have bought a Hummer. It requires no psychic to detect thoughts piercing as screams: sentences of exile commanded by dozens of petty dictators each day. Maybe his cohorts who argue with unseen tormentors are practicing soliloquies of innocence. But their energy nourishes the scrutinizers, transforming lowly magistrates in the court of social norms into executive editors deleting names from the Book of Life.

He spits in the gutter and crosses the street. His reflection in the bank window flinches. If only some telescope could have seen this apparition approaching from the distance of ten years. He could have taken another direction. Or were other future

incarnations worse? Maybe there was only one. Cold comfort until you think about it. Something made this happen. *This*. Hard not to take it personally.

The people inside tend an abstraction that grew from the exchange of beads for food, the way sacrificing goats to stop thunder morphed into Mozart's *Requiem*. Small changes accrue, leaving few fossils. Remember that. The rest is trivial.

"We don't have public restrooms," says the security guard, followed by a disastrous attempt at a smile. Any juries deliberating whether pity is worse than cruelty are dismissed.

"That's alright," says Nelson. "I piss and shit outside. Like an animal. There's something wrong with your clock."

"It tells the time, temperature, and date. You can watch it for free. Outside."

"Are you sure my eyes won't wear it out? I'd be happy to pay for the depreciation. I have some underwear in my bag I could trade."

On his first day the guard must have thought he'd be foiling robbers, negotiating with kidnappers, and seducing tellers who instead act as vessels of the same harsh judgments haunting Nelson. Some of the patrons turn away from the confrontation, declaring neutrality or at least indifference. Those who watch find succor from the pain that living brings, mollified by the ultimate antidepressant: Schadenfreude XR, time release, a natural tonic used by all people at all times.

"I want to call your attention to the fact that it's not showing the same temperature as the credit union," says Nelson.

"I'll be sure to mention this to the president." The guard hands him a pen. "I'd like to thank you for your support."

"You don't have to be an ass. I'm trying to help. You need to check and see if anything's wrong with it."

"Nothing's wrong with it. Ours is the correct one."

"How do you know? Prove it. What if they're both wrong?"

"Maybe you could keep an eye on our clock. Outside. If you do I'll give you another pen tomorrow."

"Can I fill out an application for your job? I promise I won't mention the grade school diploma that makes me overqualified." Nelson unzips his parka. A ghastly stench seeps out like some malevolent genie escaping a cracked bottle.

The guard steps closer until his face contorts. He remains a few feet away as though blocked by a force field. Revulsion is an instinct. And judging. He can't help blaming Nelson for stinking and dressing this way. Everyone naturally believes we choose our traits. Some thoughts are as essential to survival as lust and thirst. Most are lies.

"There's a restaurant three blocks up the street with a bigger sign," says the guard.

"It has the same temperature as the credit union. This isn't a matter of consensus. If it were, your bank would have some explaining to do."

"Maybe the temperature is different from place to place. Why does it have to be the same everywhere?"

Nelson covers his ears and screams. Two of the guard's neckless comrades approach, chomping gum. A teller with shooting stars tattooed on her neck and a swarm of earrings grimaces and looks away. Some tribal chieftains killed subjects who walked in their footprints or made eye contact. Talk about privilege. Bank tellers have no such rights.

"The thermometer here is wrong," Nelson yells to the patrons. "They're lying to you, you stupid sheep. Don't you care?" He retreats through the revolving door. This one doesn't lock when he's halfway through, trapping him like an insect in a Tic Tac container. Distorted by the tinted glass, the guards watch him like mad scientists performing a biopsy of his soul. He doesn't wait for the diagnosis.

. . .

Nelson eats ravioli out of a can and licks the sauce from his fingers. Across the room, grunts of exertion are followed by a splash, then a flush. On the opposite side, two men whisper about the economics of sharing a stall. Fumes invade Nelson's cloistral home, an olfactory Pied Piper inviting the ravioli to return.

He plugs his nose and shuts his eyes and his astronomy professor is telling the class there are at least 200 billion galaxies—*galaxies* like the Milky Way, not mere solar systems with one puny dying star. The girl next to him sends a text. What difference do they make to her? The professor says the odds against life arising from chemicals make it unlikely we have any company, almost impossible there's anything like us. "Science fiction writers are evolution illiterates," he says, scratching a Che Guevara beard. "All that space is being wasted. Pioneering missions of horny astronauts are urgent. Is it just me or is the emptiness creepy?"

Nelson runs a finger around the inside of his ravioli can and licks it off. Like a traveler discovering a ruin in the desert, he reads the sole inscription in his stall, the only sign of intelligent life amid the vastness of the freshly painted door and panels:

i fuckd her eest  
 i fuckd her west  
 i fuckd her wen she waz da best  
 now shes ded but not forgottin  
 i dug er up and fuckd her rottin

. . .

Spanish voices echo across the ceramic tile. Hmong voices join them. Nelson could be mistaken for a man eavesdropping on the Tower of Babel's construction crew. A sweet, skunky smoke fills the air. Others come, some of whom use it for the intended function. Nelson rolls toilet paper into tiny balls and flicks them at the ceiling and tries catching them, a wounded soldier fighting the empire of Time. Its generals know attrition is more devastating than blitzkrieg. They send their warriors minute by minute,



second by second, more savage and persistent than fire ants. If you're aware of the battle you've already lost.

Faded leather boots appear in the adjacent stall. One taps the blue and white squares like some injured bat flopping on the ground. "Go away," says Nelson.

"Thirty."

He puts his face in his hands and his brother is telling his father a story, using different voices and gesturing wildly in an effort to rescue survivors from the wreckage of the past. His father laughs and nods, follows him with his eyes, watches his son, this miraculous vessel transporting his essence to the next crossing, ensuring some of the precious cargo continues this mad ill-destined journey. But both the man who told the story and the man he told it to are dead and Nelson can't remember what it was about and maybe his life is such a story. Maybe all life.

Nelson's physics professor tells the class how a quantum fluctuation created the universe. "At the level of extremely small things there are effects without causes. That's what the Big Bang was. It's absurd to think this universe is the first, last, or only one now. They might be as prolific as bacteria."

Funny how thoughts pour into your head, as though mixed from random bottles with few ingredients from your immediate surroundings.

If you don't choose your thoughts you don't choose anything.  
You don't choose your thoughts.

Nelson thinks about the sky, knowing the gray is a momentary obscurant of the blue. Far above, all those chemicals failing to clot in the silent and beautiful reaches of space have no idea how good they have it.



## FOUR

### *Vicki and the Bobbleheads*

If a hierarchy governs their placement it eludes codification. No obvious criterion separates the bobbleheads on the upper shelves from those below, certainly none based on contributions to civilization. Why is the Terminator next to the Incredible Hulk? What twisted taxonomy consigns Simon and Garfunkel to different shelves?

Look closer. Patterns emerge and vanish, icebergs of data drifting in an ocean of static, foiling assumptions and postulates. Is chaos a type of order or is order a subvariety of chaos? Are they antipodes or kin? If nothing is random then *chaos* is shorthand for ignorance. Careful. Some people break codes. Some codes break people. The line is slight and you won't know you've crossed it. Others will.

Perhaps the difficulty involved in their acquisition is key. The bobbleheads easiest to obtain reside in the center. The more rarefied spread out in a spiral pattern. Regrettably these subjective elements necessitate the decryption of a medium even more convoluted. To account for a collection we must first understand its collector, forcing us to explain the enigmatic by means of the incomprehensible.

. . .

If you never saw the horseshoe of brown jimmies on Duncan's head you'd swear he might not be going bald. He finishes a beer and puts a red plastic bong to his mouth. The exhalation rolls over his subjects like fog. Most of the 523 bobbleheads nod in silent agreement. When the doorbell rings he turns off a vibrating dumbbell on the bottom shelf and they cease as though indecisive.

He opens the door. A petite girl with bangs in her eyes stands in the foyer. "Music" from the lower flat threatens to rend the floor. "How did it go?" he says.

"How do you think it went? How would you feel?"

"I would have suspected something immediately. What kind of pathetic misfit hangs out in a coffee shop? Does he think life is a sitcom? Was he upset?"

"He wasn't happy."

"Please tell me he cried. You remembered to laugh, I hope. What's wrong?"

"I feel terrible about doing that. He didn't seem like a bad guy."

"Neither did Stalin. If you'd seen his deformed arm and pockmarks you would have felt sorry for him too. How close were you to liftoff before you broke the news?"

"Liftoff was imminent. He yelled something about being in the bell-shaped curve."

Duncan leans against the doorway with his hands on his knees until the convulsions subside. Brilliant blue eyes extrude from his bulbous head. In conjunction with broad shoulders and skinny legs, these features ensure that of all the possible nicknames from the animal kingdom that could be bestowed upon him, the probability of frog or toad approaches certainty. "That's classic. A girl he picks up says he's inadequate and he's ready to get out a graph and reason with her."

With the outrage and innocence of a newborn her eyes wander the room. "He's perfectly normal. I can't believe I did that."

"Don't worry. He knows exactly what happened." Duncan hands her an envelope. "Take it. Those expire at the end of the month. Peppy's has the best thin crust in Milwaukee. You can scrape all the toppings off and it's still worth eating. Stay away from Java Junction."

"What if he sees me somewhere else? What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell him Dean Martin says somewhere there's a someone for everyone, especially if he's in the bell-shaped part of the curve." He bursts into another fit of laughter, which is cured by the grim countenance of the girl.

"What if he's angry? What if he tries to hurt me?"

"Say boo. Tyler is afraid of women."

"That wasn't my impression."

"Hanging out in a coffee shop is a form of masochism. By making him miserable you made him happy. Care for a drink?"

"It's isn't even noon."

"I have searched high and low for the connection between sunlight and sobriety." He points to the bong in the next room.

"This is like a frat house for non-traditional students."

"If you want to do the job right you need the proper tools. Relaxation is paramount in my line of work."

She surveys a motley assemblage of towers and monitors and the jerry-rigged circulatory system connecting them. "What are all the computers for?"

"I'm in advertising."

The hideous music from below almost extinguishes her whispered condemnation. "You're a spammer?"

"Under the protection of the first amendment I inform people about a variety of goods and services."

She regards him with slightly less revulsion than she'd reserve for a grave robber digging through grandpa's pockets. "That's the most annoying thing in the world. I thought it was illegal."

"It's misunderstood. Do you believe commercials should be outlawed?"

She shrugs.

"And you can't avoid them. They're right in front of your eyes every time you watch TV. But you always have the choice not to look at an email or click a link. Why are people so threatened by this?"

"I never see TV ads for cocksucking Russian teens. Maybe they're only on when I'm at work."

"It's unfortunate how the misbehavior of a few ruins the reputations of others. Why does everyone think in terms of absolutes? One gun owner shoots someone therefore all guns are bad."

"Who grammar checks the subject line?"

"Some advertisers are more zealous than thorough."

"What's that awful noise downstairs?"

"They consider themselves a band. Before I leased the flat to them they said they were looking for a quiet place. I believe the genre is called black death metal, not to be confused with white death metal, black life metal, or beige metal."

"I'm not into any of it."

"Me neither. If I didn't joke about this I'd lose my mind."

"Can't you ask them to turn it down?"

"I can ask. They don't have to comply until eleven p.m. And they won't."

With the caution of an astronaut doing repairs outside the shuttle, she enters the living room. "How many bobbleheads do you have?" They gander at her like alien invaders awaiting the signal to attack, their infiltration scheme brilliant in theory (camouflaged in the likeness of their prey) but destined for disaster owing to the retention of their oversized craniums.

"Many are called. Few are chosen."

"You have more than that bar on Lincoln Avenue."

"Bobbleheadz. The bobbleheads at Bobbleheadz are mostly sports figures. Quantity counts for nothing. Quality is indefinable."

"How long have you been collecting them?"

"I prefer not to think of our relationship in those terms, or any. To speak of some things devalues their importance by denying the uniqueness of their nature. It assumes a linguistic currency that can be exchanged for the subject in question. Priceless things have no currency, conceptual or otherwise."

"So they're more like roommates or imaginary friends who aren't completely imaginary. I get it. Not. How old is this one? Do you mind if I pick it up?"

"I mind very much. More than I can say."

"What happened to the heads on these? Where are they?"

"Let's focus on happy things. Do you have any friends who are as pretty as you?"

"No one is stupid enough to fall for that prank twice. Once bitten, twice shy."

"That's not why I'd do it. After a few more offers in different places, Tyler will never again know for sure if a girl likes him or is waiting to yank the football when he tries to kick it."

"My friends wouldn't be interested."

"You mean you won't ask."

"What are these nasty things?" she says, stepping back from three dried lotus pods in a ceramic vase.

"The pharaohs kept them in their tombs."

"To scare away evil spirits? Mission accomplished."

"They're not mere plants. Look at the big blue eyes."

"My ex has a velvet print of dogs playing poker. I swore it was the worst thing you could put in an apartment. I was wrong."

"Lotus pods are an acquired taste."

"Condolences. How drunk was I when we met?" She squints, searching for the lost island of the past.

"Would you like to see the heads bobble again?"

"Again? I've never been here before."

"I was thinking of the ones in the bar. You should see these."

"Big day in a girl's life. Is this like that act where the performer has to keep ten plates spinning?"

"Much more impressive. Take a seat in the big comfy chair. Stare at the one in the center."

"Jerry Garcia."

"It's Karl Marx."

"Why is he between Chico and Harpo?"

"Think about it."

"So you sit here and get baked and watch your bobbleheads."

"What's wrong with that? People turn to different things to find shelter from the commotion of life."

"I guess. It's no worse than losers who play video games all day."

"How flattering. Thank you."

"Do you do this with other guys or is it a solitary thing?"

"Take three deep breaths. It's important to relax before you see them."

"I'm looking right at them."

"But they aren't bobbling yet. Take a deep breath and hold it. Let it out slowly." He flicks a switch on the wall. Cabinet lighting bathes the bobbles in blue neon. "I want you to imagine you're drifting down a stream of clear water beneath a pale blue sky."

"What does this have to do with big-headed baseball dolls?"

"First of all, as the presentation will demonstrate, there is not a single sports doll. Not one. Second, I might be exhibiting these at a Bay View art gallery. I'll have to introduce them several times a day. I need practice. Do you think I'd let people walk up and paw them, let children put their sticky fingers on them? Maybe I shouldn't bother."

"Maybe you should pitch this to Cirque du Soleil."

"Watch the sky change colors. Dark blue. Darker." He turns on the vibrating dumbbell. His subjects nod like a coliseum of

hydrocephalic dwarfs. "Watch them shimmy. Relax. Let your eyes slip out of focus so they look blurry. Blurry like a cloud. Can you see any faces in the cloud?"

"Yes."

"Who do you see?"

"Betty Boop."

"Good, very good. Take a deep breath. Let it out. What color are her eyes?"

"Blue."

"Are you sure?"

"*Mm hmm.*"

"You're seeing the sky behind the cloud, that's why. Just like when you look into the eyes of the blue-eyed man. He is as temporary as a cloud, but the sky behind him remains. Do you understand?"

"I've never understood anything less in my entire life."

"That's okay. We don't know anything for certain. That's why we have instincts. Yours are telling you the current is moving in circles. Look at the cloud being blown by the wind, molded by it. What does it look like now?"

"Count Chocula—No, Franken Berry."

"Are you afraid of monsters, Tamara?"

"My name is Vicki. Tamara was my undercover name."

"Of course. I'm sorry. Do Franken Berry and Count Chocula frighten you, Vicki?"

"Monsters aren't real."

"Very good. None of the faces are. Only the sky behind them is. There are no *individual* monsters. What color are Franken Berry's eyes?"

"Blue."

"That's because you're seeing the sky behind the cloud. Just like when you look into the eyes of the blue-eyed man. The sky is a permanent mind watching you, thinking about you,



judging you from behind many passing manifestations. Do you understand?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"That's good. The wind is getting stronger. You're spinning faster. Are you dizzy?"

"A little. I'm afraid of drowning."

"Look down at your feet. It's a whirlpool. Look how fast the horizon is spinning." She shrieks. Duncan sips his beer and smiles. "Watch your cloud. Which one are you seeing?"

"Boo Berry."

"Very good. Look at Boo Berry. Look at his eyes. Think of the blue behind them and the mind of the blue-eyed man and what the mind wants. Then the terrible spinning will stop."

"What does the mind of the blue-eyed man want?" she pleads.

He picks up a book and opens it to a page bookmarked by a cigar band. Some sentences are highlighted, others crossed out in red as though stabbed. "He wants you to remember a simple phrase. Then he wants you to forget it until you hear it again. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Anything."

"The current is slowing down. What does your cloud look like now?"

"The Great Gazoo."

"What color are his eyes?"

"Blue."

"And why is that?"

"Because that's the sky behind the cloud."

"And the sky is the mind of the blue-eyed man. So deep and blue. So blue and deep."

"The sky is the mind of the blue-eyed man," she says. "The sky is the mind of the blue-eyed man."

"Excellent. Look into the blue of his eyes. A blissful calm washes over you like you just had an orgasm. You're not tired

but you've never felt more peaceful in your life. Do you like this calm?"

"It's like ecstasy."

"Ecstasy the drug or the many states of being squeezed into that concept?"

"Yeah."

"Would you like to feel this way all the time?"

"I couldn't drive or go to work."

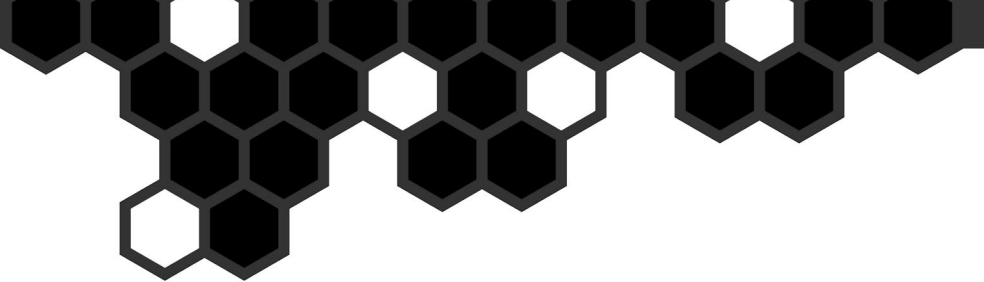
"How about feeling like this more often?"

"It's not worth the effort. Guys resent constructive criticism. It makes them self-conscious. I learned my lesson. Accept what you get or move on."

"This won't involve the Pavlovian manipulation of inept boyfriends. Are you interested?"

"Definitely."

"Then listen very, very carefully."



## FIVE

### *The Prayer of Tyler*

Traffic creeps through a foul haze toward buildings protruding from the horizon like jagged teeth. The drive to work is worse than any dystopian nightmare committed to paper. A breakfast of Soy lent Green followed by calisthenics under the gaze of Big Brother would have its advantages. Tyler shaves in the rearview mirror while listening to the Alternative Spirituality station. The aroma of hash browns and coffee bear glad tidings of the cigarette to follow.

Why can't his mind stay in bed, dreaming, waiting for the afternoon sun to slip through the blinds? The zombie-like reflexes of his body would more than suffice for any challenges posed in the next eight hours. Come to think of it, most of life could be improved by the absence of consciousness.

*If children knew this is what being Grown Up™ involves, how many would run away to live in the woods, or postpone the inevitable even longer, until they're forty instead of twenty-nine?*

A simple inference puts things in perspective, which means it shows they're worse than Tyler imagined. *By the same reasoning, if all the people living for the day they can retire knew what emptiness it often brings, how many would—Would what? There are no alternatives. The carrots in life are mirages but the sticks are real.*

Paradoxically crisp *and* greasy, a Methadone-like substitute for potato pancakes, the hashbrown bestows a moment of contentment as pure and perfect as any life has to offer. Glory fades. Nausea accompanies thoughts of a mariachi band walking up to Duncan Sr.'s graveside ceremony playing "Macarena." Perhaps that crossed a line.

The car to his right moves three feet. The illusion of progress is better than the certainty of none. In supplication to the furthest car, as though body English can influence its progress, the Saab to his left moves a foot. Its stereo quakes the ground, unloading the bittersweet fruit of freedom of expression. The driver puts her phone away and catches Tyler watching and smiles. So shiny the pink lips. Eyebrows thin as dental floss. So dark the streaks in her blond hair. As if he'd fall for that again. Was Tamara taping him? Probably. Who'll hear it first, his family or boss?

The woman texts with one hand and sips coffee with the other. So what if she sees him staring? The drive has less potential for human interaction than a trek through the arctic. Men once went into the wild to get away from people. He's surrounded by them and more alone than any hermit. His car goes a full length before stopping. His new neighbor combs his hair and talks on the phone. Was the woman ever there at all? For an hour each morning and evening these phantoms flit past like shadows cast by confetti. And to each of them Tyler is a shadow too.

Reflected on the tinted glass of a BMW, road signs create puddles of green and orange. An airplane streaks across its freshly waxed doors. Would the casket have looked any different beside the grave? Tyler pictures Duncan shooing away eight charro-clad performers, the joyous strains of "Macarena" vanishing in triumphant silence like the lives of those residing there.

Tyler buzzes down the window and extracts a white scepter from a pack of Camels and ensouls it with fire. Deeply he inhales the life-giving breath, strength for the weary, succor for melancholy, invigorant of the worker, midwife to the genius and

scholar, incense offered in humble gratitude following life's two greatest pleasures, faithful companion from third grade to death bed. If we can't smoke after we die can we be blamed for clinging to life?

"Maybe the afterlife is an eternal laughing jag," says Tyler's inner theologian, an armchair conscience more prone to theorizing than its blue-collar counterpart. "Why isn't that a popular conception? What could be better? Instead of floating around experiencing some ill-defined bliss or a family reunion or an orgy with virgins, you finally get the punch line to the Big Joke. And it's the greatest joke ever told. What else would explain and justify the unrelenting lunacy of life?"

"Hey asshole, today," calls the driver from behind, blasting the horn. Tyler moves for the better part of three seconds and hits the brake. When the joys from the world of dreams surpass this vale of tears (and how could they fall short?) is emigration not the only sensible option? He turns off the radio.

"Lord, my idea won't involve an intervention in the course of everyday events. I understand that's asking a lot. We could wait until Duncan dies of natural causes, then you'd make a slight but temporary change in the usual procedure. Consider the following."

. . .

Duncan clutches his chest and thrashes like a drowning man and then is still. His astral body hovers over the bed and watches the corpse emit a frightful gurgling. This strange craft—lumbering vehicle of bone, flesh, and mucus—is brokedown and irreparable, its mission of exploring the badlands of earth terminated. Who sent it, and why? On whose behalf was it gathering information? Surely not its own. Few observations survived more than an instant. Most conscious moments were spent avoiding salient observations. A vortex appears on the ceiling and sucks astral Duncan into a tunnel lit by stadium lights and covered

with animated billboards for phones and credit cards. He collides with other astral bodies like Ping-Pong balls in a bingo cage.

. . .

Tyler opens an eye, moves the car two feet, has a sip of coffee, and returns to the gated community of his mind, away from the unwashed rabble of the living. "Don't worry," says his inner theologian. "Harmless fantasies aren't wrong. If the Creator knows all things, He knew from the dawn of time you were going to imagine enlisting His aid to prank Duncan. Besides, look at the vain things people pray for. *To win football games?* Your request would be conducive to another man's moral improvement. It's not the least bit selfish."

. . .

Surrounded by shrieking infants, Duncan pages through dog-eared copies of *PC World*, attempts an abridged version of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, almost completes *In Search of Lost Time* (skipping the dinner parties and both Albertine volumes), reads the Harry Potter series twice, and solves two sides of the 7x7x7 version of Rubik's Cube.

Conceptions of the afterlife as another bureaucracy, pray their popularity is the result of man's limited imagination, not the cosmic manifestation of some necessary pattern.

Finally his name is called.

"I've been sitting here for sixty-three years, I think. Is this real time or the ghost of time?"

"If you'd been paying attention you'd have noticed there was something fishy about the normal variety," says the receptionist. "There was an outbreak of diarrhea in Ethiopia. That backed everything up."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have complained."

"I don't like it either. Rumor has it free will won't be included in the next model. Price is too high. Earlier versions did fine without it, much more orderly."

"What does diarrhea have to do with free will?"

"Did you file your own taxes?"

"Once, and I swear those were honest mistakes."

"Then you're not ready for the free will flow chart. It's a head scratcher."

"So which religion is the true one?"

"They all are. Isn't that great. Whatever you believed, as long as it made you happy and boosted your self-esteem; as long as it wasn't hateful, sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic, transgender-phobic, intolerant, or judgmental of others, then it was true for you. You could have worshiped a pink flamingo on your lawn, or a bowl of nachos, or the 1976 Buccaneers, or the 2008 Lions, or nothing at all. Everybody wins. Prizes for everybody."

"That's what I was hoping. Some people think religion is like calculus, that there's a single right answer and all the others are dead wrong."

"Now that's silly. Why would your creator expect you to know anything about Him, why He made you, or the purpose of existence when you can make something up and feel good? Come with me, Mr. Bandex."

"It's Brandle. B-r-a-n-d-l-e."

The officious woman looks up at him through octagonal glasses. She types his name. "Oops. Stupid Linux."

"What's wrong?"

"A little mistake. I'll find your file."

"I don't want to go back. No offense, but the waiting room is depressing. I can't go through life knowing it's ahead of me."

"That's what Lazarus said but no one understood him. The different expectations people have of eternity are interesting."

"I didn't set my hopes too high."

"It's important to stay busy. If you get bored you can really freak out."

"And you can't kill yourself," laughs Duncan.

"Well, you shouldn't. Think of the people you leave behind."

"You mean there's an after-afterlife? Can you off yourself in that one?"

"Surely you have better hobbies. Follow me."

821 years and several thousand waiting areas and information centers later, Duncan sits in a conference room across from two social workers. An anorexic woman with an artificial tan opens his file, turns it to him, and taps her finger on a line. Her partner, a heavysset man in his fifties, texts with pudgy thumbs.

Duncan reads and rereads the statute number and the charge it designates. "You must be kidding. Everyone does that."

"There's only four instances in history," says the man.

"It doesn't *seem* wrong."

"Based on what?"

Duncan's astral hands massage his astral head to expunge its astral migraine. The afterlife is as baffling and aggravating as its brutish predecessor. "I need to get something straight. Does God disapprove of stuff because it's wrong, or is it wrong because He disapproves of it? If it's the second option then the difference between right and wrong is arbitrary. He could be tossing a coin. If it's the first then He's outsourcing his standards."

"There was a class on that but I skipped it," says the woman.

"Attendance wasn't mandatory," says the man.

"So when do I meet Him?"

"Meet who?"

"God."

The man and woman exchange a smirk. "For what?" she says. "Are you going to compliment His work on sunsets?"

"That would mean so much coming from you," says the man.

"I just assumed there'd be a graduation ceremony or something," says Duncan.



"Was there an orientation week?" says the woman.

"Were you hazed?" says the man.

"The whole damn thing was a hazing," says Duncan. "So what happens now?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this but—" The man's phone plays "Whole Lotta Love." "Would you excuse us. We have to take this."

They step outside. Duncan puts his ear to the door. On speaker, a third voice says, "The circles are all full. So are the squares, triangles, quadrilaterals, and dodecahedrons. I don't care who he is. The forms for a transfer would take a millennium. . . . Level 543782-BBC678B19-274C11A is in violation of code. Don't quote me, but privatization was worse than affirmative action."

When they return Duncan wraps himself around the woman's feet. "Not hell. Please don't send me there. I'm sorry for my evil ways."

"Well why didn't you say so," says the man. "Now everything's forgiven."

"There's a few beliefs you'll need to have," says the woman. "Then you're good to go."

"How was I supposed to know any of this?" says Duncan.

"Choose your parents carefully," says the man.

"This is ridiculous. How is this just?"

"We work with a guy who says there's no such thing as justice," says the woman. "The Creator has to make do with bizarre special effects and cryptic legislation."

"That's messed up. You guys have been working here too long. It's time to hit the big boss up for a promotion."

"We've never seen Him," says the man.

"Did you ever go straight to the head of your company with a complaint?" says the woman. "Great way to burn fifty bridges at once, all of them to people more powerful than you."

"He never worked an actual job," says the man, paging through the file.

"I worked with computers," says Duncan.

"That doesn't count. Few jobs created after 1979 do."

"If I kill myself will I go to another waiting room to see more social workers? It can't suck worse than this."

The door bursts open and Tyler struts in and shouts "Gotcha!"

Duncan falls before him. "I don't deserve to be your adversary. That was the best prank of all time. I should have known."

"It's good to have friends in high places."

"How did you pull this off? He never answered *my* prayers."

"Pweeze send me a pwitty girlfwend."

"That wasn't what I asked for!"

"That's not what He said. Uncle?"

"Yes. Absolutely. Uncle."

"Say it again."

"Uncle. Uncle!"

"Put your fingers in your nose and dance around like an idiot and sing it."

Duncan does.

"Pull down your pants and put your shoes on your head and shout it."

Duncan complies with no hint of malice or shame and Tyler laughs in triumph and opens his eyes at the sound of the horn from behind. The woman in the car beside him looks away in horror and pretends to adjust her mirror.

. . .

Tyler toils in his miserable cubicle, surmounting one itsy bitsy challenge after another like some injured Sisyphus having his boulder delivered a pebble at a time. Could the life of a galley slave have been any worse? Possibly better: good cardio. The eye cannot be filled with seeing. Man's sense of accomplishment

when a job is finished is no less sieve-like. Worst of all, the unchallenging work provides ample time for reflections on the dreary surface of reality. Why did a gifted Artist paint day to day life in such drab colors? Why hide the important things behind a tumbledown façade? It's as if He carved the Venus de Milo and tee-peed it.

"Are you bragging about your IQ?" says the girl in the adjacent honeycomb, peering over the divider.

How often had he glanced into Kristin's cubicle, waiting to see her descend from the dreamworld of college to the underworld of an actual job, hoping to play the suave Virgil to her Dante. The joyful sense of purpose shattered him. She loved the inane work, idolized their arrogant supervisor, and came in on weekends. Twenty-four years led to *this*, this chamber of horrors, this personification of everything a real education should have taught her to hate, and she couldn't be happier.

"What are you talking about?" he says.

"That thing you hung in the Coworker Snack Station. Mr. Gunderson says it refers to a book about white supremacy. I looked it up on Amazon. That's hate speech. Someone will probably file a coworker complaint with Human Resources."

He follows her through the maze of lost souls into the break room. A poster of graph paper adorns the bulletin board. Inches demarcate the X axis. Beside his picture, the same one on his work ID, a caption reads, "Hey ladies, I'm smack-dab in the bell curve. There's nothing average about being average."

Whether comic, mundane, magnificent, or atrocious, all things are devoured by the ravenous indifference of the universe. The fluorescent light gleaming on Kristin's earrings. The vacancy in her eyes. Tyler's grin. The Second World War. Your life. Every moment that ever was or will be.

Tyler frames a mental lineup of security personnel who may have aided and abetted this foolishness. One suspect dwarfs the rest. "This doesn't pertain to my IQ," he says, ripping it down. "And I didn't put it up. It's a cruel practical joke."

"Like when the police came to arrest you for overdue library books?"

"Which I hadn't checked out."

"Like those crazy ladies who said you owed them money?"

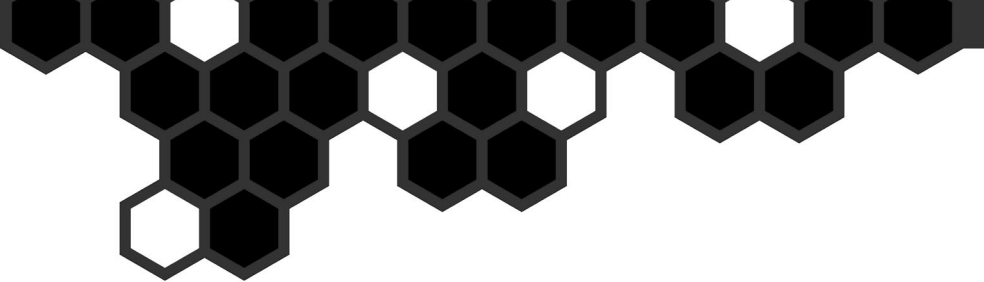
"Who I didn't know. And I've never done methamphetamine in my life."

"Like the time you got stuck in the elevator for two hours?"

"It was closer to five hours, and that could have been the cruel hand of fate."

"Like the rotten cheese under your desk?"

"Similar to that, though I think it was limburger, not rotten. Thank you for alerting me to this, Kristin." He returns to his desk. "There is no welfare for poverty of imagination," he says.



## SIX

### *Nelson Faces the Faceless Man*

A great wind destroyed the church and tavern both. It tilled the town but left the outlying fields untouched. The opposite would have been a miracle. This was bad luck. Wrapped in pink insulation and rags of aluminum siding, trees point west like spears wielded by charging Huns. Some lots retain outlines of what disappeared, pages smeared by an irate author. Others contain rectangular pits filled with debris. Future archaeologists will wonder why anyone built a road in the middle of nowhere.

A scrawny boy shouts for his sisters, running past isolated instances of things remarkably intact: furniture and refrigerators and TVs, past a mirror hanging on a jagged wall. An old woman sits on a sofa cushion arranging mangled photo albums, the sole remains of what she spent a lifetime tending. Possessions only seem unimportant while you have them. The absence of a thing reveals its significance. The space it occupies can't be measured when it's there.

A man wearing boxer shorts and sneakers takes a break from dragging items onto his lawn and sips a warm beer and watches the sky. No sign of the suspect. Clouds drift past, chaotic and transitory as if reflecting the world below. "You know what'd be great?" he asks his dog. "If it came back through here and put everything back together." He crushes the can and catches

himself looking for the garbage and laughs at the absurdity of it now that the old rules no longer apply. Which ones do?

The dog sniffs the breeze, checking for the scent of the invader. He watches the man. Does his master control the weather? This volatile demigod attunes every other parameter of his life, but why would he do this?

Wheat drowning in black water looks like the head on a pitcher of Guinness. An impromptu swamp laps buildings skinned of shingles. Muddy tributaries ignore Stop signs and streetlights. Men wade through the water toward a liquor store. Two little girls float past, bouncing off squashed cars.

A train spreads across the horizon like some great wall blurred by its frenzied construction. Nelson rests in a boxcar, head on his Hefty bag. *If I had died in my sleep I wouldn't know it.*

Again this peculiar thought inaugurates a new day. Before he opens his eyes and accepts terms of unconditional surrender to the hostile occupying force known as *the world*, fear of death is a joke. Everyone has been mistaking it for something terrifying rather than a type of slumber differing only in degree. New & Improved Sleep. Lasts an extra-long time. Dream-free. Amazing how a new marketing angle can spruce up an old and unpopular product.

While he's awake The Fear motivates everything he does. The passage between sleep and consciousness offers a detached appraisal of life's worth, the way adolescents see adulthood differently than those afflicted: as a sham, a walking coma, an undead state of insincerity and hypocrisy that hopefully won't happen to them.

*How valuable can something be if you wouldn't miss it? That doesn't make it precious. That makes us hoarders of dust.*

Why can't Nelson seize this understanding and clutch it all day, using it to bash petty concerns? The perspective feels alien, the view of another civilization from a lost explorer dragged by the undertow of sleep through dark places and spewed onto a distant shore. Before the residue of slumber dries, before the

light of dawn evaporates the tumultuous water, he sees a temple on a crest of amber sand and scrambles toward it for a clear view of its inscriptions. He traces them with his fingers but they pass through the vapor temple and its vapor wisdom as he awakes.

*Why would you desperately cling to something that vanishes? That's crazy. I'm being tricked to do something pointless, to think it's not pointless.*

"Hey buddy, you alright?" says an incoherent voice slurping like Sylvester the Pussycat. "Did them booty bandits get you?"

Yellow light inflames Nelson's eyelids. The ground trembles. He remembers where he is, and who. He looks toward the voice. From frayed and oil-stained jeans peak sneakers wrapped in black tape. Between them bounces a bottle of Listerine, half empty or half full. "They get their hands on your ass you'll be lucky to live. And not so lucky."

Nelson sits and beholds the antithesis of all romantic portrayals of hobos. Would Norman Rockwell have superimposed a face over the gray and yellow nodules of scar tissue? He tries to picture the man shorn of his gray mane, in a suit and tie, a monocle covering the sole functional eye. He fails. "The booty bandits, is that a band?"

"You'll wish they were. I found a guy on this line about two weeks ago. Couldn't even sit up. Laid there crying. Young guy. Said he wanted to ride the rails like he read in some book. Six or seven Mexicans invited him to join their car, offered him a drink. One smashed the bottle on his head. They started kicking him. Took turns standing on his shoulders and arms."

"Man's inhumanity to man on the interstate rail. I knew I should've stowed away on a cruise ship. Better food. More activities." Through a crack in the door Nelson sees ambulances and fire trucks stopped at a black and white striped pole, their lights rolling.

"More like man's humanity to man. If our friend had studied his fellows a little more closer he'd of realized he got off light. Me and a buddy used to travel all over the country, Canada and

Mexico too. One night he got caught by two watchmen in Ohio. Said he was sorry. Said he'd leave. Hadn't broken nothing. What do you think they did about it?"

Nelson sees cars waiting for the train to pass. The driver of an SUV gazes at his phone, the woman beside him likewise. A little girl in the back with curly blond hair stares out the window, still at the naïve age when the physical world is more interesting than its digital replacement.

"They took turns pounding his knee with their batons. Said it hurt them more than him. Ain't that funny? Then they told him if he didn't get across a field to the end of the property they'd pound the other one to smithereens. They said they hated to do it but rules was rules."

"What happened?"

"He hopped and crawled with them right behind, cheering and laughing. I was hiding behind some pallets. What was I supposed to do, file a complaint? One was making a movie with one of those—What the hell are they?"

"Cell phones."

"So he comes to a fence and starts climbing and one of them whacks him square between the legs and says where the hell do you think you're going? Get back on that train and don't ever let us catch you round here again. And back and forth they chased him. You want to know why?"

"Because they could."

"They could have given him a sandwich and a pack of smokes. They did it 'cause it was fun. Making another person hurt was fun. They were having the time of their life. I don't know why but they were."

"Cats play with mice."

"We ain't cats."

"Some fish kill when they're not hungry and their territory hasn't been threatened. Cichlids do it."

"We ain't fish."



"They're our great great great grandparents. You can take the boy out of the sea. You can't take the sea out of the boy."

"You wouldn't be cracking jokes if you'd seen my buddy's leg."

Nelson sees a crane deposit a girder atop the skeleton of a building like some robot creating a world in its own image. "Most people aren't too bad."

"You take a survey? The minority can sure raise hell. World's gone to shit. How much worse can it get?"

"Maybe it's ending."

"End time shit is for optimists. I know better."

Nelson fights a smile. There ought to be a word for the probationary period when one ascertains the relative sanity of a new traveling companion. "So thinking about the end of the world is cheerful to others but not you?"

"Makes people feel important to think everything was leading up to them. What are the odds we're the last group of people out of all the ones there's ever been?"

"Someone has to be."

"Someone has to win the lottery. The chances ain't good."

"It's a weird kind of luck."

"Luck is luck. If you're a gambler it's a safe bet that things will go on like always. The future will forget all about us." The man wipes a trickle of drool that normally would have been diverted by an upper lip. "Name one thing that happened a thousand years ago."

"That big plague?"

"No doubt they thought it was all over too. In another thousand years there might be two or three people who know about this shitty decade. Heaven knows why they'd waste their time thinking about it. The rest will be getting ready for the end."

"People should cheer up," says Nelson. "We have more time to prepare."

"This ain't comforting. It makes us invisible, not important and special."

"Everybody wants to be the headliner, not one of the opening bands."

The train *clacks* the arrhythmic pulse of the earth, rounding a bend, passing warehouses and boxcars covered with a colorful rash of calligraphy and strange vectors.

"You know what that writing means?" says the man.

"Gangs use it to communicate with each other. Like dogs pissing on hydrants."

"I don't buy that. Why couldn't they have meetings or send letters?"

"Most of them aren't on good terms. And they have a higher than average rate of illiteracy."

"You're not making sense. How can they read this fancy shit if they're illiterate? I can't make heads or tails out of it and I read fine."

"Who else would spray graffiti?" says Nelson.

"Some of it's secret formulas. Scientists use it to send messages."

"To aliens?"

"It's better than sending a bunch of signals every which way. That was a bad idea. Why would they be listening to radios in outer space?"

"They won't. They'll keep getting interruptions on their satellite TVs of Beethoven's Ninth and a bunch of prime numbers. When their version of the FCC comes to investigate we better pray first contact isn't with the booty bandits or the end is definitely near."

The man's laughter sounds like the sneezes of a big dog. A geyser of emerald snot erupts through a passage covered by folds of rubbery flesh. "I'm sorry," he says, covering it with his hand. "You wanna know what happened to my face?"

Nelson refutes a timeless contention by deriving no comfort from someone who has it worse than he. The bottomlessness of misery should be the ultimate source of dread.

"It looks awful, don't it?"

"I wasn't paying attention."

"You don't have to lie. It ain't contagious."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"As a matter of fact I'm on my way to the Mayo clinic for a face transplant. I got a million bucks in my pants. Please don't take it mister."

Nelson starts to laugh but stops. His companion is neither smiling nor frowning nor capable of either.

"Me and some guys was huffing paint. You ever do that?"

"I try to stay away from the stuff."

"That's a good policy. It sends you straightaways to another place, a better one, but when you get back this place ain't no better."

"That defeats the purpose of going on a trip. It's supposed to give you a new appreciation of your home."

"Well it don't. And you tend to neglect things while you're away. These guys live under a bridge. They call them the goldilips. They say gold paint has the best buzz. Some stores can't keep it stocked. One night I passed out and fell into the campfire. They were so stoned they didn't know what happened. I'll never forget the way they looked at me when they came to. One ran away. Said he was going for help. He wasn't going for help."

"I'm sorry."

"I wish I could go back to that night." He touches the contours of the no man's land between the teeth on his lower jaw and the gristle covering his cheek bones. "Maybe it's good in a way. No one bothers me. Watchmen think it's a disease. The Mexicans think it's a curse. What is it about life that people will do anything to make it go away, even for a few seconds?"

Nelson looks out the door. Clouds drift toward the horizon like a crowd of deities sneaking out of a bad play. "People are impatient. It'll go away if they wait a while."

"There's more to it than that."

"Everyone likes a buzz. Animals do it too, especially the smart ones."

"Again with the animals. It was hard enough to get along before. I'll never get a job now."

"They can't discriminate against you because of a disability."

"You go to law school?"

"My office is in the next car. I don't open for another hour."

"Being in public is a pain in the ass. Folks try so hard not to stare they sprain their necks."

The elephant in the boxcar blasts its trunk. Nelson's ears ring. Henceforth the man's erotic encounters will involve partners well paid, unconscious, unwilling, or imaginary. "Maybe you could do one of those anti-drug commercials."

"You think?"

"Or go to schools to warn kids."

"That would be worse than joining a freak show."

"Sympathy can move mountains. Use it or lose it."

"Aren't you just six feet of sunshine. Pity is poison."

"What difference does it make what someone else thinks about you?"

"You're right. No one else gives a shit about how they look. Why should I?" He takes a drink of mouthwash and offers it to Nelson.

"I prefer the green kind."

"It tastes worse than it is. And it's a helluva lot easier to steal than booze." He screws the top on and places the bottle between his ankles. "So what brings you to this luxurious ride? What books you been reading?"

"I didn't know you still could hop a train until a few weeks ago. Some gang-bangers showed me."

"Did you see them painting? Bet you didn't."

"I did but it was only some pictures, not the secret formulas."

"It's a shame their talent is wasted. Some of that graffiti, don't tell me it ain't art. Most of them will end up in prison. Or dead. And the art just gets covered up."

"Like sand Mandelas," says Nelson.

"Like who?"

"Paintings made of sand by Buddhist monks. As soon as they finish one they smear it away."

"What the hell for?"

"To show nothing is permanent, except Styrofoam."

"Is that good news or bad?"

"Both. Neither. You tell me."

"Do they use the same sand for the next painting? If they do then something's permanent. It just gets recycled."

"Who's more dangerous, gangs or watchmen?"

"Unfortunately those ain't your only options. Depends how you rank your evils."

"In terms of lethality," says Nelson.

"Here's your basic problem. What do you do when someone wants to kill you and no one cares you're alive?"

"Avoid groups larger than zero."

"Good policy if you can stick to it. I keep meeting people. Still can't get over our young friend, riding because of all the freedom he read about. No bars of civilization, life among noble savages, that sort of bullshit. Free to get the tar beat out of you. Free to eat road kill and freeze your ass off. Free to compare toothaches to burns to see which feels worse. People take civilization for granted. The ones complaining about it have never taken a shit outside. You should open that door wider. Stuffy in here. It's not too cold out. Must be almost sixty."

*Or fifty-nine.*

*Or sixty-one.*

Nelson plugs his ears but it's too late. *The bank thermometers DO NOT correspond to the actual temperature. To prove this you'll need readings from other thermometers.*

*They might be lying too. This could be demonstrated by a third group.*

*But if those thermometers are inaccurate you'll need another set. There has to be a way to settle this for once and for good, to get out of this loop, to—*

*Stop. Try again. Think it through. You're not suffocating on phony air with no temperature. Where would you get that idea? The temperature can be measured. Measured accurately. Measured with 1,000% certainty. But you have to plan it carefully. Step one ...*

Instead he evades today with recollections of an earlier station on his journey. If there were tickets to the past the tracks would clog with desperate riders, an exodus from the devastation of the present. Each would soon seek a new destination before regretting it in favor of another and another until arriving at a stop before his birth, before all births. To change a few things you'd have to change everything.

. . .

Nelson rapped on a door that once contained a screen. In the way Nature is ignorant of peace and justice and equality, the girl's face had no idea its features were in theory too angular for a ponytail. Succulent peaches bounced beneath her Pearl Jam tank top, igniting a voracious desire in Nelson and numerous third parties, its purpose not gratification of the starving but the creation of more afflicted with hunger.

"Why are you early?" she said. "Don't you trust me?"

"If I didn't trust you I'd be sneaking around here at night. Should I go sit in the car for half an hour?"

"I'll be right back."

"She likes you," said the mother. Though her face had caught some shrapnel, her body had withstood the blast of Time's double barrel.

"I like her."

"Are you two just hanging out or are you serious?"

"I'm not seeing anyone else, if that's what you mean. I have to finish school before getting more serious. We're playing it by ear."

"That's how she came into the world."

"Ears had nothing to do with it."

The girl returned wearing low rise jeans and a yellow shirt revealing a jeweled navel. Pugsly the Pug joined them outside, wagging his tail. A frown sagged on a face scrunched with too much ancient Chinese wisdom. Two squirrels examined the clear plastic tubes of an empty birdfeeder next to an overturned birdbath. A rusted car with no plates and unmatching tires slowed down in the alley. A young man with a beard grown on an installment plan scowled at them and squealed the tires when he departed.

"Who's that?" said Nelson.

"No one. He likes me."

"If you can't resist his New Yorker I'll understand."

"Not everyone's parents can buy them a car."

"Not everyone knows sometimes it's better to walk."

"You don't care that he likes me?"

Nelson petted the Pug, scratched its head, massaged its neck. Pugsly closed his eyes and the world consisted solely of The Hand, the same world that for all its barbarities to his kind will never make him worry about his death or seek explanations for the obscene carnival preceding it.

"I wish you cared. Normal guys get so jealous they'll kill you, or themselves."

"That would teach you. Not caring is a sign of confidence."

"Not caring is a sign of not caring."

"How's Pugsly?"

"He's good. You didn't have to do that."

"He was limping."

"We can't pay you back."

"You don't have to. Let's go to the park." He put his arm around her.

"It's not a park."

"Alright, let's walk past the block where the houses were torn down." Pugsly trotted ahead down a sun-baked strip of earth, a path so conspicuous that all other routes, however possible, seemed forbidden.

. . .

The Listerine churns. The figure sprawled behind it could be mistaken for an alchemist felled by a volatile potion. "I made sixty bucks last week," he says. "Want to know how?"

"Honest hard work?" says Nelson.

"Had to drink a cup of poison. One mouthful and I collapsed. Some kids recorded it on their phones. Never saw someone laugh so hard."

"What was it?"

"Damned if I know. Didn't smell too bad. Felt like something was trying to rip through my stomach. Does my voice sound funny? Tongue hasn't felt right since."

Strobes of sun flash through the doors of a stationary train beside them, emblematic of the life cycle of months and empires and eons. Brown faces with black moustaches appear and vanish, created instantaneously and effaced with equal abruptness. A great wind gusts through the boxcar, whispering nothing of its voyages. If its passage is random so is everything.

It's passage is random.

"I never heard your voice before it happened," says Nelson. "What did you think they were giving you, hot cocoa?"



"I was piss drunk. They said it was tobacco spit. I suppose you never did anything for money you ain't proud of. Must be nice."

Nelson observes the boxcar and his new companion, smells the green cloud wafting from his own pants, and fails to suppress recent memories of an occupation not represented at the high school job fair. Was this caused by a series of wrong turns or a fall from a bridge on the right path? Hopefully the latter. Then this is a terrible accident that can be corrected, a chasm he can vacate. If not, the compass is askew and could lead to even worse places. "What happens if the conductor finds out he has riders? Does he care?"

The man finishes the Listerine and lies down with his hands behind his head. "I don't think there is a conductor. Just tracks and more tracks headed back and forth, headed in circles, headed nowhere."

"How can a train not have a conductor? How does it stay on the tracks?"

"It obviously does. No one's denying there's tracks."

"So it's on automatic pilot?"

"I try not to think about it."

"Who stays in the caboose? I don't want my knees broken."

"We're talking about two different trains. There's a little one and a big one."

"Which one am I on?"

"Both." The man knocks on the floor. "This is the little one."

"What are you going to do when it goes as far as it can?"

"Ride it back."

"I'll probably see you again," says Nelson.

"You'll have to pay to look next time. First time is free."



## SEVEN

### *The Recruitment of Duncan*

If an alien twenty-three light-years away peers into a powerful telescope it might be able to see Duncan's house the morning it began: the Grand Am parked halfway on the curb, Frisbees and hacky sacks on the roof, empty quarter barrels strewn across the backyard like spent casings.

Inside, Duncan crumpled an empty beer can and grabbed a full one off the floor. Rather than stretching to reach the remote control he began watching another episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The phone rang.

"Yellow?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brandle," said a voice two octaves below baritone. "My name is Sergeant Schuster. I was wondering if you have a moment to talk about your future."

Not even five beers could counteract the sickening whirl of resignation and horror. Duncan sat up, seeking clarity, finding none. "I'm going to college after I graduate," he said. It didn't matter. No deterrence or subterfuge availed. A full scholarship to Harvard would have only encouraged them.

"I should hope so. A smart guy like you. How do you intend to pay for college?"

The historian in Duncan's mind calculated how many of these spiels he'd received in the last month. A thousand? At least ten. Why didn't he use a different voice when answering

the phone like his friend Tony: "Dude, the more you resist the harder they try," he'd said, espousing a theory with more than a whiff of plausibility. "They wear you down by making you defend your reasons not to join. After a while you get so sick of thinking up excuses you just give in and talk to them in person. Ask Cooter. Then they crank it up a few notches until you crack. They take these messed up classes in psychology. Cooter's cousin was a recruiter. He said the only safe thing to do was never talk to them, not even one word. Don't answer your phone again until you're doing bong hits in your dorm."

Not discussed was the possibility that a salesman's success requires no abstruse understanding of human nature. Obeying the leader of the tribe meant life or death for thousands of generations. This favored some genes over others and sculpted the human psyche, determining how it responds to authority. Servility is our default condition. Man was born to kneel.

"Uhhhhm, college is already paid for."

"What you're neglecting to consider is how we can turn your life around. The same fire that melts the butter hardens the egg. Have you ever thought about that?"

"Sir?"

"Different people respond differently to the same stimuli. It's a fact. That's one of the first things they'll teach you in college."

The bliss from a few beers on a summer afternoon when your parents are out of town, how awful to have it spoiled by essay questions for a test you didn't have to take and can't hope to pass. Duncan envisioned a bald and muscular man in a gray uniform covered with medals. A map filled the wall behind him, as though he was taking time out from battle to enlist desperately needed recruits. Less essential to the visualization and existing as flickering holographs, a bulldog curled up beside his desk and a cigar smoldered in an ashtray.

"Here's a practical example. Two boys go to school. They both take the same courses but one gains far more from the experience. How could that happen?"

"Well, I guess no two people are identical."

"Absolutely wrong," said the sergeant. "Two men will derive different things from college because one is a responsible citizen and the other is a worthless dope dealer."

A chill ran down Duncan's back and gathered in his bowels. This exceeded the standard pitch by an order of magnitude. The specificity was uncanny but surely a coincidence. "I think my life is on the right path for the most part, sir."

"If you're on a road heading toward a cliff you're still on a road, correct?"

"I guess."

"Your life is on *a* path, but is a path that includes selling bags of dope a good one?"

Duncan inhaled but his lungs had been removed, preventing any oxygen from reaching his brain. He looked at the golden village on his can of Old Style: its mountains, its valley, the peasant drinking a beer in the foreground, the good people going about their joyful pastoral existence. How could he escape to God's country, away from conscription agents?

"As far as being smart goes, there are different definitions of the word. You're smart enough to take a test for college and answer questions about the speed of cars going in opposite directions, but not smart enough to know the police have been on to you for some time. For Christ sake it's in your file. Maybe you should try solving this math problem. Suppose a dope-dealing moron is driving a shit-box Grand Am due north at twenty miles per hour. A certain little snitch who must remain nameless sends the police in the same direction at ninety miles per hour. How long until the dope-dealing moron is wearing an orange jumpsuit in juvenile detention—assuming he's not tried as an adult, which depends on how much he may or may not have sold to an informant. Are your math skills up to this challenge?"

The beer fell from Duncan's hand and splashed his lap, christening his testicles for their voyage back inside his body. The frenzied terror of a cornered animal begot vertigo. Vertigo begot

paralysis. Paralysis begot disturbances unnamed, as though the aggrieved did not survive to title them.

"No, don't run and flush anything down the toilet. If you had a time machine you could do that, but you don't. Do you?"

"No."

"No what?"

"No sir."

"I'm going to give you what you desperately need: a fucking clue. When people get caught with dope and Officer Friendly asks where they got it, what sound do they make?"

Duncan saw dots and more dots but failed to trace any constellations. It was like determining where you caught the flu. Who got busted? Did one of his regular customers sell to a careless third party? How can you possibly know these things? Not even Sherlock Holmes could have resolved the mysteries intrinsic to dealing.

"I asked you what sound they make."

"They squeal?"

"Correct. Even the biggest and bravest. Now make that sound for me, if you would be so kind."

Silence.

"If I have to ask again you will regret it for the rest of your life."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I will not be calling you back. My next call is to—"

"*Squeeeal*."

"Louder and longer."

Silence.

"Do you or do you not want to know how you can save your sorry ass?"

"SQUEEEEEEEEEEEAL!"

"Definitely better. But we need to get this right before we can proceed with your rehabilitation. Again."

. . .

Eventually the sergeant said, "I think you have the hang of it. Now let's get something straight. No self-respecting branch of the service wants your worthless burnout ass."

Waves of relief, confusion, and dread lashed the sinking ship of the S.S. Duncan.

"We're looking for men, not wastoids. However, I keep looking at your file. I can't help myself. You're a handsome young man."

The S.S. Duncan plunged off the edge of the world into darkness. The furious ocean was paradise by comparison. At least there he had some faint hope of turning the ship around and returning to the shore of the leather couch and the cool refreshing spring of Old Style.

"I want you to stop by my office this afternoon so I can show you my desk. It folds out into a bed. Don't worry. No one will know. I figure a visit on Mondays and Thursdays until the end of summer should be enough counseling. I'm sure I can fully rehabilitate you." The sergeant's high-pitched and hysterical laugh, the opposite of what one would expect from his Lurch-like voice, bespoke madness, evil, and worst of all, supreme confidence, as though this was just another part of his day.

A bead of cold perspiration trickled down Duncan's forehead and stung his eye. He looked at the mouthpiece of the phone, the wire running to the wall, the wooden pole outside. Life must have been so much better before them. They don't represent progress. They bring us closer to the level of insects in a hive, each at the beck and call of all the others by means of an infernal, afternoon-destroying gizmo. With these self-inflicted antennae Man emulates bugs rather than something solitary and free.

"You accept the need for discipline, do you not?"

Maybe it was a nightmare. Can we ever know for sure we're awake? What *is* consciousness anyway? Science says the brain, tabernacle of the mind, is a computer embodied in goo rather than silicon, a high-tech blob encased in a helmet of bone. Who

can be blamed for suspending judgment to steady his nerves with a few Old Styles before accepting the testimony of this fallible source? There are no references on its résumé. We blindly trust it despite 1,000,001 mistakes and cases of outright fraud.

"Do not ignore me Duncan. I've had enough of your insults. I try to help and all I get in return is—"

"I've made some mistakes."

"Admitting a need for help is the first step. I want you to say you need some discipline."

"I... need... some discipline."

"Louder, like you mean it... Good. That's good. I want you to say you need a spanking. Naughty baby needs a spanking. Yell it."

. . .

"I want you at my office by five. Wear that pink polo shirt, you hear?"

Duncan's heartbeat had the unmistakable trademarks of a Keith Moon solo, hopelessly out of control yet constrained by some secret meta-order.

"I am addressing the living."

"Why haven't the cops arrested me?"

The sergeant exhaled. "Clause C section thirty-four of the Second Chance Program signed into law by our libtard governor. They now have the discretion to call attention to juveniles *at risk* before taking further action. Who do you think they're going to call, the garbage man? They should, but I get stuck with the trash."

"But... what... *uhhmm*..."

"My, what a masterful conversationalist. Fortunately for me we won't be doing any talking. Here's the bottom line. I own your sweet little behind unless I decide to hand it back to Officer Schwenke. You are familiar with him, I presume."

Schwenke. Living legend. Tin-plated Eliot Ness. Scourge of the stoner. "Who told on me?" says Duncan.

"Does it make a difference? You'd have done the same thing. They say there's honor among thieves. Drug addicts should get a transfusion. I'm going to get my desk ready. Five sharp. Here's the address."

. . .

Of interest is how out of four girlfriends in the following years who were awakened in the middle of the night and played a recording of Duncan squealing and repeating a variety of disturbing utterances only two dumped him. Employers and male friends were less understanding.

. . .

Duncan paced. He drank another beer. And another. The minute hand swung around the clock like a scythe. *Keep the appointment and kill the son of a bitch. He didn't announce this plan to his colleagues. Or did he? What if it's a conspiracy? How can you kill a guy who knows ten kinds of self-defense? If only this was obviously a joke. If only it—*

The magazines accumulating under his bed. Good thing he fetched the mail during the summer. *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth* was a shallow analysis. There are no free subscriptions in life. He glared at the phone. Could it be? Their volley of pranks, though not ceasing according to the terms of an armistice, had diminished. Divergent paths separate boyhood friends until each finds himself on a different island evolving into a new species. If they meet again as adults they scarcely know what to say. The awkward remembrances may as well be descriptions of an old movie, the heroes of which they no longer admire, its adventures absurd, its morals trivial.

He dialed part of the number and hung up. It wasn't him. Couldn't be. They hadn't spoken since when, a year? Two? And Tyler didn't know about the weed. Or did he? Hell, who didn't?



No one can keep a secret. *Who else would do this?* Either call him or go see the sergeant. Pick one. He dialed the once familiar number and pressed the phone to his face and made frantic pledges to Whom It May Concern.

"Tyler? Okay, you got me. You got me good. How'd you pull that off?"

"Duncan?"

"You know damn well who this is."

"Who got you?"

"C'mon, this is serious. I'm not saying uncle but that was brilliant. They've been calling here three times a week with their mind games. My resistance is low. Who'd you get to do that?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The army recruiter. C'mon, who was that?"

"Dude! I thought that was Cooter. He got me yesterday."

Duncan collapsed on the couch and melted into a warm glow. "This is miles above Cooter's aptitude."

"What the hell's going on?"

"Did you send dwarf porn to my house?"

"Someone subscribed me to *Fatties Fucking*. My mom found it in the mail. She says I need counseling."

"A plus-sized girlfriend would be cheaper. This guy crossed a line. He was bribing me."

"With what? I hung up after he asked me to come down and polish both his helmets."

"About a potential problem with the law."

"I hear you're a big dealer these days. Way to go."

"Do you swear it's not you?"

"I swear. I swear on Terri's life."

"That means so much to me. Wow, you're still with her. I'm gonna go cry for a while I'm so choked up. Call you back."

"Hey numbnuts, she says *you* dumped *her*. That was a long time ago. Get over it. I bet this is the same guy who called here

and told my mom he was the Grand Dragon of the KKK. He said my final initiation was coming up and congratulated her.”

Duncan’s revulsion and fear decomposed, becoming rich nutrients to fertilize the delectable fruits in a garden of revenge. “Who’s doing this?”

“Remember the clubhouse?”

“That was a gem. Those were the days.”

“Until someone spread a few cans of tuna under the carpet in the middle of the summer.”

“I swear it wasn’t me,” said Duncan. “I was jealous of you with Terri, but I wouldn’t trash the fort.”

“We both had reasons to suspect each other. Let’s clear things up. It wasn’t me either.”

“You think the same person is doing all of this?”

“No, it’s a group of random strangers. Go smoke another bowl. Remember who we used to egg every time he walked by?”

“I could come up with a top forty. A whole lot of people and cars and houses got egged. It was like Vietnam fought with jumbo Grade As.”

“This kid’s head was a magnet for them. Who cried and swore we’d be sorry someday?”

Painted by the abstract artist of Memory, a hazy mural covered a wall in Duncan’s living room: the fetal head; the thick black glasses; the slit of a mouth sans upper lip on a face devoid of all emotion; the way he came bounding down the sidewalk, his pendulous man-tits undulating beneath a Devo shirt; the oval projectiles zooming inexorably toward their target; the eternity between impact and the recipient’s response demonstrating the taffy-like stretch of Time. The bewildered creature stood there as though having hatched from an egg of its own, dripping in the albumen that had nourished it during the voyage from non-being through gestation, squawking for its mother, beating scrawny appendages and demanding answers from a world that had so thoughtlessly dragged it into existence. When was the last time Duncan had thought about Nelson?

Where do such memories go? It's as if they're stored in a safety deposit box to which we hold only one key. How can a person you haven't deigned to consider, a nebbish who doesn't even have the status of electrochemical twinkles in the dendrites of your brain, obstruct the arc of your life? Ask Lincoln.

"You don't think *he's* been—"

"Messing with both of us all this time," said Tyler. "Think about it. Think long and hard about it."

"You were pretty mean to him."

"And you were Mother Theresa. The guy had a C-cup for crying in the sink. We need to get together and be completely honest about which pranks we've done to each other. I'll tell you right now they won't add up. Maybe the best ones are going to be unexplained."

"Remember that goofy science project he had on his roof?"

"Solar panels. Energy source of the future."

"Your Wrist-Rocket turned them into solar crystals," laughed Duncan.

"Yeah, it was all me. I think the dope is clouding your memory. Remember Halloween? Every year his house became a shrine of classic pranks. You were the master. I was your faithful Igor."

"We messed with everyone. It's a part of growing up. Cooter and I are like brothers now. Remember the shit we did to him?"

"The same fire that melts the butter hardens the egg," said Tyler.

"He said that to you too. Is that some motto? He's gonna have a new one pretty soon."

"Begging for your life isn't a motto."

"Shouldn't he be in college by now?"

"So? Do you think he's partying? Do you think he's banging cheerleaders? When he's not playing Dungeons and Dragons with Inflate-a-Mates he's probably plotting revenge against

everyone who ever messed with him. Believe it or not, we might be at the top of the list.”

“He was a major egghead, in the other sense of the word,” said Duncan. “What if he’s some evil genius?”

“Let’s find out where he’s enrolled so you can go apologize.”

“We need to compare notes on a few things. Then it’s pay-back time.”

“I hear you. Sending that shit to my house was wicked. And there was a certain call to my little sister.”

Silence.

“Duncan?”

“I swear it wasn’t me. I swear on my grandma’s grave.”

“Is that the one whose lawn you cut for twenty bucks, whether it needed it or not?”

“I was pushing my luck with twice a week, but I never thought my own flesh and blood would call me a crook. What happened to your sister?”

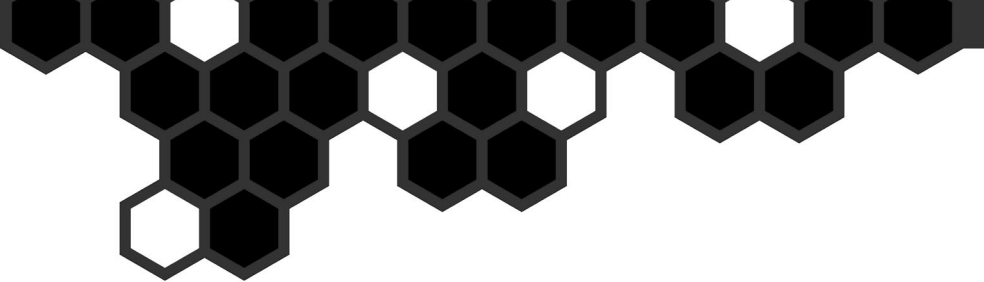
“We were all at dinner and the phone rang and she picked it up. Then she asked my dad if he wanted a rusty trombone. Someone said he was selling them.”

“See, that’s not ... right.”

“It’s not funny, you ass. We have to call a truce to deal with this.”

“Okay, truce. When we get done with Nelson he’ll be begging for an egg in the face.”

“Nothing knee-jerk. One masterful prank is better than a thousand small ones.”



## EIGHT

### *The Path of Nelson*

Bearded and gaunt like some castaway, Nelson sits against the ruins of a Pick 'n Save, eating yams from a can and airing out the blisters on his feet. With the exception of La Casa Gonzales Grocery and Cash In A Flash, plywood boards cover the shops.

A woman zigzags across the parking lot like a scarecrow carried through a cornfield, only her snarled hair and pale face visible above the cars. She goes three rows down and one forward, five up and two across, then three up and over four, as though following secret instructions to find buried treasure beneath the crumbling asphalt. In mute fury she waits for a dilapidated Buick to pass, forcing it to drive around her, not ceding an inch. Its plastic-covered side windows resemble translucent light receptors, an early stage of the eye. Small changes accrue. You haven't forgotten that, have you?

The woman abandons the security of the final row and approaches the remains of an Ace Hardware. Twine fails to secure the front of her trench coat. The wind opens it long enough to punish the curious. She transfers a bulging purse from one hand to the other and heads back, her passage again displaying contempt for the shortest distance between two points. Each subsequent crossing brings her one row closer to the grocery. In the window stands a thickset man, his face austere and unwavering like some terracotta warrior, arms folded like crossbeams.

The inevitable collision could be extrapolated by anyone familiar with billiards or the first chapter of a geometry textbook.

"Hey, there might be some food in the dumpster behind Foo's Palace," Nelson calls to her. "I could help you find some. It's only a few blocks away."

She looks in his direction. An eye covered by milky film overcompensates by bulging. "There's poison in it. You don't have the antidote."

"Is that what's in your bag?"

Furrows wind from her pursed lips like crevices down a volcano. "Don't patronize me. What I'm doing is no less sane than what you are."

"You don't know the tenth of it."

"Mommy, look at the funny lady," says an urchin. Its elephantine mother yanks it in the opposite direction and continues a conversation, her phone submerged in a fleshy cheek.

"Why do you keep walking through the parking lot?" says Nelson, opening a can of oysters. He sniffs the contents and places it on the ground. They'll taste better in a few hours. Hunger is a four star chef.

"They covered my path before. They thought they could hide it from me. They were wrong."

Nelson massages a red swollen heel, kneading sharp spasms into a dull ache, not asking, "What is pain?" Similar inquiries can make tastes and smells and thoughts seem unreal, but misery defies all doubts and head trips as though it alone is foundational to existence. I suffer, therefore I am.

"Who covered your path?"

"They tried to hide it by confusing me with pills, but I found it again." Victorious, she raises her bag. "Then they covered it with a library. Those were the good years. They let me walk it every day." She tries to grin but half her face disoblige. "This time they almost took it from me. Sometimes cars are in the way and I have to wait." She squints her good eye and bobs her head. "What if they put it under water? I don't know what I'll do. I can't

swim. What if they dig a hole under it so it's on a bridge? That's my worst fear. I'm afraid of heights."

Think of something else. Not the mother, sister, husband or son who exhausted every permutation of argument and supplication, who went from unconditional love to tough love to feigned acceptance. How much comfort do they derive from explanations about chemical imbalances, the modern equivalent of "By means of an insanity-inducing faculty"? What do they say to neighbors and friends? How do they harmonize their love for her with their hatred of what she's become, their despair with their faith? Functionality is not guaranteed by Brute Chance Inc. Nothing is. There but for the grace of a few twists of DNA go you. Sucks to be reminded. *That's why you hate them.* They're living monuments to your contingency.

"How did you find the path in the first place?" says Nelson.

"It's mine. It won't do you any good."

"I don't want to take it."

"It's not like you have a better one."

"I'm not saying I do, but it might get you in trouble if you keep going toward the store. Do you see the owner?"

"He's going to call the police when I walk inside. I'm not supposed to go there. They'll be here after I knock over his candle display."

"Maybe you could walk around it."

"It's in the way. That store wasn't always there."

"Why would they close a library?"

"It was only bums and crazies who went."

"I had some good Chinese food last night. Would you like to get some?"

"The poison in it swells your ankles."

"MSG?"

"It also swells your thoughts," she says. "It makes them too big to fit inside words. If you can't put them in words they spoil. Thought poisoning can kill you."

"What are the symptoms? I've been feeling rundown."

"The days start to scare me. That's when I know I'm sick. That's when I need to walk my path. It burns off the poison. It makes me focus on now." She rubs her palms and jerks to one side. "Do you have a calendar?"

"I'm traveling light."

She steps closer, followed by a fetid gust, purple knots clustered on her hairy legs. "Are you sure?"

"Honest."

"They lie. They fool you. They want you to believe each little box is out there waiting. Do you think next Tuesday is out there somewhere? Do you think we could go find it?"

"I've never thought about it. I guess we could try."

"*I guess we could try*," she mocks, as if the sum total of human dignity is forever fixed and can only be increased at the expense of another. "A calendar is a make-believe map, a liar's map. There's one little island but the map shows hundreds. This is the same moment it's always been. There's only one moment and one path and now is when I have to walk it. The rest are tricks to scare and control me."

"You said he's going to call the police when you enter the store. That isn't happening now. Isn't that out there in the future?"

Her scream pierces his head and a flash of blue appears between the black-crested waves of gray rolling across the sky. Blue like the eyes always watching him. He hyperventilates and looks at his raw feet and plugs his ears until she stops.

"Where am I?" she says.

"You're standing in front of me. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Am I in the grocery store?"

"No."

"So there. You can play all sorts of games with words. They're mirrors that make the room look bigger. The room is tiny. You and everyone else are playing make-believe in a closet lined with



mirrors. That doesn't mean I have to. If you understood you wouldn't be able to sit still either."

Like a spectator to a show scripted by his thoughts, Nelson watches the conclusion of her solemn procession. Details materialize. Big letters in the windows spelling words he can't translate obscure the commotion.

"Go away you stinking witch. Get out!" shouts the owner. A woman joins him but her deprecations are in Spanish. Three patrons run out looking over their shoulders. As prophesied, a Crown Victoria pulls up in unison with a tremendous shattering crash.

Two assemblages of muscle wrapped in blue uniforms don latex gloves and remove their specimen with the force and trepidation of novice zookeepers retrieving a stray anaconda. In halcyon days of idealism they probably dreamt of foiling unequivocal Evil rather than resolving domestic disputes and transporting people with disabled brains—both the intentionally self-impaired and those courtesy of Nature's inscrutable ways.

Nelson approaches, boots in one hand, Hefty bag in the other, ignoring his better judgment screaming, "Don't look for trouble. Let it find you. One man can only make a difference if he doesn't smell like a paper mill."

The woman whines pitifully, refusing to let go of her purse. A group gathers. Why is there no word for this blend of amusement, contempt, bewilderment, and relief it isn't them, a feeling as old as love or hate?

"It's mine," she cries, arms entwined in the handles.

"Ma'am, you can have it back after we go to the station. No one is going to take it from—"

"It's mine now and it's always now," she screams. "*After* and *later* are lies. I don't have to believe them. You can't make me. The pills can't do it either. Damn your lies."

This caste of untouchables, ridiculed and forsaken and persecuted throughout history, victims of mobs and executioners,

defenseless against all accusations, subjects of torture in the name of science and medicine, contributors to civilization disproportionate to their number, locked in cages and held responsible for what all avow is not their fault, every age considers its treatment of them superior to what came before. Every age is wrong.

"You don't have to hurt her," says Nelson, his voice cracking, watching her pressed against the hood, her arms spread at an impossible angle. One officer tugs on the bag while twisting her wrist and pounding her forearm. She whimpers.

"Hey, hey!" shouts Nelson. "She just wants to walk her path."

"Do you know this woman?"

"I know she didn't hurt anybody."

The cop's mirrored sunglasses reflect an unworthy petitioner, a shabby jester pleading for the release of captives.

"Maybe her and the owner could work this out," says Nelson. "She's been walking it longer than the store has been here."

"You start walking your path or you'll join her."

Nelson steps back until his reflection fades. "I was thrown from mine. I wonder if anyone else found it." He thinks about what the woman said. You can't dismiss the message just because the messenger wanders the parking lot of La Casa Gonzales Grocery. What if all the days do not exist on calendar squares? What adheres those scraps to the collage of memory? Some fragments are so vivid it's impossible to distinguish between Now and Then. The past is not the past if it never recedes.

. . .

Pugsly the Pug ran ahead of Nelson and the girl. She squeezed his hand and they walked toward trees drenched by the pink froth of the sunset. Pugsly disappeared in tall grass and howled.

"What do you think he found?" she said and broke into a run. If only he had told her to wait. If only he had stopped her and seen it first and knocked it over, saving her from the savagery of terrorists who target civilians.

That moment, the divisor of his life, never to be lost in the dark pit of forgetting, preserved with the terrible clarity of an abstraction or theorem: cold and exact, isolated from all experience, not a forked path separating possibilities but a blade killing all save one.

The little Chinese dog barked and growled and barked. The girl fell on her knees and sobbed at the sight. Nelson ran to her but it was too late.

The giant plywood Pug was a magnificent two-dimensional rendering of Pugsly, complete with a green collar and silver bone-shaped tag. The girl threw her arms around Nelson and cried, "Yes. Yes! Yes!" She hugged him so hard his back *crackled*.

Over her shoulder he inspected the creature. Two ropes tethered it to the ground as if it would otherwise bolt and devour him. A caption over its head read, "Woof. Will you marry Nelson? Woof! Woof!"

Blood streaked the sky between the trees. Pugsly jumped to their waists and barked his approval. She ran off in a mad dash to tell her mom, her friends, everyone. His shirt wet from her tears, Nelson sat at the feet of his plywood master and stared at the grass and weeds covering the paths not taken. A spasm of guilt shot through him for even thinking about telling her the truth.

. . .

"What's she got in her bag?" says one of the cops, holding it at arms length.

"She has the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures," says Nelson. "The fourth amendment says you need a warrant signed by a judge, specifying what you're looking for and where you intend to find it. Her refusal to let you search her does not give you probable cause."

"Are you her boyfriend or attorney?"

The other cop grins. "Have you made partner yet?"

"You might want to switch to class action suits. More money."

"I like your casual approach, the shoeless thing. That must put your clients at ease."

"Didn't I see you on a commercial the other day? The law offices of McGinnis, Kaplowski, and batshit bum?"

"I saw him on Court TV. He asked the judge to throw the case out because one of the voices in his head knew a juror. The prosecution objected."

"I caught part of that episode. Did you see when he took a shit behind the witness stand?"

"Old habits die hard."

"I saw her go in the store, that's all," says Nelson, staring at the pavement. Why do sinkholes only devour houses and cars, not former humans longing to disappear?

"I'm going to take a peek inside here. When you argue this in front of the Supreme Court you might want to get a new Hefty bag." He opens the purse and drops it and covers his mouth.

"It's not mine," says the woman, struggling to undo her cuffs. "That's his. He made me hold it for him. He said I couldn't look because of the fourth annulment. He said he's an attorney. We met in the hospital."

Nelson takes a step back, and another. "I swear I've never seen her before in my entire life."

"Drop your bag and boots and raise your hands."

Nelson doesn't. The cops take him to the ground as if impatient of gravity. One presses his head against the pavement and knocks it down hard when he moves it. The other kneels on his back and cuffs him.

In the backseat of the cruiser the woman sits beside him, greasy ropes of hair draping her shoulders. "Don't worry. They can't take my path from me."

Nelson gags. "Why did you tell them that? I tried to help you."

"I have to get back to my path. You don't have one. Don't worry if they give you time. There isn't any. Anybody can draw

squares on paper and call them by different names. They're playing Candyland but they think it's real."

One of the cops tells dispatch they're returning for decontamination. Both laugh.

"He's been raping me," she says. "He's been abusing me ever since I left the hospital. Please get him away from me. I stay in the parking lot because he can't hurt me here."

The driver's eyes examine Nelson from the rearview mirror, ridden with the exasperation of a man discovering roaches under the sink.

Nelson looks at the woman. Who called them useless eaters? He was too kind. Eugenicists had the right idea but terrible PR. Stupid Nazis ruined everything. As they drive away he sees the can of oysters he never ate. Did the possibility even exist, or did a narrow trail lead straight here? Maybe there are no paths in life, only a wasteland precipitous and pitted.



## NINE

### *Keychain Number Four, Please*

Routine is the most insidious drug. Addicts don't deny their use; they forget it, taking the potent spell for granted. Withdrawal is devastating. Knowledge of impending death is the most acute form. Instead of the delirium suffered by alcoholics, the Routine junkie awakens from his stupor with augmented powers of perception, overwhelmed by the miracle of the mundane. Reality glows bright and strange under peeling layers of deceptive familiarity. It was there all along, camouflaged. Moonlight pools at his feet in a crystal elixir concocted by a reclusive Sorcerer and birds chirp a symphony counterpointed by his heart. Why wasn't this noticed earlier?

Less severe instances of withdrawal can be no less shattering. In the midst of what had been a routine day, Duncan squeezes the phone and butts his head against a wall. "How much clearer can I be? I don't know anyone in Nevada or anything about Sandy Valley."

Sometimes these misunderstandings are easily resolved; sometimes not.

"You mean fifty acres are in my name? ... Oh great, 150. How did I pay for them? ... *How?* ... So they're already as good as mine. I'm a victim of identity theft, again! ... What sane man would want to live near a gunnery range? ... I'm sure it's lucrative, but I have no desire to collect copper scrap to make a living,

as wonderful as that sounds. I'm employed in the advertisement industry. ... Yes, please connect me, if they can straighten this out."

Though never having expended any thought on the subject, were Duncan to compile a list of the worst songs ever composed it might contain most of the next hour of on-hold music. And then ...

"If you'd like to make a call please hang up and try again."

He calls back.

"How can I help you? You might say, I want to check my account, or I want to make a payment, or I'm interested in purchasing more real estate, or—"

"I've been fucked in the ass by a son of a bitch."

"I'm sorry. I didn't understand that. I'll get an operator to assist you." The phone plays another song by Foreigner.

He holds it away from his ear and stares out the window. Dingy mounds of snow line the yard like piles of used tissue. Blue bubbles percolate on a slate fountain and ooze down its sides. "Yes, this is Duncan Brandle. ... No, it wasn't the least bit helpful. How can a mindless voice be helpful? Why don't you send me a smiley face to stare at? That would be even better. ... Don't congratulate me. I didn't buy desert property. ... I know it says paid in full on my account but that's—No, do not put me on hold—Hello?"

He refrains from punching the window, which would not bring justice to the battlefield outside, something millions of bombs and billions of gunshots have failed to accomplish. There is only the redistribution of sorrow. Unless that is Justice. The doorbell rings.

Despite an oversized sweatshirt and baggy jeans, Vicki fails to look androgynous. "That music downstairs is the worst sound I've ever heard. Do you get used to it? This is like living next to an airport, except for the screaming."

"The trick in life is not minding. And what a trick it is. Some day I hope to learn it. I'm getting plenty of practice."

"You don't look good. What's wrong?"

"I'm moving to the desert."

"Really? How come?"

"I'm going to live in a trailer. Probably have to sleep underneath the damn thing during the day. It gets up to 140 degrees in the Mojave. At night I'll crawl around hunting for shards of copper. Would you like to join me?" He looks through the fridge and grabs a beer but thinks better of it. "I'm sure we'll develop a tolerance to scorpions. Instead of water we'll drink rattlesnake piss."

Apprehensive, she watches him. Eccentricity makes humor difficult to detect. It could just as easily be a warning sign. "I don't think that's a good plan, but it's better than being a spammer. Why don't you get a normal job?"

"What's normal?"

"I like what I do. Everyone needs a haircut. Sorry."

"No, it's okay. It's funny that I'm bald. And fat. And that my legs are skinny. When a good prank has been played on you it's important to accept it. At a deeper level they're hysterical."

"You're not that fat."

"Thanks."

"You could get a hair transplant. Start working out. Lots of guys do."

"Don't you get it? That's part of the gag: the fact that you have to do these asinine things. Just like now I have to file all sorts of fraud claims and spend days on the phone or I'll own half the Mojave." He decides to have the beer. "The deeper hilarity of this one won't hit me for a while. Your disturbed paramour bought me a place in the sun, with my money."

"But it's two different things. Nobody made you ... have less hair than some people, or have ... more—"

"Nobody made me bald and fat?" He gapes at her as though discovering a precious jewel. "You're too nice to come out and say the words. Think of it like this. What if you were walking



down the street and you were hit in the face with a pie, but when you wiped it off there was no one there?"

"I'd assume someone threw it and ran."

"Okay, you're out in the woods."

"I'd assume someone set a trap that throws pies."

He grunts and squeezes the bridge of his nose. "This is why it's so hard to explain. Life is a series of these pies. You have to learn to admire the shtick of the jokester who's throwing them."

"God's throwing pies at you?"

"No. Stop. Back up. That's too literal. You're in Tyler territory now, a man who derives his theology from the Alternative Spirituality station. The fact that no one is throwing them is the best part of the joke. Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"No one, but it just hit you in the face with a pie."

"So it's a make-believe comedian but his jokes are funny."

"Our brains force us to attribute everything to an intelligent cause: God did it, everything happens for a reason, karma, and so on. It's like we're born with irreversible head trauma. That too is part of the joke."

"They say humor is subjective," says Vicki. "I feel left out."

"It's an acquired taste."

"Keep telling yourself that. Look how angry you are. Why do you guys do this if it gets you so upset?"

"Different artists use different mediums. Instead of a canvas or clay, I use pranks to create masterpieces." He strokes the stubble on his chin. How do you tell a stranger about the place where your dreams gestate, a place hidden from you? He generalizes with a few enthusiasms, repeats them, and stands speechless, his silence a testimony to the majestic complexity of the subject—except in her eyes where it's further proof of the adolescent incoherence of the undertaking.

"Have you ever read *Don Quixote*?" he says after an awkward silence.

"My grandma has the soundtrack."

"It belongs near the top of your bucket list. It's the single best symbolic representation of human existence. Here's the plot. A delusional old man gets the living shit pounded out of him for a thousand pages."

"Sounds great. How does it end?"

"He dies. There are credible reports of men who laughed themselves to death while reading it."

"I prefer books that won't kill me."

"This is my point. The world is a full scale replica of *Don Quixote* where billions of delusional beings get the living shit pounded out of them. Then they die."

"Don't believe everything you read."

"I believe what I see. And that's all I see."

She walks into the room of bobbleheads and shudders as though a thousand tiny feet are trampling her grave. "I think I came to see them."

"You miss them?"

She runs a fingernail between her teeth and nods.

"You want to see them bobble?"

"Yeah."

"Does the thought of them not bobbling disturb you?"

"Bobbleheads are meant to bobble."

"My sentiments exactly. A non-bobbling bobblehead is not truly a bobblehead, its *raison d'être* unfulfilled. Have a seat."

"What's the deal with those creepy lotus bulbs," she says, re-coiling from the vase on the table.

"Lotus pods are not here to be enjoyed by us."

"Then they're doing a good job. If someone sent them to me I'd slap a restraining order on his ass. Are they alive or dead?"

"Their very presence calls the distinction into question. And other distinctions. The seeds resemble blue eyes, don't you agree?"

“Not even the Addams Family would have put them in their house.”

“It’s important to relax before seeing the bobbleheads bobble. Take deep breaths.” He stands behind her and adjusts the lights with a dimmer switch on the wall. “Look at the beautiful clear blue sky above. Relax. What’s that fluffy white thing moving toward you from the horizon?”

“A cloud?”

“Formless and fluffy and filled with the potential to become anything in the clear blue sky, a cloud.” He turns on the vibrating dumbbell. The ineffable breath of life fills plastic totems not famous for sporting endeavors: the Rolling Stones (except for a headless Jagger), the Beatles, Monkees, Elvis, and Kiss; the whole Star Wars gang (sans a headless Darth Vader); Darwin, Newton, and Einstein; the Heat and Snow Miser; the Muppets; the old and new Star Trek crew; Rod Sterling, Milton Berle, Marilyn Monroe; Hemingway and Faulkner and Joyce and Shakespeare and—

“What does the cloud look like?”

“George Washington.”

“That’s Mozart. Anyway, it’s shifting. A cool breeze is blowing it, morphing it. Who does it look like now?”

“Timothy Leary.”

“That’s Francis Crick.”

“No, the cloud looks like Timothy Leary. My ex had a shirt with him on it.”

“Okay, what color are his eyes?”

“Blue.”

“You’re seeing the sky behind the cloud. Just like when you look into the eyes of the blue-eyed man. Now you’re getting more relaxed, so relaxed that moving your pinky is impossible. Try to move it.”

“I can’t.”

"You're so relaxed it's impossible to tell a lie. That's because lying is hard. In order to cover up the truth you need to lift thousands of heavy bricks. Are you strong enough to do that?"

"No."

"But telling the truth is easy and natural and feels good. What's the first thing you thought when I came up to you at Bobbleheadz bar?"

"What does this old loser want? He can't be serious."

Duncan guzzles his beer and gets another. "We spoke for a little while. You were laughing. What were you thinking then?"

"Why won't he go away? Why am I so nice? It's better to shoot someone down than get his hopes up."

He crushes the can. Beer runs over his hand and onto his shoes. Maybe the clues from facial expressions offer more than enough information about the content of other minds. "Do you find me attractive now that you know me a little?"

With the chilling matter-of-fact bluntness of an android or sociopath she says, "Not at all. Even less."

"Is it because I'm bald?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"Lots of reasons. Being attractive is a package deal. I had a boyfriend who was bald."

"And covered with piercings and tattoos no doubt. Tell me about him."

A wise man once said humans can handle very little truth. Confirmations of this abound: "He was mean. He ignored me most of the time. He flirted with my friends. He never returned my calls. He—"

"Why in the world is that a turn on? Never mind. To hell with it. What else do you remember about the night we met?"

"I couldn't believe you thought I'd be impressed by one of the bobbleheads in the bar, that you were holding it up and asking me to concentrate on it, talking about how it had magic powers

of relaxation. That's the lamest pickup line of all time. You need to go to the east side to find girls who'll fall for that flaky shit. You'd be better off asking someone who her favorite quarterback is."

"What happened then?"

"I—I got dizzy. Then I wanted to see *your* bobbleheads."

"You haven't told anyone about them, have you?"

"I don't think so."

"What about your secret missions?"

"My secret missions are top secret."

"Do you think about any of this when you're not here, when you're not relaxed and watching the bobbleheads bobble?"

"You told me not to."

"Very good. What did you think about Tyler the first time you saw him?"

"He's very serious."

"Like a head cold. What about after you talked to him?"

"He's a little weird, but interesting."

"Did you find him attractive?"

"I put him on probation."

Duncan looks toward the fading light in the window. If only he had a button that could blow the whole planet to smithereens. "I want you to imagine the most attractive man you've ever seen in your entire life. Picture him being formed in the cloud. What color are his eyes?"

"I'm not sure."

"Okay, imagine the second most attractive man you've ever seen. The cloud is now turning into him. What color are his eyes?"

"Green."

"Dammit." He picks up a book and pages through it and tosses it back on the table. "Okay, the cloud is turning back into the most attractive man. In a little while you're going to be in the kitchen and you won't remember anything about the cloud or

the sky. When I say 'Keychain number four please,' I will be that man. When I say it again, I will be Duncan and you won't remember what occurred while you were with the attractive man. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

. . .

"I feel weird after I see them," she says, seated across from him, examining the label on an empty pizza box. "Was this really anchovies and pineapple?"

"It sounds nauseating, but it was only mildly horrible. You haven't seen Tyler recently, have you?"

"I don't know why, but I followed him all day Saturday. He didn't recognize me as a short-haired brunette in baggy clothes. The glasses probably helped too. He was in Barnes and Noble for six hours."

"Drinking coffee and trying to look intelligent? Any woman who falls for that deserves whatever she gets. Did you sit behind him when he opened his laptop?"

"I covered my face with the *Shepherd Express*."

"Did you happen to see any of the passwords he used?"

"I can't believe I was being so nosy. I've never been like that before. I couldn't see the main one to log on his computer, but for Supermail.com and Cupid's Bow it's three qwerty five."

Duncan writes on the pizza box. "Good work. What else was he looking at?"

"You're trying to find out what he's planning for you."

"Like the man said, know your enemy. Unfortunately the most reliable thing about Tyler is the plasticity of his nature."

"He seems like a nice guy."

"So did Ted Bundy. Do you think he was serious and interesting? I suppose you would have put him on probation too."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Tyler's not *a* nice guy. He's a confinement center for brooding loners. Character is destiny even if it's a lump of putty."

"Are you into psychology?"

Duncan smiles. "Only insofar as it produces tangible results. I tend to be impatient with the theoretical part. How could your dreams mean anything? Is there a team of screenwriters in your head? Messages have senders. A meaningful dream would have to come from an external source."

"Some of them seem like stories. What about the ones you have more than once?"

"The water in a flushing toilet has an interesting pattern. That doesn't mean it's trying to tell you anything. If you look at the world with rose-tinted glasses everything's rosy. Our brains are purpose-tinted glasses. Everything has meaning."

"Deep. Is anyone else in on this dumb game?"

"He's been sidelined. Injured reserve, possibly early retirement."

"Are there any rules?"

"Someone has her finger on the pulse of things. That question has caused me a great deal of grief in the last few years. I thought I knew the answer."

"What do you mean?"

"The questions 'What is art?' and 'What is a practical joke?' have a lot in common. Those who push the boundaries and say anything goes are hacks. What they lack in talent they try to compensate for with vulgarity."

"So beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder?"

"It is, but some people are blind."

He leans back and inhales, savoring the anticipation of bliss, then savoring the savoring. Hunger and thirst are shadows compared to his craving. Some say the expectation of pleasure is the greatest pleasure. They're wrong.

"Keychain number four please."

She jumps up and covers her mouth and steps back until she collides with the fridge.

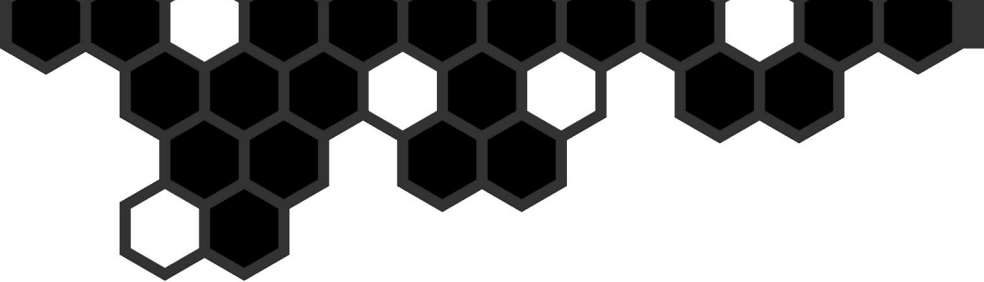
“It’s me baby. I’m here to see you. I’ve always loved you. You’re so beautiful.”

She screams and screams and screams.

“Baby?”

She runs from the room. By the time Duncan gets to the street there’s nothing but the night, that perfect creation forged in the furnace of the day.





## TEN

### *The Lamentations of Limburger Leroy*

Construction workers with leathery tans and Nietzschean mustaches drag orange barrels off a truck. Watching them from the periphery of what a man's life should be, Tyler sips an iced vanilla coffee and envies their honest work, ashamed of his little foo foo job, his little foo foo existence. No doubt they'd consider his scheming to be toys filling the playhouse of his days.

And what would his ancestors have thought if they'd known their sacrifices and toil were paving a road to *him*, to a world where luxuries not extant in mythology brought only more refined strains of sorrow, a world where the last great extinction decimated honor and virtue and shame and civility? Would they celebrate their modest pleasures, secure in the wisdom that nothing finer existed, or commit infanticide to spare the future from itself, to wash their hands of all responsibility?

The pendulum swings. Tyler pities the construction workers, despises their ant-like diligence. No one sees life as he does. The view from a mountaintop is lonely. To everyone else life is something that simply happens: the blank space between sporting events; patches of sound and fury punctuating the white noise of work; a given that defies all categorizations except "mysterious," "like a box of chocolates," and similar banalities.

Taken for granted more than air, life becomes an imperceptible medium, a temperate climate germinating our dreams

while evading comprehension. Some Great Loom weaves reality together one second at a time while this obnoxious species scratches its collective self and yawns. Faint rays of thought can't even penetrate the fog during commercials, not even so much as the modest *Golly, this is odd. All of a sudden I'm alive. How the heck did this happen? Now what? I guess I'll work a crummy job and watch football and—There's my phone. Gotta take this.*

If men experienced one minute of the sheer undiluted wonder commensurate to their circumstances they'd brandish firearms and demand answers from the sky, then fall to their knees, mortified by the silence, and cry out for elucidation, waiting for rescue in a dark uncharted sea.

"Hey asshole, today," shouts a voice from behind. Tyler drives ten feet and hits the brake. He peruses the paper until seeing the headline in the Lifestyle section. Apparently "people of faith" have fewer coronary problems. Some doctors suggest that a "spiritual orientation" could play a role in lowering the tragic rate of heart disease. He squeezes the paper into a ball and throws it in the backseat. It's not whether certain beliefs are TRUE, but if they're healthier than granola, if they might extend man's vain existence by three years.

Tobacco, one of the Creator's most brilliant and gracious gifts, lifts Tyler's thoughts to new heights, invigorates him, makes the journey tolerable. Not surprisingly, it's slandered by the same megalomaniacs who give us permission to pray: an arrogant coven of scientists who deny the Creator's existence, who torture His creatures in diabolical experiments like an army of little Mengeles. From these degenerate prohibitionists with their utopian delusions tobacco deserves the staunchest defense. Society has stopped smoking. Is it any wonder we've entered another Dark Age?

Tyler inhales and the gauzy membrane wrapping the world peels away a layer at a time like some bloody bandage, revealing the raw tissue underneath. He studies it unafraid.

"No one gets the point of life better than you," says his inner theologian. "It's a magnificent prank orbited by satellites of lesser gags. Pranks within pranks within pranks within the Big Prank. Man is the dream of a shadow chasing the wind and slipping on a banana peel. Step back and look and try to deny it. But make no mistake, this wisdom is esoteric. If you try to explain it to anyone, even in a bar at closing time, they'll call you crazy. And if you ask for their analysis you'll hear some of the dimmest bromides and puddle-deep clichés ever uttered, imbecilic musings about how 'Life is what you make it,' 'Life is a precious gift,' 'Live each day as if it were your last,' and worse."

*What if these ideas are blasphemy?*

"Don't be absurd," says the theologian. "You're an honest man looking for answers. The occasional wrong turn or fender bender on the road to Truth is nothing to be ashamed of."

Reflected on the side of a silver oil truck, passengers in a school bus expand and diminish, their boundaries tenuous as though each is grasping for existence and slipping back into nothing, abandoned by the Great Sustainer. Who could blame Him? Tyler smiles at the novelty and accuracy of his investigations, a pioneer exploring unfamiliar territory, alone but headed in the right direction.

"Could I please see your ID?" says the smug security guard, the frivolity of evil incarnate. Dilated pupils bore into a studio apartment of a soul littered with stacks of *Barely Legal* and *Soldier of Fortune* and semi-automatics and handcuffs not needed for his job.

"I've worked here fifteen years," says Tyler. "Do you think I'm his clone? Bioengineering is still a few years from that." *How many times has Duncan walked past this brain-dead galoot? Where did the bidding start, a thick crust with pepperoni?*

"May I please see your ID?"

"Someone intent on sneaking in could probably acquire a phony one. Why do I have to show it to you every morning? Wouldn't Monday be sufficient?"

His cubicle neighbor approaches the checkpoint and says good morning to the diligent sentry.

"I'm afraid I'm gonna have to search you, Kristin. And I'm gonna love every second."

She laughs and walks past them to the elevators, her long dark hair swinging above a masterpiece of creation, full proof that something wants man to be happy, or at least uncomfortable and distracted.

"What the hell was that?" says Tyler. "Why is she exempt from your policies?"

The sentinel stands, raising a rampart of meat between Tyler and the elevators. He unwraps a piece of paper and reads, "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it."

"It's not intimidating if you have to read it, moron."

"Excuse me."

"What if Dirty Harry had pulled out a note card when asking how many shots he fired? It wouldn't have had the same effect, would it?"

"Who's Dirty Harry?"

"Couldn't you find a job with the Somali pirates? You should check the classifieds for special ed mercenaries. Do you have any idea how pathetic your new boss is?"

"As a representative of this company I insist on the respect of my coworkers. If subjected to anymore of your insults I will file a coworker complaint with Human Resources."

"Whatever he's paying, I'll triple it. Think about that, alright?"

At his cubicle Tyler checks his chair for signs of sabotage and his desk for unusual odors. Last summer's limburger cheese was the practical joke equivalent of an atomic bomb. It must have

been stashed late Wednesday night before the four-day holiday weekend. His only comfort was the knowledge that Duncan (if it *was* him, and of course it was, almost certainly it was) hadn't heard the dialogue performed in front of the department before they fled the floor seeking shelter from the bio-hazard. Socrates had no idea what mayhem his method could wreak. Annoying the movers and shakers in Athens was child's play compared to the virtuoso performance of Tyler's supervisor:

"Did you think the cheese was going to dissolve? Are you of the opinion that the space below your desk is a cheese-destroying vortex or a doorway to another dimension whose inhabitants are starving for cheese?"

"I'm really sorry about this," said Tyler. "I think what must have happened is—"

"So you expected it to persist, as things tend to, yet you took no steps to place it elsewhere. Do you believe cheese has an unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of rye bread? Should we expect a Statue of Cheese Liberty on your desk sometime in the future, its inscription reading, 'Give my desk your tired, your poor, your rancid hunks of cheese yearning to decompose.'"

"No sir. I don't know how it got there."

"So you admit to having totalitarian beliefs about cheese. You just denied its basic rights, if I understand you correctly. Yet you decided to grant it asylum beneath your desk. Were you hoping to exploit it for slave labor, forcing it to do a portion of your job without pay?"

"Look, I'm sorry. It was—"

"Lacking limbs and the power of locomotion, was it supposed to do the modest intellectual part of your job? I'd say it's overqualified. Are any of its less fragrant cousins available? I'll gladly give them applications. I'm partial to Muenster."

"I'll pay the cleaning cost."

"You mean we won't need to take it out of the CEO's bonus? He'll be ecstatic. Are you sure? I was going to insist he come down here this instant and scrub the putrid filth under there

with his bare hands. But you'll pay for it? This is wonderful. Tyler, your selflessness is an inspiration to the department. Forever after this day will be a company holiday where everyone celebrates your heroism. We'll reenact it by placing cheese under our furniture."

After a finale that put the closing passages of *The Republic* to shame, his supervisor led them to an empty training room. He went through his lunch, pulled a slice of American off a sandwich, and placed it on the table in front of Tyler. "Here, this is your new secretary. Her name is Amy. I don't want her going under your desk. Wait until the two of you get home for that sort of thing."

Fascinating how haphazard interactions imitate intelligent design. Cheese + eighty-six hours + pseudo-intellectual tyrant with chipped shoulder = a masterwork Duncan could have never foreseen (of course it was him, assisted by the monstrous security guard).

. . .

Tyler checks the surrounding cubicles for early birds and logs on to Cupid's Bow. His coworkers, so dull in most respects, courageously defied the internet censor and compared maps of the journey. "New messages!" flashes the heading, herald of bliss, messenger from the new frontier that's already a sanctuary few can live without.

"Good things come in twos," says Tyler. The first date with Roxanne was scheduled for Saturday at the planetarium.

thanx (i think) 4 asking me 2 chek ur new updates. not my thang. hav 2 cancel. Rox

Tyler rereads the message until its words secede from the union of sentences and the letters break free of invisible shackles to become hieroglyphic squiggles composed of lesser lines and curves. The harder you search for meaning the less you find. Look too hard and it's gone. Same with the meaning of life.

A lightning bolt of panic strikes, hollows him out, leaves a vacuum to be filled with the icy expansion of dread. There were no updates. The profile he spent days perfecting could not be improved. While his peers neglected to capitalize words or spell them correctly, his profile had semicolons. Even if Duncan knew about the account, guessing the password would take thousands of years with brute force. And after three failed attempts they lock you out. He opens Janet's email:

**YOU FREEK!! WTF??? WTF IS UR PROBLEM??? U SEAMED LIKE SUCH A DESENT GUY. AT LEEST I WONT WAIST ANYMOR TIME ON UR SICK ASS! JERK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

He grips his desk like the edge of a cliff. A hot wave of nausea breaks against his throat. Questions and counterfactuals assail him like bats in a cave. How did Duncan do it? A keystroke logger? Wouldn't the anti-virus program have found it?

*Don't even look at your profile. Cancel it and move on. Let it go. Your account has been compromised. Brace yourself.*

"Those women might have been harmed by your actions," says the theologian. "Like a secret agent, you exposed them to risks simply by befriending them. You have an obligation to assess the carnage, which may warrant an apology."

"Why is the right thing always the least pleasant and most difficult?" whispers Tyler. "What was the point in making the world such a miserable place for decent, honest people?"

He clicks *Men Seeking Woman* and goes to the fourth page and scrolls down to Tyler\_401's profile. His picture, arguably the finest he ever took, remains. Eyes twinkle, beckoning serenely with the hint of a smile. It reads: UPDATES ADDED! NEW PICTURES!!!!

And what did Janet see, the thoughtful redhead searching for mooring in this storm called life, buffeted by middle-aged adolescents polluting the dating pool, disillusioned with a career in nursing, terrified by the years coiling up behind her like a scorpion's tail.

Their correspondence breathed life into her picture, as if arriving in bursts of sunlight and moisture until germinating a seed. The two made a definite connection. In response to her “seeking Prince Charming,” Tyler wrote that the good prince, sought after by most of the ladies, will be one busy fellow, which made her LOL. His playful teasing paid dividends when he criticized her description of herself as “down to earth” and “easy going.” “You’re just like all the others,” he wrote. “Everyone says that. Maybe I want a girl who’s spacey and tense.” This caused her to ROTFL her AO. What did she see in his updated profile?

Three high resolution pictures. A man in a strange leather mask with a black ball strapped in his mouth. Another of him confined to a dog kennel. In the final and worst picture, a hooded man wearing a soiled diaper and combat boots.

*What went wrong in his life?* wonders Tyler, detaching, slipping into the same eddies of thought that must have drowned poor Janet. *Did he wake up one morning with this urge or was it an accident he happened to enjoy? Talk about life playing a prank on you ...*

“Nasty!” says Kristin, peering over his shoulder, on her way back from the Coworker Snack Station with a coffee.

“Someone sent this to me. I hate when people send embarrassing emails, don’t you?”

“That’s your Cupid’s Bow account. Tyler four-o-one. The picture on top is you.” She observes him with fascination befitting the examination of a six-foot tapeworm. “I’m not judging or discriminating against your lifestyle choice, but those pictures make me uncomfortable. This is workplace harassment.”

“No it isn’t.”

“I went to the coworker class on it. This is definitely harassment.”

Like an attorney in a courtroom with melting clocks and Escher stairs, he says, “You shouldn’t have invaded my coworker work space. You harassed me first.”



“Anything that makes a coworker uncomfortable is harassment.”

“And by invading my coworker work space you’re making me uncomfortable. The harassments cancel each other. I won’t file a coworker complaint with Human Resources if you don’t.”

Over fifteen dreadful years trapped in this cell. The days spread out before him like Petri dishes filled with some vile contagion. The random selection of an application gave life to the first. Each of its miserable progeny existed only to produce the next, all leading up to one that emerged with the terminal mutation of a strange leather mask.

Tyler looks at Kristin’s thick lips, her arched dark brows, and the eyes behind her designer glasses where his hooded doppelgänger runs amok like some diaper-clad Jason slaying all prior impressions of him.

“What’s harassment?” asks someone. Several sets of Kilroy eyes protrude over dividers in the maze. Kristin walks away and whispers excitedly to a coworker, and another. The masked man will spread from mind to mind if Tyler doesn’t quarantine and eradicate him. Memes are more prolific than genes.

“Download a screenshot.”

“Oh my!”

“Looks like the Muenster Man has other hobbies.”

“How does Limburger Leroy eat cheese with that thing in his mouth?”

This can’t be how it ends, not after he survived so many other assaults and booby traps, not after enduring his supervisor’s dialogue about the deranged meth whores Duncan sent to the office:

“Tyler, we all understand how young lovers inhabit a world of their own, but do you think these distractions are fair to the rest of us?”

“I have never seen those women before.”

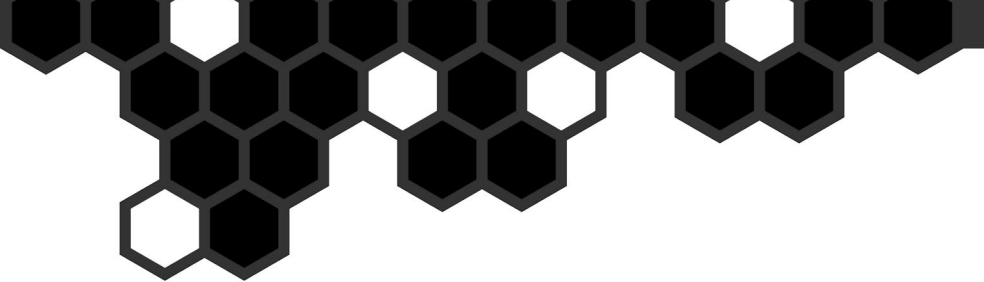
"It sounds as though there's some disagreement about who was supposed to pay for the last few dates. There are no rules when you're playing the field, but for the department's sake could you go Dutch from now on? Have you taken them to the art museum?"

"We're not dating."

"Then I suggest the rose garden at Wilson Park. Your ladies will know they're more than friends when you take them there. I look forward to meeting them at the Christmas party."

. . .

He expected so much more. But what? Overseeing the two days of intensive training his replacement will need? A card from his fellow inmates congratulating him on his release? The search for another job to stay busy? Surely all the years were heading somewhere special. Or did Time stultify him with the illusion of progress, trick him into thinking that hours are something other than termites devouring a rickety bridge he thought he could cross.



## ELEVEN

### *And Justice for Nelson*

Lies and Truth compete for scarce resources in the mind. Nature equipped the strong one with armor, claws, serrated fangs, the intelligence to lie dormant when outmatched, the persistence to return if defeated, and the sapience to know compromise often leads to victory. It thrives in the desert and tundra and jungle; swims the depths and roams the flatlands. It loses battles but never wars.

Its lowly nemesis is a formless blob whose bungling seekers speak of its inherent worth. They might be right. It has no other. Magical properties such as setting its possessors free have yet to be demonstrated. You'd scrape it off your shoes if you didn't know better. Its classification confounds the greatest and poorest minds alike. Everyone expects it to be as grand and prevailing as Lies.

Some who hunt the Truth dream of transforming it to Justice, which is even more contemptuous of categories. Their theorems are written in riddles, their standards recalibrated every few years. Today's Justice is not your grandfather's Justice and even psychics won't hazard a guess at what form it will take tomorrow. Unknown is whether it's anything more than a word masking a multitude of confusions and raw passions, whether it presumes to undo the past, perfect the future, or simply inflict suffering on the wrongdoer, which makes it an effete euphemism for Revenge.

A dark-robed wizard of this alchemy collected the Truth pertaining to Nelson's circumstances and placed it on a great scale. His Honor had completed the sacred rites of initiation by running ads accusing his opponent of being soft on sex offenders. With the confidence most mortals reserve for the likelihood of dawn, he proclaimed the means of rectification, how Nelson must void from the annals of earth his transgressions.

The good news: the testimony of a woman marching across a parking lot carrying a bag stuffed with a dead cat had no bearing on Nelson, who had merely resisted arrest and engaged in disorderly conduct. This deserved exactly thirty days of Justice (not twenty-nine, not thirty-one). It gave him access to nutritious food and a shower. The bad news: practical applications of Justice are counterintuitive, and the philosopher's stone of Diversity has yet to work its transformation everywhere.

. . .

Nelson wakes on concrete. Ghastly smells and residues slither across his flesh and constrict, suffocating him. His mind remains a great distance from the carnage of his body, like it's watching news about war crimes on the other side of the world. Hopefully this shattered plaything has been discarded in favor of shiny new ones.

With an almost superstitious revulsion, the way one would shun clothing worn by the dead, his mind doesn't want the body back. Was the upkeep worth it, the washing and grooming and exercise and doctor consultations and every other indignity and necessary futility, all to maintain a flimsy contraption that invariably succumbs to defilement and decrepitude? The broken machine tries to sit but cannot. It emits noises triggered by internal sensors detecting serious damage and falls beside a stainless steel toilet and closes its eyes and welcomes the darkness. Nothing is more soothing than Nothing.

. . .

Seven lotus pods surround him, cocking their heads inquisitively, beaming at him like spotlights on watchtowers. Two of them part, permitting him to leave the circle. At his feet he finds a silver walking stick with a thermometer attached to one end. He smiles and picks it up and heads to the street. The pods watch his departure, their segmented blue eyes fixed on him.

The bank's columns have fallen. People writhe on the ground clutching their throats, illumed by a pale glare. Some run amok through the streets dodging massive rats and covering their mouths from whatever has doomed the others. A group watches from the third floor of an investment firm across the street, apparently thinking they're safe. But the sanctuary stands at an angle. It is going to collapse.

Serenely Nelson approaches and holds up his staff to the bank's sign. Darkness like ink spills across the sky but an auroral light surrounds his face. He examines the readings and points to the revolving doors of the bank. "Deceivers! Their sign is a false sign. They have cursed us."

The guard who condescended to him, who offered him a pen for his revelation, shields his face with his forearms and kneels. The teller with the shooting star tattooed on her neck runs to Nelson and falls at his feet. "Tear down the sign," he says. "Only I have the temperature."

"Fraud," calls a voice from the back of a crowd. Holding a golden rod with a thermometer, Duncan floats through waves of human refuse. His red robe, girth, and globular head make him the living embodiment of a Taoist sage. His eyes suffuse the sky with blue yet remain undiminished. He holds his staff next to Nelson's. The stricken recover and examine the readings.

"False prophet," says Duncan, holding his thermometer for everyone to see.

A hand seizes Nelson's throat. Others tear his hair and claw his face. "How do you know you have the true temperature?" he pleads, conceding uncertainty about his message—suicide for any prophet.

"These gauges are toys. There is no true temperature," whispers Duncan, his smile so wide the top half of his head hovers above the lower jaw. He holds up a bobblehead with a lotus pod for a face. "Only this can control the weather, assuming man is the measure of all things. Destroy the false prophet," he cries to the horde.

. . .

Meanderings between sleep and consciousness again bring Nelson to the wonderland of detachment. *If I had died in my sleep I wouldn't know it.* He scrambles to a temple hovering above amber sand and traces its inscriptions, hoping to seize the wisdom and carry it back. But his fingers become holographs and the temple fades like some monument to the ghostly essence of all seekers and everything they seek.

He opens his eyes and watches the concrete floor. Cage doors slam in the distance. Men hoot and shout in strange languages, some vaguely English. Unpredictable and relentless, different armies annex the territory of his mind.

If you don't choose your thoughts you don't choose anything.  
You don't choose your thoughts.

Do his recent days make all the previous ones better by comparison? How will they affect the days to come? Like plots of land, their value is not constant. No Objective standard exists to measure them unless compared to the days before Life appeared, a time of blessed peace devastated by tribulation. If they can only be contrasted with each other their worth changes with the weather. A memory that would have been a waking nightmare under normal circumstances becomes bittersweet nostalgia:

His wife and mother-in-law watched a show where two obese and shirtless humanoids bayed like walruses over the paternity of a toothless woman's offspring. The mother-in-law lit one cigarette from the butt of another. Like a mime with poor timing but impeccable skills of imitation the wife did the same. Four bare feet with pink nails rested on a coffee table amid crushed cans of

Diet Coke, piles of coloring books, and a tablature of white lines on a mirror.

"Could you please turn it down," Nelson said.

"Why don't you go study in the library?" said the mother-in-law, furiously scratching a faux chicken pock. "After this our judge shows are on."

The wife slapped her hand. "Knock it off. You're gettin' all scabby."

"We don't have enough gas money for me to drive back and forth."

The mother-in-law lowered the volume but the damage had been done. Knowing he shared a planet with the creatures on those shows proved distracting. Why bother contributing anything to the world unless it's deep-fried cyanide or birth control with psychoactive properties? He glared at a page of equations. Once they were coded love letters, their solutions like veils dropped in a dance of seduction. Now indecipherable curlicues filled the page, as though months of rutting like a beast had altered his mind in due proportion, as if marriage had dissolved all layers beyond the brain stem.

"What time do you work today?" said the wife.

He bristled. What does familiarity breed? *All things in moderation* did not originally pertain to liquor. "At which job?"

"The gas station," said the mother-in-law.

"If I steal any more cigarettes they'll fire me."

"We got a coupon for generics."

. . .

His cellie calls. Nelson's body attempts to crawl but underestimates the stability of its knees. They feel as though the caps have been removed to expose the soft tissue. Is it ironic, curious, or par for the course of Justice that he has no idea what his cellie's transgressions were and hasn't made any conversation except a few pleas for his life?

Behind a thick fog of terror, deeper than the unity of apperception, some Ultimate Kernel of Nelson is astounded how the survival calculus of prison proves what is about to happen is the lesser evil, contrary to all casual assessments made on the other side of this shattered looking glass where submission is impossible and death before dishonor is default.

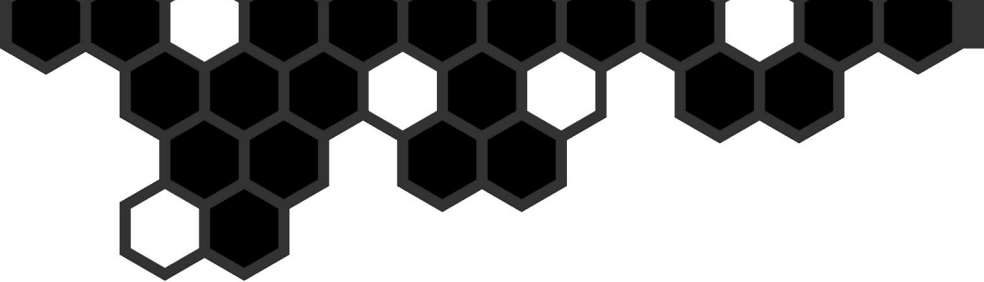
After twenty-eight more days of suchlike Justice he shuffles through a series of doors to the outside. An icy breeze descends from concrete hexagons segmented by strips of dark glass. Though spring is here it feels colder, as though the outside has been altered by what occurred within, like someone left a giant freezer open.

In older times Justice was less subtle and secretive but no less the object of mirth. Crowds gathered to watch a good wheeling. Convicts had their ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, and shoulders smashed to pulp by a sledgehammer before being braided into a wheel and left to die. It could take days, attesting to the craven defiance of the human spirit. One droll eyewitness described a victim as “a puppet with four tentacles, like a sea monster of raw, slimy and shapeless flesh.” The humor of *Don't drop the soap* has distinguished medieval forebears.

“Do you know what the weather's supposed to be?” Nelson asks a young woman smoking a cigarette. She's frail and wretched and the suspicion in her eyes is there to stay. “Have you heard the temperature?”

“It's gonna be cold 'til June. You can bet on that forecast.”





## TWELVE

### *Land Ho!*

A wounded creature staggers behind Vicki. Stitched together by absent-minded creators who added limbs and organs in installments, her worldview was clumsy under ideal circumstances, stumbling from one day to the next with great effort. The sight of something terrifying and inexplicable at Duncan's place shot it in the chest, disabling her ability to separate the possible from the impossible, abandoning her to a landscape of twisted wreckage.

In need of a familiar place, refusing to admit that in the wake of what she's seen there aren't any, she heads for Java Junction. If others see it there will be strength in numbers, collective wisdom, or at least the underrated collective ignorance. She orders a straight black coffee. The girl behind the counter stares at her.

"That's the dark stuff all the fancy things are poured into." With both hands she sips her drink and watches her reflection in the window. Bad strategy. He'll be able to see in but she can't see out. "Do you mind if I sit here?" she says to a slovenly man resting his face in his hands. Without a laptop he'd look homeless.

"You!" says Tyler. "Yes I mind." A search from Jobs.com vanishes when he closes a browser. "That disguise doesn't fool me."

She sits across from him and tries to discern faces on the shapes in the street. "I'm being followed. He's not wearing a shirt. Long hair. Leather pants."

“What are you up to? If you spill anything on me I’ll press charges. I do not consent to being filmed or taped.”

She leans across the table and squeezes his hands. “I think I’m losing my mind.”

“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice—How dumb do you think I am?” As he watches her bite her lip, longing and rage become despair, the way blue and red make brown. “What a terrible thing to do to a man. For shame.”

“I’m sorry. It doesn’t feel like it was me who did it.”

“It was you alright. Only you had long blond hair then.” He crosses his arms and leans back. “Now someone’s after you. Is that what I’m supposed to believe? Then you’ll ask for my protection. Then what? I won’t fall for this anymore. Tell your boss I’ll be working full time on him now. I’ve neglected him. I’ve rolled with his punches and played defense, but no more.” He finishes a smoothie and pounds the table. “You should read my emails. Duncan hacked my Supermail account. My brother-in-law says if I ever contact my sister again he’ll kill me with his bare hands. My aunt says she’s praying for me. That should give you some idea of the beast you’re working for. Was he angry about the land in Nevada? ... Okay, how does he get you to fake tears? The FBI says you can’t fake those. Do you visualize him in a Speedo?”

“Something’s happening to me. I never wanted to work for him. I’m a hair stylist. I don’t know why I agreed to do that to you.”

“How much did he pay you?”

“Nothing. No money.” She stops. What she’s about to say is impossible. “He gave me gift certificates for pizza, but it wasn’t a payment. I met this loser in a bar and he took me to see his bobblehead collection and—It doesn’t make any sense.”

“What a charmer. Did you happen to notice if there were any missing heads?”

She nods. “Do you know where they are?”

He smiles and cocks his head, not examining her from a different angle so much as revealing another side. “Ask to see the

pictures. The nonnegotiable terms of their safe return haven't changed. The heads will be reunited with the bodies and all can bobble, when Duncan buys Tyler three cases of Pabst bottles."

"Is that what this is about? You took his stupid little bobble-heads and now the two of you are practically killing each other?"

"You might want to think about the stupid little shooting that led to the First World War. Fighting for honor isn't stupid. There's also a metaphysical dimension here, but don't ask Duncan about it. His mind doesn't process *why* questions, only *how* ones. All he knows is tactics."

"This is the most childish thing I've ever seen in my entire life."

"The word you want is *primordial*. If you're looking for a rational basis, Aristotle said that for a punishment to be just it has to fit the crime. My pranks are always proportionate to the ones he's played on me."

"You're trying to excuse juvenile behavior."

"I'm telling you about an absolute standard. Where do you think it comes from? Nine senile judges in Washington? A group of starry-eyed Enlightenment thinkers? Some academic in an ivory tower masturbating over *The Communist Manifesto*? Sorry, but those opinions are wrong in the way that two and two don't equal six. I doubt Duncan explained this, I doubt he could, but we're in the midst of—"

"Who the hell is Duncan and what does any of this have to do with me?"

Is it the desperation in her eyes that tells Tyler she's sincere, or the debauched luxury of no longer giving a damn? After his supervisor's tour de force about the heartbreak of unrequited love online, after the security guard escorted him from the premises and handed him a nickel and said, "You can always give blood in a pinch," he finds himself liberated from the chains binding most men. If such things can happen in this world, what value can it have? Only a fool would care about it.

"Duncan is a lazy, unprincipled slob," he says. "We're not supposed to bring outsiders in. You might want to remind him of that."

"He says you involved his family at a funeral. Now anything goes."

"The only blood member of his family at that fiasco was dead. And the deceased regarded his spawn with appropriate regret. Trojan should have approached him with an offer to be their spokesman. It's amazing how an only child can still be a black sheep. Have you come to negotiate with me? He has to deliver the cases in the nude, waving his underwear as a white flag. That hasn't changed."

"How old were you when this started, ten?"

"Why are you asking me all this? What do you want? He might stoop to involving others. I won't."

She puts her hands on the table and examines them. When our wits betray us where can we turn? Why should the faculties of others, the same fragile instruments navigating the same tempestuous voyage, be considered reliable? She takes a deep breath and says, "I came here because I just saw Jim Morrison at Duncan's place. He said he loved me."

Tyler rests his chin on his fists and watches the other patrons converse with phones and gaze at laptops and fiddle with gizmos. This is too strange and subtle for his adversary, but tremendous caution is warranted when plotting the trajectory of a desperate man's deeds.

"That isn't bad news. How's the ol' Lizard King doing?"

"He's dead."

"Obviously not. I'm assuming it was Morrison circa 1968. I don't even want to think about how he'd look today."

"It was him exactly as he looks on my cell."

"Why are you afraid? Morrison was a sensitive guy. Ask him to read some poetry. He wanted to be remembered as a poet, not a singer. Did he smell like booze?"

"I'm completely serious."

"Did you drink anything with Duncan? Eat anything? Smoke anything?"

"No. I wanted to watch his bobbles. I think."

"He's not above slipping something to a woman. I suspect he'd have to. What do you mean *watch*? Does he put on shows? Does he play with them?"

"I sit in a recliner and he—" The coffee shop begins to spin. She puts her head on the table. "He tells me about them?"

"Are you asking me? What's wrong?"

He watches her sob, helpless as all men when faced with this spectacle, encumbered with the pragmatic mindset that there must be a hidden cause he needs to remove, in the way a sink can be unclogged. "C'mon, take it easy," he says, checking to see if others are noticing his inability to fix the drain, the concern for her misery second to his fear of appearing inept. "What did he do to you?"

"I don't know what's happening to me. I'm scared to death."

"There's a few things you deserve to know. Duncan might look pitiful, but he's extremely dangerous. He needs to win at all costs. Before going missing in action, the other member of the feuding factions knocked him on his ass. Ever since, Duncan's been lashing out at me."

"What happened?"

"He lost the most important things in his life in one fell swoop."

"Bobbleheads are the most important things in his life? Is he insane?"

"He lost a killer job, a sweet condo, his standing in the community, and the right to leave his home for a few months. That's when he started collecting them."

"And you decapitated a few. You kicked him when he was down."

"It's a long story. I'm not the bad guy."

"This is the stupidest thing in the history of stupidity."

"This is about honor. It doesn't come without revenge. And revenge comes in many flavors, from silly to deadly."

"Duncan says it's about art."

"Was that the *Mona Lisa* you did to me or something by Monet?"

"I think you're supposed to be Don Quixote." She accepts a napkin to dry her tears. "Why don't you guys fight a duel, or have one of those racing contests where you drive at each other until someone veers away at the last second, or play Russian roulette?"

"Those would be fine with me. But I don't trust him. I'd get shot in the ass if we fought a duel."

"Are there any rules to this ... whatever it is?"

"Duncan's not following any. He probably thinks of you as collateral damage. How often do you see him?"

She closes her eyes and she's putting down the phone at work and telling Kelly she's taking a half day. She walks three blocks and goes through the park. The statue of General Kazuczynski bends and morphs like it's melting in the sun, as though losing a valiantly waged battle against impermanence itself. The earth diminishes beneath her like some punctured dirigible and she's about to fall and—*Look up. Don't watch your feet. They know where they're going.* A Canadian flag flaps against the pole outside the Maple Leaf Hockey Pub. The sky so blue. So blue. An armada of clouds drifts toward her and she waits like some modern Montezuma expecting gods or ancestors or omens. When they pass she walks on toward the blue, quickening her pace not from a deficit of agency but an abundance.

"There's a shabby duplex, fourth from the corner on Oakland Avenue," she says, clenching her fists as if they hold the rope to some epistemic anchor. "It has a tall wooden fence. *Pervert* is painted on it. There's a fountain in the backyard filled with some horrible-smelling blue gunk."

"I can't believe he hasn't cleaned that out. See what I mean about lazy? I had the contents of a Porta John dumped in there after Summerfest. Why should I bother if he doesn't care?"

Tyler watches the other denizens of Java Junction, compares their Wiffle Ball lives to his. What's the difference? Here they sit, diverted from diversions by diversions, tweeting about the tweets of people who are famous for being famous. And he sits among them, as though all roads lead to Rome, as though all gutters drain to it. Can a man have a meaningful life in a vacuum, or have the gadget-obsessed hordes despoiled the preconditions, draining all depth?

Inching through the dark corridors of her memory and stumbling about like a hoarder with vertigo, Vicki says, "The unit on the bottom has an eviction sign on the door."

"I paid their rent in full for three months. The members of Succubus Disembowelment are turning it into a recording studio. He can't kick someone out because he doesn't like their music."

"That's *your* band?"

"I helped them find a place to rehearse. My taste in music is a bit more old fashioned. How does Duncan like them?"

"He says the trick is not minding."

Tyler massages his temples. "He's lying. He has to be. The problem with bogus religions like Stoicism is that they promote an attitude only the founders had the capacity for, then they hold it up as an ideal for everyone. Duncan doesn't have the right stuff for detached indifference. Neither do I. Does the band still sound awful and loud?"

"It's the worst thing I've ever heard."

"Maybe he's used to it. I should call the bagpipe player and see if he still needs a place to practice. What does Duncan's flat look like?"

"I go upstairs and—" The image bends and blurs and whirls down a drain. Her mouth gapes like a fish kissing its reflection.

She scrunches her eyes, trying to capture the view, to click a slippery button on a defective camera.

"Are you alright? You just came from there. Do you see him every day?" Tyler scowls. "You're not involved with him, are you?"

"Hell no."

"Does he seem depressed?"

"Yeah. He feels bad about being fat and bald and having skinny legs."

A blissful moan escapes Tyler. The whites of his eyes flash. "Does he ever complain about social issues, problems fitting in with the community?"

"Why do I go there ever?"

"What is it you want me to do? I can't call him. Our last attempt at a peace conference made things worse."

The dark window reflects laptops bright and nebulous and scattered like galaxies drifting away from the point of their cataclysmic expulsion. Ghosts of the Java Junction patrons sustain their ghostly selves with ghostly drinks. More vivid and real if only by degree, their counterparts inside ignore the dark medium echoing them. Vicki lowers her head and keeps her eyes on the door. If a shirtless Morrison walks in should she hide or buy him a deluxe mocha frappuccino and say that "Land Ho" is as underrated as "Light My Fire" is overrated?

"Why would I do something mean and disgusting for a stranger and then not even think about it?" she says. "This doesn't make any sense. I wouldn't do what I did to you for a million dollars."

Tyler studies her, mourning the death of the woman who laughed at his jokes, the one he almost tasted bliss with. Is this the treacherous spy who betrayed and humiliated him or a confused and hysterical penitent? Will he recognize or even like "Tamara" if he finds her? "Do you know where you live?" he says.

"Yeah."



“And you had no problem finding Java Junction.”

“Obviously not. It’s just tough to think straight when you’re scared shitless. How would you feel if a dead person said he loved you?”

“It would be the best thing that’s happened to me all day. So you get an urge to see his collection, then you do things you normally wouldn’t.”

“He calls first. I don’t know what we talk about.”

“Can you take a couple days off work?”

“I guess I have to.”

He shakes a finger at all of the Tamaras seated across from him, every permutation her nature allows. In a voice both outraged and urgent he says, “I can help, but it’s not unconditional.”

She looks into eyes more black than brown, eyes furious or intense or crazy or all of the above. How forlorn is your plight when the only man who can save you from Jim Morrison is a man you betrayed?



## THIRTEEN

### *Not So Good Vibrations*

Is Satan deaf? When did he announce that he prefers the horrendous noise downstairs to jazz or bluegrass? Duncan rolls two foam plugs into thin stems and gently inserts them in his ears. The character portrayed by Goethe would have detested morons scraping three chords and growling, as would the sophisticate described in “Sympathy for the Devil.” The Lord of Darkness should be offended by the feeble-minded art dedicated to him. If he’s hoping to win converts this will fail spectacularly. The adolescent white males who partake will abandon it as soon as their testosterone levels decrease.

Duncan adds a crumpled Old Style to the ones beside the couch and picks up a book. On the cover, four young women in varying states of undress surround a grizzled old man wearing a silk smoking jacket. In one hand he holds a tuning fork; the other gives a thumbs-up. His wink radiates depravity in a way few things do. Duncan rereads a portion that won’t sink in.

. . .

This is the important chapter, the one you’ve been waiting for. As soon as we extract this rotten misconception the rest is sweet, sweet gravy. What is a conscience and why can’t hypnosis override it? That’s what you’re asking. It’s the first article of faith

everyone is taught. Hypnosis can't make someone do what she wouldn't do under normal circumstances.

That, my friends, is nonsense.

I encourage you to rip this page out and tape it dead center on your headboard. Peek at it from time to time in the following months. Try not to giggle. The guest underneath you will think you're laughing at her.

Ask yourself something. Why do people flock to hypnotists to quit smoking or drop thirty pounds? *Because they could never in a million years do these things under normal circumstances and are therefore trying extraordinary ones.* They are looking for an injection of willpower. Likewise, how many people would normally dance around a stage clucking like a chicken?

Here's an excellent definition of a hypnotist. *A hypnotist is someone who puts you in an altered state of consciousness and tricks you into doing what you normally wouldn't, like going without booze or cigarettes or ice cream.* I wonder why this obvious definition isn't more popular. (We'll get to that if they let me live long enough to finish typing this book and send it to my publisher. In the unlikely event you are reading this, I suggest locking your doors before proceeding. The Powers That Be have a vested interest in keeping this information from you.)

The article of faith about the Invincible Conscience has gained currency for one reason. It discourages the common man from availing himself of the awesome power of Vibrato Hypnosis. Compared to the technique you've been reading about in this book, normal hypnosis is a pistol next to an atom bomb. "The potential for evil is too great with Vibrato Hypnosis," they say. "Its use must be restricted." Sure, *restricted to them*. I'm not one to speak of conspiracies, but when all the literature in a given field begins with an asinine lie that's demonstrably false you can draw your own conclusions.

Granted, some men might use it to achieve non-humanitarian ends. They might amass a pliant dating pool that would have made King Tamba green with envy, or ask the bank

teller to round up to the nearest \$1,000, but the same can be said of any technology. Nothing is good or evil in itself. It depends how it's used.

The reader who's tempted to misuse Vibrato Hypnosis should consider the enervating side-effects of complete satiation. Historic precedents abound. Worse than the paralyzing fear of assassination, languor debilitated many of the Roman emperors. Be forewarned, there are more than a few recorded instances of men who mastered the techniques in this book and fell victim to the same melancholia after indulging their whims too readily.

One case involved an unemployed gentleman who sauntered into crowded nightclubs wearing a bathrobe and slippers. He'd leave with a gorgeous girl under each arm, another to hold the door, and one to lug the takeout beer. Back at his parent's basement the girls would chip in for Chinese food after the festivities. *How could that be a problem?* you're wondering. Here's how. We evolved to surmount new obstacles. The gratification of his every sensual desire imbalanced his endocrine system, causing a crushing sense of ennui and bouts of constipation.

. . .

Duncan drops the book. "Ennui? The poor bastard. I'd sell my soul for some of that ennui, even to the devil those idiots downstairs are summoning."

. . .

Granted, it took several ecstatic years of indulgence to reach this nadir. Fortunately he learned a valuable lesson (King Midas anyone?) and went on to use Vibrato Hypnosis in moderation, treating its awesome power with the respect it deserves. You've been warned.

Let's get back to the existence of an Invincible Conscience. The first, second, and third thing you need to understand is how absurd this is. Consider the traditional fairy tale. All humans

have a miniature Mr. Spock inside their head who calls out the coordinates of Right and Wrong in a booming voice.

Alright, let's compare and contrast the moral geography of the Ik tribe, the practitioners of Jainism, the Iroquois and Apaches, the Quakers, the Japanese army that invaded Nan King, the Russian army that entered Berlin in 1945, and the early Christians who wouldn't defend themselves against lions. How unanimous were the decisions of the timeless Inner Judge who acted through them? Boy, he sure is moody.

Ascribing the same transmundane sense to the members of these groups is no sillier than saying they all had a magical third eye but each saw something different. One group saw ultraviolet colors, another saw dust mites, one saw auras, another saw through clothing. "Step right up, ladies and gentleman. It's the same incredible innate power but your mileage will vary." That's what we're supposed to believe. This concept is nonsense in neon and it's time to unplug that old sign. It's attracting flies.

Maybe, and this is me waxing philosophic, mankind has a conscience in some grand communal sense. Individuals rise up every generation and decry slavery or child labor and their contributions raise the bar for us all. But this lofty and rarefied type isn't what we're concerned with.

Even if the garden variety conscience *does* exist, it's an underachiever. Milgram's experiment warrants serious consideration. The test subjects weren't even hypnotized and they delivered what they thought were powerful shocks to someone in the next room when told to do so by an authority figure. They had no problem as long as they were following orders. It's my contention that Milgram could have told them pushing the button would vaporize a nation and they still would have obeyed. (Some days I wonder how our species came to be classified as vertebrates.)

Here's the lesson for our purposes. By altering the parameters of responsibility you can make anyone do anything. For a hypnotist, as we discussed in chapters four and five, this is much easier. You can mold the contours of what the subject believes she

is doing. To cite the case just mentioned, the girls weren't greeting a bathrobe-wearing bum. It was the man of their dreams.

. . .

Duncan belches and stretches and turns to an appendix titled "Second Thoughts? Don't Be Silly." The author must have struggled with his phantom conscience too.

. . .

Could Vibrato Hypnosis have unintended results or snowball effects? Well of course. But what area of life is free of these? Getting out of bed has snowball effects. If you hit on a girl there's no telling what the consequences could be. We've all watched in horror as men who seemed perfectly rational walked down the aisle of doom. Vibrato Hypnosis, like all things, is subject to the unpredictable ways of the world.

Granted, there have been a few "professional" criticisms made by so-called experts. As I'm about to demonstrate, these carry the least weight. In full disclosure, I was once a licensed psychiatrist and psychologist. When I tried to use Vibrato Hypnosis to help my patients, to empower them and get them back on the track of enjoying life, it first led to censor from my colleagues, then the revocation of my licenses, then death threats. My main motivation in writing this book is so all I've learned isn't lost in the event I succumb to an "accident." Who would want to kill an old nutjob like me? What industry stands to lose trillions if non-medicinal cures for depression and anxiety are found?

I digress. You turned to this appendix for some perspective, some idea of where your innocent use of hypnosis stands in the big scheme of things. Consider the pointless, bank-draining, spine-softening hogwash that psychologists inflict on the downtrodden who flock to them. Generations of perfectly normal people have abandoned their common sense, self-reliance, and dignity to seek the guidance of charlatans. Psychologists caution

against Vibrato Hypnosis for the same reason witch doctors hate the Red Cross.

Don't get me started about those other "experts." What's the difference between a psychiatrist and the infamous lobotomy zealot, Walter Freeman? (That's a rhetorical question.) There was no money in selling ice picks and scalpels so they switched to peddling drugs. If magic pills for depression did not exist it would be necessary to invent colorful placebos and expensive brain disablers, which is exactly what they did because that's all they have.

You just want to have a little fun, put your girlfriend(s) in the mood a little quicker, make your friends laugh at a party, maybe settle some old scores. Where's the harm? They are the ones creating dope fiends, not you. The men who would judge you routinely poison children with noxious drugs. (Did ADHD arrive in a meteor in 1980? Where did it come from?) How do they know there won't be deleterious long-term effects on developing brains? Because a six-week study sponsored by the company that makes the drug says so!

Tinkering with the most complicated machine ever made, they are like troglodyte mechanics tuning a Rolls Royce with boulders and clubs. Their condemnation is worth less than nothing. Besides, how are you going to entice strangers to stare at a tuning fork? Someone would only do that if she already consented to being hypnotized.

. . .

Renewed by the consolation of philosophy, a gag to the shrill though imaginary voice of his conscience, Duncan finishes a beer and stares at the ceiling. "He's right. Compared to those monsters I'm not doing anything. But he doesn't go into any detail about what to do when things go wrong."

There was the rub. Difficulties with his subjects proved more exasperating than do-it-yourself projects gone awry. For those you can always call an expert to fix your mess. Who could have

foreseen how Blanca the cleaning lady, so vivacious and pretty, so susceptible to bobbling, would respond to the man of her dreams?

Duncan interrupted her while she was gathering empty pizza boxes scattered on the floor like bear traps. Working only five hours a month for him, she had to focus on the most conspicuous messes, the ones likely to kill him.

“Blanca? Keychain number four please.”

She squinted and folded her hands. Her cheeks flushed. “Clooney! That is you?”

“Yes Blanca, it’s me. You are so beautiful. I came here to see you.”

“Why you are short?”

“I’m—All famous actors are. Tom Cruise. Matt Damon. Those other guys. Tall men don’t look handsome on the big screen.”

“Why you are bald, Clooney? In movies you have hair.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “None of that matters. The only thing that matters is us.”

She hugged him but began crying. “My daughter sick, Clooney. She need medicine. We have no money. Please! You so very rich.”

He fell back. That damned imaginary sound between his ears started to howl, no doubt the result of thoughts gusting through the lofty peaks of his intellect—*not* from a conscience. “Blanca, I’m here for you. Has anyone told you how beautiful you are?” He put his arms around her.

“Clooney no,” she said. “My husband taller than you. Is angry all the time. Can you give me money? Please Clooney.”

He kissed her. She slapped him. Hard. And again. Apparently the man of her dreams could not prevail over the reality of her wedding vows.

Blanca’s replacement, sweet little Eligia, showed a healthy curiosity about the bobble collection. Unlike 70% of the population



who are impervious to Vibrato Hypnosis (such as Tyler: thanks a lot, Cosmic Pie Tossler), she had a pronounced receptivity.

“When I say ‘Keychain number four please,’ I will become your ultimate fantasy lover, the one person on earth you dream about more than any other, the one you can’t and won’t resist. Do you understand, Eligia?”

So innocent the big brown eyes. So perfect the disparity between her waist and hips, as though Mother Nature had devoted all eternity prior to eking out the 0.7 ratio.

“Yes, I understand.”

Duncan gloated, knowing he’d removed all ambiguity. “That’s good. I’m going to bring you out of the trance now.”

She was singing to herself and scraping toothpaste off the bathroom mirror when he called from the bedroom. “Keychain number four please.”

Upon adjusting to the psychedelic splendor of his black light posters, her eyes revealed the transitory nature of innocence and how bestial craving is a thing of greater beauty. She dove at him and wrestled him to the bed and they rolled and writhed until she screamed.

“What the hell’s wrong?”

On the edge of the bed, her hand trembling as it pointed between his legs, she said, “Angelina Jolie, you are a boy?” And she ran from his apartment and never returned.

. . .

“I should have them fill out a questionnaire before hypnotizing them,” says Duncan, cursing the logistical problems. Aside from the language barrier, the answers he most needs would look more than a little strange on an application. He rests the book on his face to roam the roads not taken with Blanca, Eligia, and Vicki.

Awareness of his surroundings peels away a layer at a time—the tremors from the flat below, the softness of the couch, his need to urinate—until a monad of pure thought remains.

Perhaps it too consists of layers. So *why is my non-existent conscience wailing like a banshee? Why should I feel bad about strangers experiencing mild side-effects from an old parlor trick?*

"Because it's wrong."

*Says who?*

A choir of Van Munch screamers appears in the void. A conductor stands before them waving a headless bobble as a baton, not to guide them but to intensify the chaos of their shrieks. Applause from an audience unseen sounds like coins poured into a can. The choir evanesces in silver vapor, dispersed by the wind.

He wakes on the floor of the church where his father's funeral was held. Stars like headlights illumine the stained glass windows, tie-dying the marble interior. On the ceiling is a fresco of the 1982 Brewers. In addition to the giant beer mug Bernie Brewer slid into after home runs, the expansive outfield includes Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and either Neptune or Uranus. Duncan stands and looks for his favorite window.

St. Michael trampling the devil has been replaced with a dazzling animation: his first girlfriend, Terri, lies on an inflatable mattress in the plywood fort he and Tyler built. Her head bobs on a golden pool of hair and her feet point in incongruous directions. Red-nailed toes curl and skinny legs twitch in response to Duncan the Younger's bumbling but determined search for the G spot based on a map he'd studied in *Penthouse*. Synchronized to the tremors from her epicenter, plastic milk crates crammed with a library of porn and the ill-gotten booty from liquor cabinet raids and shoplifted smokeless tobacco appear and diminish in the quivering glow of a propane lantern. Duncan the Elder pays his respects. *What happened to you? Rest in peace.*

Unsteadily he walks to the next window and watches in stunned delight. Nelson and his bride enter the Jamaican Hilton. Their reflections shimmy on brass elevator doors while they stand at the desk and Nelson announces his reservation for the honeymoon suite. An elderly man in the lobby puts down his newspaper and smiles at his wife. The clerk checks the registry

and goes in a backroom and returns with another clerk who says, "All the changes have been made to your reservation. I'll get you a ride to your accommodations in Kingston."

Nelson looks stunned but says nothing. The bride laughs and covers her mouth, probably thinking it's part of a surprise. They sit in the back of a red, yellow, and green-striped hospital-ity van holding hands, watching tourists in floppy hats, listening to the ubiquitous reggae music: all the same yet not the same, the bass a cosmic heartbeat. When they arrive at the new motel they see two men asleep on the sidewalk next to the entrance. A sign in the window lists "howerly rayts."

Duncan puts his hands on his head and steps back. As often as he and Tyler wondered what this must have been like, never in their wildest dreams did they imagine the emotionless mask of Nelson's face and the poisonous scorn in the bride's voice. "Your parents paid for this shithole? *This* is our wedding gift from them? Was the Hilton too good for me?"

From the next window voices cry Duncan's name. Filling the glass are the pictures he's been receiving of his bobble's kidnapped heads: Darth Vader wedged between hairy buttocks, Mick Jagger floating in a toilet above a mighty deuce, a gloved hand clutching a ball peen hammer above Jack Kerouac. The three of them scream, "Help! He's torturing us! Save us, Duncan. Why won't you make him stop?"

Duncan covers his ears and runs to the next window. It shows him standing in a church looking at a window depicting him standing in a church looking at a window depicting him standing in a church and it makes him dizzy and he staggers to the next one.

It's his backyard long after Tyler or Nelson soiled the fountain he'd purchased at Stein's Garden Center to impress potential renters, the one he'd spent a weekend assembling in the broiling sun. Most of the grass has been scorched by what must have been a fantastic bonfire. A fresh mound protrudes in the garden and red and blue lights flash beyond the fence.

He turns away from the remaining windows and puts his hands behind his back and returns to the first one, to marvel at every nuance, to study the interrelationship between details that could not be fully absorbed or appreciated in a century. All moments are singularities, but some are more singular than others.

Bathed in the window's kaleidoscopic light, an old woman in a tattered smock watches intently. Terri's hand disappears into a vertical blur while Duncan the Younger grimaces and moans. Terri examines his expressions like some novice healer relieving an invalid of an agonizing infirmity, checking to ensure her cure is working. The old woman points at the window with one hand and makes strange gestures with the other. Sporadic wisps of white hair drape a tattoo covering her head, a spindly arachnid of unknown taxonomy. She turns to Duncan with silver eyes lit from within. "Everyone's best window contains erotica. This one is marvelous."

"That summer was the best time of my life. I had no idea."

"Of necessity some period has to be. Did you think it would be when you're ninety, pissing in a diaper?" She starts to laugh but no sound accompanies the heaving of her shoulders.

"Something abducted those moments when I wasn't looking, killed and dumped them by the side of the road."

"No, they died of natural causes."

"Murder is a natural cause. Are you some kind of nun?"

"Just an old hag with a spider on her head. Why don't you look at the rest of the windows?"

"Do I have the power to change the ones in the future or are they a done deal?"

"If you have such a power, not seeing them will have consequences. Perhaps it's better to watch reruns of an old handjob."

The color drains from the windows and floats away in crimson clouds, attracting sharks the size of buses. They circle the church in a frenzy. One rams the side. Plaster falls from the ceiling.

"Megalodons are extinct," says Duncan.

“Don’t let the fancy names of eras fool you. An orange and black chain of days and nights connects you to that time with your girlfriend. A slightly longer one connects you to the Cenozoic.”

“What difference does it make? Both those times are gone. Like they were never here.”

The woman clutches his hands. “Look on the bright side. Remember when you were little and played a game where you tried to think of Nothing but you never could because some thought always popped in your head? Now it’s all you can think of.”

Another blast to the exterior sends a chandelier down on her. A shark torpedoes the main doors, blasting them open. Its ugly head lodges in the entrance. Jaws with teeth the size of baseball diamonds chomp and chomp in case a snack wanders by. Water fills the church and bizarre-looking fish burst through the windows and rotate below the Brewers’ lineup on the ceiling.

Duncan swims around jagged glass and up through warm dark water, past an armored Dunkleosteus and a long-necked Plesiosaur and other critters he and Tyler once searched for in a dry creek bed as youngsters. He kicks his legs until he’s a mighty frog millions of years ahead of these doomed brutes.

*Do they ever think about what it’s like above the surface? Maybe they think it’s heaven, the opposite of the carnage down here. Idiots.*

He soars out of the water and flies through the air and lands on his couch and has to urinate so bad his lower back is throbbing. He removes his earplugs and eyes them suspiciously. Maybe they contain some toxic chemical that leached into his brain, causing the nightmare. Downstairs the band is playing a song about sacrificing virgins and drinking their blood from a chalice. “Those thugs wouldn’t know a chalice if they tripped over one,” he says. “Or a virgin.”



## FOURTEEN

### *The DXM Man*

If only rubbing your belly made you less hungry, the way other drives can be fooled. Wretched and indignant like an exiled king, Nelson stomps on cans beside a Dumpster. As the hole in his stomach expands and deepens, more of him descends. Some never fall into this pit deeper than their ankles. Many never see the surface. Choose your parents carefully.

A scrawny young man approaches, flailing his arms and jerking his head like some stick figure animated by a sloppy cartoonist. A mushroom afro erupts from the energy. His first attempts at conversation fail, not from a language barrier but due to the speed of the transmission.

“Sorry,” says Nelson, “I don’t speak tweeker. Do I look like I have any money? Panhandling will bring in more revenue from an upscale community.”

“I don’t want your money. If you steal me some cough syrup I’ll give you five bucks. Cold Zap and Grandma Ruth’s are the best, but anything with Dextromethorphan is fine.”

“I’d say if your cold isn’t gone by now it’s here to stay.”

The DXM man emits a squeal of a laugh. “Crazy people are crazy. I’ll give you five bucks. It comes in pill form too. C’mon, you know how many cans you need to crush to make that much? They won’t let me in Walmart. Sometimes I forget to pay.”

"Who the hell are you calling crazy? You're begging a stranger to get you pills. Did you plan on winding up like this? When daddy tucked you in at night, before he played with your wee wee, did he say you could grow up to be anything in the whole wide world, even a pill freak? And you did. You shot for the stars, big dreamer."

With great exertion the DXM man puts his hands in his pockets. One escapes and slaps his thigh. He holds his face still for seconds at a time but no eye contact is forthcoming. On his forehead protrudes a thick brow containing either a mound of bone or a keen intellect requiring constant distractions from its flyspeck significance in the Big Scheme. The former is not without virtues.

"You were born crazy," he says. "I choose to get high. Big difference. Get a big bottle of Cold Zap and we'll share."

"You don't look like you're having fun. The fact that you're *choosing* to do this makes you every bit as nuts as the people you mock. Think about that. Try putting your hand on your chin. Sometimes that helps. Your insanity is making you take pills that make you even crazier."

"And yours is making you go into banks all over town and ask what the temperature is. You're as nuts as catwoman. I heard you fuck her."

Nelson falls back as though punched by an invisible adversary and knocks over his Hefty bag. Crushed cans tumble onto the pavement. Having departed an inferno of hydrogen and helium eight minutes earlier, photons splash off them like gold dust. Some day the inferno will surge and incinerate all life on the face of the earth. This has implications for the importance of things now. Few contemplate them.

"Heard you bang the catwoman," says the DXM man, bobbing up and down like Angus Young. "That makes you the catman. How about the cats?"

Nelson tackles him. "What did you say about the ... about what I do?" he yells, as if his very soul is lost and he has no recompense for its new keeper, only idle threats.

"I was kidding, man. You're not crazy. Let me up. I'm sorry."

Nelson stands but keeps a foot on the DXM man's chest. He crosses his arms like he's freezing or fevered and with great difficulty says, "I won't hurt you if you tell me what you said about the ... about what you said."

"It's not me who's saying it. The goldilips gang under the bridge says it. The high school junkies say it. The meth whores at the Hideaway Inn say it. They all do. It's no big deal." He starts his laugh, more an avian distress signal than a primate response to humor.

Nelson picks him up and shakes the emaciated contents of his army parka. "What do they say?"

Stuttering like a skipping CD and jerking like an overzealous dervish, the DXM man says, "That you ask every bank if their thermometer is accurate, that you're crazy. I don't believe it. I don't really care. *Crazy* is just a word. I can try to help if you get me some cold meds."

Nelson let's him go and steps away. The ground beneath his feet no longer feels solid but exactly how a happenstance cluster of particles ought to feel. On a wall in the alley his shadow looms like a cave only he may enter. "Why am I doing this?" he asks the dark shape, pleading. Its creator could be mistaken for a great spotlight beaming directly on him, though billions of other suns point at empty stages and trillions more illumine nothing at all.

The DXM man sits and wraps his arms around his knees and constrains his movements to a mild rocking. "Everyone needs a hobby. It's not half as bad as collecting dead cats. Sniffing paint isn't a good way to spend your time either. Who are they to judge you? Those Hideaway whores have diseases that haven't been discovered yet."

"I never used to care about it," says Nelson, his face ashen as though a sudden glimpse of his reflection turned him to stone.



"Did you ever work in a bank? Maybe they screw with the reading to influence customers. Wouldn't surprise me if people are more likely to take out loans if it's warmer."

"Every time I think about it—It's not *worry*. It's more like freaking out."

"Panic attacks?"

"I guess that's what you'd call them."

"Then you better stay away from Dextromethorphan. What you need is some Seroquel. That stuff will mellow your ass out for days. How old are you?"

"Over forty."

"How long have you been worrying about the temperature?"

"A year or two, I think. It's like I'm not fully aware I'm doing it, if that makes any sense. It's just become a regular part of my life, the main part."

"That's not normal. Schizo starts when you're young, early twenties."

"You a doctor?"

"I was a medic. Three tours of duty. Can you think of anything traumatic or way out of the ordinary that happened before you started doing this? Did you do any drugs with initials for names?"

"Those can cause it, reefer madness style?"

"Shit. I got a friend who hasn't left his mom's attic since he was discharged, won't throw anything out. He *had* an IQ in the 150s. Now he listens to techno all day and arranges the shit in his room so it fits in with the music. It makes perfect sense to him. You come over and he's all excited and he shows you this mess, tells you how the cigarettes and underwear spread on the floor correspond to the tune. He'll have the chairs turned a certain way with soda cans piled on them up to the ceiling: that's the bass. Then you have to guess what track it is. When you shake your head or take a wild guess he looks at you like you're nuts."

"What was he into?"

"DMT."

"Is that an Iraqi drug?"

"Dimethyltryptamine. Made in America. The businessman's trip. You can watch the rise and fall of a civilization in fifteen minutes."

"I prefer reading about them after the fact."

"We did so much when we came home. I got off light compared to him. Smart people don't *lose* it; they *get* it. But what they get isn't pretty, a gift that keeps on giving."

"I didn't do anything like that. No drugs."

"You sure? Never tripped? Not even once?"

"Never even smoked weed."

"Jesus. Anything stressful? You go to Iraq?"

"Nope. What did I miss?"

Instead of a happenstance tic from overburdened neurons, the DXM man's face evinces what appears to be an honest expression of deeply felt inner states. Revulsion. Hatred. Terror. "Nothing. You didn't miss nothing. What else you been up to? Were you stalking a weather girl?"

Nelson cocks his head and steps toward him. The DXM man raises trembling hands. "Straight up. I'm brainstorming with you."

Nelson turns and scrutinizes his shadow, the outline of a crime scene with no perpetrator in sight. But there can be only two suspects. "What happened to me? How could they make me care about this?"

"I'm no psychologist, but I've noticed that messed up situations mess people up."

"How about marriage?"

"I heard it's like being a POW only the food is better."

"The food was awful."

"Let's set you up with some Snoozeberries. You take enough of those you won't care if you're on fire."

"Will this involve my participation in non-procreative acts? I don't have any money."

The DXM man's laughter sounds like guitar feedback. "You've noticed how life on the road involves alternative occupations."

"Technically there's nothing alternative about it. There's a lot to be said for finishing college."

"But there's so many rewarding employment opportunities out here. I starred in a movie last week."

"The two old guys in a Lexus?" says Nelson.

"They asked you to audition?"

"My agent couldn't work out a deal. He said it would interfere with my lucrative singing career. One of the goldilips told me they're making snuff."

"I should be so lucky."

"Your guidance counselor should have warned you."

The DXM man chuckles. "Why didn't they ever show a full-blown, worst case, this-can-happen-to-you scenario?"

Nelson imagines the faceless man from the train standing in front of an auditorium of junior high students and trying to warn them about the dangers of drug abuse. "Look, it's Freddy Krueger's grandpa," says a punk in the front row, to the delight and admiration of his peers. Horrified teachers fail to quell the savage mob. "How do you chew tobacco?" shouts a wit slouched in the back. "Is your girlfriend Helen Keller?" and so on and so forth ad nauseum ad infinitum. Raw human nature, the active ingredient in teenagers, makes wolverines seem cuddly.

"You would have laughed," says Nelson. "You and your friends would have thrown coins on the stage and made farting noises and the whole room would have exploded in laughter."

"We had a lady come to our school who was in a wheelchair from drunk driving. Someone asked if she ever drove it when she was buzzed."

"Whistling in the cemetery makes beautiful music."

"We should get going. It's a long-ass walk."

"What is?"

"Here's the deal. You get me some Cold Zap. If you steal it you can keep the money. Then I'll take you to my buddy's house. He's got psych drugs. He won't take them because he can't see his music when he does. Do not laugh. Don't even smile. He's totally serious. This is his whole life. It's all he has. His mom will make us PBJs."

"She's not pissed at you for turning him into the Leonard Bernstein of the vegetable kingdom?"

"He's the one who wanted to enlist. The drugs are just the icing on a burnt cake. I didn't force him to do nothing. He was my best friend. I guess he still is, what's left of him. His mom wants him to find a job and get a girlfriend and go back to school. She thinks this is a stage he's going through. That's where she is on the spectrum of reality appreciation."

"Parents have a defense mechanism no amount of life can disable."

"Think of a song for him to design the room according to," says the DXM man. "If he offers you any drugs besides Seroquel, take them."

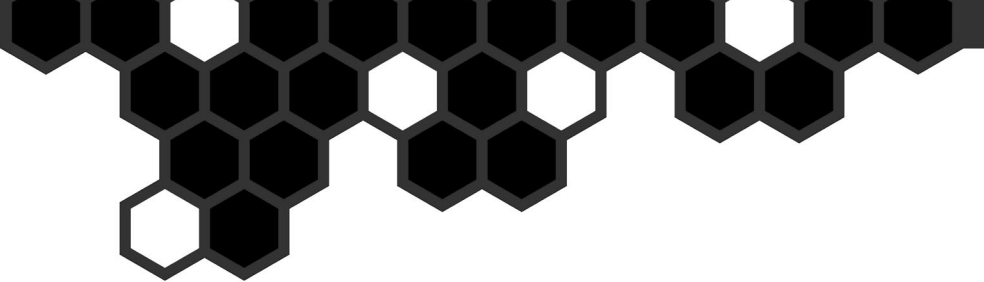
"I don't want that crap. Who know what it does."

"We can sell it. You need money, don't you? A man has to make a living."

"Work is good for the soul."

"Idle hands are the devil's tools."

"Work will set you free." Nelson throws his bag over his shoulder and the two set off like some apocalyptic Kris Kringle and his renegade marionette. The sun, no less a prognosticator than Nostradamus, spreads dark pits before them.



## FIFTEEN

### *In Search of Honor*

“What is that thing?” says Vicki.

“Groucho is a Presa Canario,” says Tyler, petting a colossus with the musculature of a powerlifter. The tail rotates like a propeller, increasing in rpm at each mention of its owner’s name. “They’re excellent watchdogs. I worry about Duncan breaking in. If Groucho ate him I’d have to put him down. It would kill me. I couldn’t do it. After I had his stomach pumped we’d go into hiding.”

“It’s like a gargoyle with fur. Did they breed a Pit Bull with a rhino?”

“He’s a perfect gentleman. Look, he wants to kiss you.”

“Does he lick his butt or anything?”

“Anything. Look me in the eye and say you wouldn’t. Don’t worry. We go by the three-minute rule. It’s been longer than that since he’s groomed anything.”

“That’s a new version of the three-minute rule.”

Tyler goes to the kitchen and returns with two cups of coffee. He glares at dust bunnies on the floor between Vicki’s feet. They merge and hover across the hardwood plains in search of food and mates as though ordained to arise from simple elements and increase in strength and complexity while avoiding that deadly predator, the Swiffer.

*It's not evolution*, says the theologian, awakened from dogmatic slumbers.

*But in a few months I'd have giant dust monsters*, thinks Tyler. *What would tons of funky chemicals and lightning and sunlight and volcanic percolations and who knows what else produce in billions of years?*

*An alpha male would dim the lights instead of worrying about this.*

"Is the coffee okay?"

"It's completely unlike anything at Java Junction," says Vicki.

"They sell the sizzle, not the steak. If you paid twenty bucks for this and heard it was grown by peasants in Greenland you'd swear it was the best you ever had."

"Are there peasants in Greenland?"

"Doesn't matter. As long as there's a paragraph on the package describing their tragic exploitation by greedy corporations it would fly off the shelves."

"Do you work in advertising?"

"I haven't ruled it out. I haven't ruled out picking coffee beans in Greenland either. Or tragically exploiting the tragic peasants."

They sip their coffee while another of the fuzzy ghosts approaches Vicki's feet and conjoins with strands of lint and hair. From nothing emerges strange beings no human could create. *What if I stopped cleaning?* wonders Tyler. He sees himself enslaved by boulder-sized tumbleweeds, serving them like some neo-aphid, shaving and scraping his skin in return for food while they build their empire. With a wet paper towel he deposits the up-and-coming overlord in the garbage.

"You don't have to clean for me. This place is nice. All dogs shed, especially the ones that aren't supposed to."

"I hate it when their fur forms angry mobs. Are you hungry?"

"No, just overwhelmed."

He sits beside her and massages Groucho's back. "It has to be hypnosis. Rophynol victims don't complain about being chased

by 1960s icons. I think he's done this before. It would explain other things."

"Is this good news or bad news?"

"It's better than being insane."

"How do you figure? What's the difference?"

"It's temporary. When he's forced to throw in the towel, undoing it will be one of the terms of surrender."

"You can't enjoy living like this. What are you waiting for, someone to die? Why don't the three of you call a truce?"

"We did. This is it."

"Who broke it?"

Tyler leans back and puts his hands behind his head and studies the crown molding. How can the same heart pump such discrepant humors through his veins: guilt, outrage at the wrongs he's suffered, lust for revenge. Always for revenge. As though it does not come from within but below, primal as lava, a geyser funneled through him at regular intervals until that day when the perfect eruption wipes away the past so he can start anew.

"Duncan and I thought that after Nelson was married he'd settle down. In retrospect that was a careless assumption."

"Is Nelson the one who started this?"

"Figuring out if Mr. Chicken preceded Mr. Egg isn't going to help. This has been going on too long. Once things are underway it doesn't matter."

"So it was you."

"It didn't suddenly start out of nowhere. It ..."

"Evolved?"

"I guess you could say that. Anyway, when Nelson and his wife split up he went on a rampage."

"What happened?"

"She was a sweet girl, but they were from different sides of the tracks and too young. Duncan and I got on with our lives. He landed an awesome job. I did ... alright."

"You agreed to stop acting like drunken frat boys?"

"There was no formal declaration. A couple years go by and I get a call. Duncan was more furious than I'd ever heard him. His Corvette had been stolen. It was returned a month later. To his swimming pool. Painted pink."

"Did you?"

"Absolutely not. But he didn't believe me. It's the kind of thing I would have done, drastic but tasteful. Nelson was playing us against each other, and not for the first time. So Duncan and I exchanged pranks for a while, nothing too serious. One night I get another call from him. He's at the police station. His boss found some pictures on his computer, bad ones."

"Yuck."

"One of the cleaners where he worked fit Nelson's description. He'd quit a few weeks before the bust."

"That's not a prank. That's more like attempted murder."

"The word is *vengeance*."

"What happened?"

"Possession is possession. He lost his job, got two years probation and six months of house arrest. His neighbors hounded him out of his condo and he has to register as a sex offender. I expected the ax to fall. Nelson must have hoped Duncan would blame me. But he knew I wouldn't do anything like that. He wanted us to team up and capture Nelson and put him in some kind of underground dungeon. He said we wouldn't let him out until he wrote the numbers one through one million in crayon, rotating the color of every digit. Nelson had a minor in mathematics. Duncan saw poetic justice in that."

Vicki puts her head in her hands. "What kind of sick freaks am I dealing with?"

"Wouldn't you be a little upset?"

"I wouldn't be in that position to start with."

"You've never wanted revenge? Ever? It's the heart's deepest longing."

"Peace on earth. Hello?"



"Not gonna happen. The best we can hope for is justice on earth. From time to time it's achievable. The main problem with revenge is predicting your opponent's next move. Too bad it's not more like checkers."

"The main problem is it's wrong."

"Hardly. Forgiveness is the flavor of the day. To the endangered minority concerned with honor and justice it's pathetic."

Tyler studies her for some sign of empathy, some comprehension of the magnitude of his endeavor. Reflected in her frightened eyes is not the wise theologian who holds forth during traffic jams. It's Manson decrying social inequality or Dahmer sharing a cooking recipe.

"I know some of this sounds weird," he says.

"Not at all. I'm sure it's happened to all my friends. They just never talk about it."

"Retribution isn't as straightforward as it used to be. Society's collapse had consequences. Revenge has become a relativistic mishmash."

"You're playing a game with no rules that you can't win."

"No, that's what most of mankind is doing."

"You didn't put this other guy in a dungeon, did you?" She heads to the door. The big dog follows.

"Of course not. When Duncan became obsessed with Operation One Million, I suggested a Yalta Conference. The more I think about what happened, and what you've been telling me, I'm convinced Duncan hypnotized Nelson."

"I'm surprised you didn't all run in with guns and start shooting."

"It was tense. We met in a crowded bar where we'd all be safe, Bobbleheadz on Lincoln Avenue."

Vicki gasps. "That's where I met Duncan."

"It was his idea. We agreed there'd be no apologies, no regrets, and no recriminations. We wanted to put an end to it. It was no longer possible to tell where we stood."

“Does the great honor code permit that?”

“Mock it all you want, but you can’t deny that America misses honor. That’s why we love movies about the mafia. It’s nostalgia. People no longer follow any codes of conduct. There’s vicarious satisfaction in watching men who do.”

“It’s because there’s no guilt from watching scumbags kill each other. How did the conference go?”

“The timing was bad. The day before, Duncan’s dad received all the newspaper clippings about his son’s legal problems. Nelson arranged them as a collage and mailed it from the post office near my house.”

“What happened at Bobbleheadz?”

“We got pretty buzzed. Nelson reminisced about the early days, about some of the pranks we’d played on him. One of his favorites was one Duncan and I could barely remember. We put a plywood board over his bedroom window one night. He said when he opened his shades in the morning he freaked out.”

Vicki bursts into laughter, eyes twinkling.

“Well, well, well. Miss high and mighty enjoys a good prank. Who could have guessed? You’re not so different from the rest of us.”

“I think that’s a bit different from planting illegal shit on someone’s computer or brain.”

“Duncan and I complimented some of Nelson’s masterpieces and his ability to split his enemies. No one said a word about his surprise wedding or Duncan’s secret picture collection.”

Tyler squeezes the couch until his knuckles turn white, recalling a temptation he fought that night, to grab Nelson by the hair and smash a bottle and shred his face while telling him, “Remember your calls while we were eating dinner? My little sister asked our dad to give her a dirty Sanchez. If that was funny, so is this.”

“Surprise wedding?” says Vicki, her voice freighted with the angst of a mother opening a letter from the principal. “What did you do?”

"It was nothing. He loved this girl. We sped things up a bit. But *Nelson* brought it up. He said it was the mother of all pranks. That's when things got weird."

"Until then it was three normal guys who may as well have been talking about sports."

"Duncan asked the bartender if he could see some of the bobbleheads. Apparently they'd been trading the things. He kept asking Nelson how much he thought this or that one was worth, holding them up, bobbing their heads. Nelson just stared."

"It can't be that easy."

"I think it depends on the subject."

"What did he say to Nelson?"

"I don't remember exactly. As much as I hate the word *surreal*, that night was surreal. Duncan was complaining about the bank up the street, nothing ominous."

"What did Nelson do?"

"He watched and listened. I figured he was humoring him. Then Duncan asked if he wanted to see his personal collection, like they were old friends who collect comic books."

"You weren't suspicious?"

"The bar was closing. We wanted to keep drinking. It crossed my mind that they were out to get me, or that Duncan had some Edgar Allen Poe setup waiting for Nelson. If I hadn't brought a snub-nosed .38 in an ankle holster I would have gone straight home."

"Did you agree to quit messing with each other?"

"We toasted the future."

"Did you promise to knock it off?"

"In retrospect a written document would have been helpful, something drafted when we were sober."

"What agreement did you reach?"

Tyler presses his thumbs together and examines the floor. In perpetuum the strands of dust continue their maneuvers like disparate links destined to join if only there is enough time. And

there is abundantly enough. The great sprawl of Time makes the boundary between chaos and order porous if not illusory. Anything can slip through. The dust's gradual but inexorable ascent toward something more powerful and durable and elaborate is ensured by the accumulation of fortuitous additions and the dissolution of all others like some block of stone resisting all chips that do not resemble David. This rising, this *becoming*, algorithmic in its simplicity, ineffable in its teleology ...

"Tyler!"

"We should have avoided booze. There were some ambiguities in the agreement. Hell, it went as poorly as the original Yalta Conference. We should have skipped that and nuked the Soviets."

"What happened at Duncan's?"

"When I saw that dump I really felt sorry for him."

"It's not that bad."

"You never saw his condo. We had a few more drinks. I had cans. That's the only way to make sure someone doesn't drug you. It wasn't enough for Nelson to stand and admire the heads. Duncan made him sit and listen to some lecture."

"Did you see them?"

"They didn't do anything for me. Duncan tried explaining their incredible powers of relaxation, how it's the most stress-reducing collection you can have. All I saw was a jackass shaking a doll."

"How did it end?"

"After all sorts of handshakes and backslaps and bullshit, Nelson left and Duncan passed out. I prayed for deliverance from the temptation to put his hand in warm water. I was freed from it. I went home."

"And that was it?"

He tickles Groucho's side until finding the elusive banjo spot. Groucho's back leg kicks spastically. "Look at him go. This ol' boy's a hillbilly."

"Tyler?"

"There's a minor footnote. The next morning I had more of a hangover than I'd expected. When I put my jacket on I found a few of those damned heads."

"You stole his bobbleheads at the peace conference."

"Only a few. And not the bodies. I don't remember doing it."

"Then it's okay."

"And he says I put his lotus pods in the garbage disposal."

"Those things are hideous."

"I have no regrets. He'd been showing them to Nelson, babbling about an ancient cult that worshipped them. He said the sects never last. The pods give you poisonous wisdom, truth that makes it impossible to go on living."

"Do you think he's a member?"

"Duncan reads a book every ten years. He has to let you know."

"So now what? You can't have another conference after that, can you?"

"It's safe to say any semblance of good faith is long gone. And this wouldn't be the best time to try. I may have lapsed into questionable taste with some of the funeral planning. Now we have to play to win. Are you familiar with game theory?"

"That's where they study strategies, right?"

"Applied to our problem it's the question of what would be in the best interest of each competitor, assuming he's rational."

"And you're all nuts. So what good is it?"

"The conclusion I keep coming to, the one Nelson and Duncan have obviously arrived at, is that the only way to avoid losing is to disable the other participants. Imprisonment, for instance. I'm concerned they might resort to more permanent measures."

"If Duncan wants you dead why didn't he have me kill you instead of yanking the football away?"

"That's not what you did," he laughs. "You demoralized the kicker."

"This isn't funny to me. What am I supposed to do now?"

"You can't, under any circumstances, look at Duncan's bobbleheads."

"You think? That's great advice. You should have been a general."

"Are any of your former boyfriends in therapy from the sarcasm?"

"What about the phone? The last couple times I went to see him it was after he called."

"Do you want to get even with him?" Tyler whispers, as though uttering an invocation too powerful to be spoken aloud.

She covers her mouth. Her eyes extrude. "That's what this is about. You want me on your side."

"If you want to turn the other cheek I can't help. Move to a different town. Change your name. If you see Jim Morrison coming after you, plug your ears and run and remember it's only Duncan. I'm sorry this happened. I don't know what else to say."

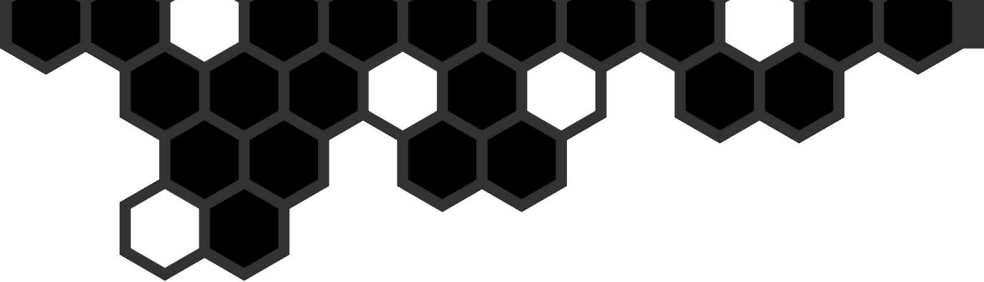
She begins to cry. Groucho hops on the couch and licks her face.

Tyler takes her hand and waits until she looks at him. "One of us tricked you and implanted something in your mind. The other forgave you for a vicious, life-changing prank and has been completely honest about everything."

"I didn't want to do it."

"I understand. Listen. One of us treated you like an inanimate plaything, a life-sized doll. You're a toy to him. Doesn't the injustice of that enrage you? Do you want to get him back or not? Remember something. The renunciation of justice is injustice. There is no karma. What goes around goes away and every silly motto to the contrary is solace for cowards."

"What do you have in mind?"



## SIXTEEN

### *The Big Game*

Nelson and the DXM man sit on the floor in an attic. Moonlight pours through the corner of a tattered sheet nailed to a window, erecting a ghostly column between a pile of soda cans and a bucket. A human shape slouches in a chair across from them.

“How you doing?” says the DXM man. “This is a friend of mine. Where’s your music?”

The figure leans forward and joins the light, his skin the same milky shade only denser, like an accumulation of it. “I can’t concentrate when it’s playing. I can barely think when it’s perfectly quiet. What’s the point of having thoughts if you can’t understand them?”

“I hear that. My memory is good for shit these days.”

“That’s not what I mean. Noise interferes with the reception.” The theme from *Cops* plays below. He grabs an aluminum bat beside his chair and pounds on the floor. “Ma! Use your headphones or watch it in the basement.” Returning to a whisper he says, “It’s like living in a bus terminal.”

“I thought your music *was* the reception,” says the DXM man.

“It sounds like you have synesthesia,” says Nelson. “One sense interprets the input from another sense. Some people say it’s a gift, not anything they’re ashamed of.”

"You and my doctor should go out for drinks, maybe get a room. If I put a scorpion in a box and wrap it up and give it to you, is that a gift?"

Nelson clears his throat as if trying to reset the tone to one with no condescension. "It could be a marketable talent. From what your friend has told me, you can arrange things to look the way a tune sounds. People who are into feng shew—or whatever the hell it's called—might be willing to pay good money for that."

"My ma was right. The music was just a stage I was going through. I miss it already. You know what I wonder? What if all the acid and shrooms and Special K and Ecstasy and PCP and STP and GHB and everything else permanently altered the way I see things? What if they opened a door in my head or blew it off the freakin' hinges and now I can see things other people can't?"

"What kind of things?" says the DXM man.

He pounds his bat. "Ma! I swear I'll come down there and smash that TV. Sorry. She's usually pretty quiet. Listen, no one is going to pay for my services. We had a power outage a few weeks ago. I had to listen to silence. Nothing but silence. My ma is afraid of the dark so I had to hang with her. That's when I started seeing it. You," he points at Nelson, "stand up. Both of you be quiet. Stand still." He jerks his head like a rotary sprinkler. "Step back where it's darker." He cocks his head at a variety of angles and stops. "There it is."

"There *what* is?" says the DXM man, almost disguising the crack in his voice.

"On the silhouettes of people I can see stuff."

"Are we talking trails, floaters, oil slicks, faces on wood?" says the DXM man. "That's called a tripper's hangover. Your Snoozeberries will mellow that shit out, just like a Bloody Mary and a joint will take care of a regular hangover."

"They're not freakin' hallucinations. Look, you're not a real doctor. You're the Otis of cough syrup."

"I'm trying to help."



"I don't know what's going on. They're blueprints written in some crazy-ass symbols I can't understand. Blueprints and computer code scrolling down a million lines a second." He digs his knuckles into his forehead. "I get headaches if I watch too long."

"Maybe you're projecting this," says Nelson. "A dark shape could be like a projection screen for your brain."

"So a few drops of dopamine turned me into Da Vinci. And I grew a George Lucas between my ears who's directing this stuff in real time. How come I only see it on living things, not walls or objects?"

"Take it easy," says the DXM man. "He's brainstorming with you."

"I don't need his help, or my ma's, or the doctor's. I try to write it down but it doesn't look the same. It goes too fast. What's the point of seeing it if you can't write it down?"

"Who would you show it to?" says the DXM man.

The pale figure leans back, receding into the darkness like some apparition absconding its shape. "I'm going to post it on craigslist. Twenty gallon aquarium for sale, and does anybody know what these freakin' symbols mean?"

"I'm just asking. No need to get all pissy. What do you see on Nelson?"

"It's some kind of neon grid, but the individual shapes aren't squares or rectangles. And there's formulas, I think, at the intersections of—Now it's different. Something is flipping the pages before I can read them. There's two shapes like fishing hooks or lightning bolts where your kidneys are. The symbols on your forehead—weird squiggles inside bubbles—remind me of a scoreboard." He pounds his bat until the theme from the *Late Show* stops. "I can't concentrate here."

Slowly Nelson sits. "What does your doctor think it is?"

"Her job is done. My check hits the mailbox no matter what I say. I don't have to prove anything to her anymore."

"She might have other patients with the same symptoms," says the DXM man. "You won't know if you don't ask."

"Sure, I bet there's millions of us. When she's watching me beat my gums I feel like one of those drowning rats in the experiments. Different pills make them swim longer, but they're still drowning."

"You hear from anybody lately?" says the DXM man.

"I haven't checked my email in months. I don't want to hear who died."

"Nothing we can do about it now."

"There wasn't anything we could do about it then. You know what I did the other night? I went for a walk."

"Outside?" says the DXM man. "Good for you. Would you like to go for another, just the three of us? We won't go far."

"I went down to the lake, by the pier where we used to party in high school. I had to see if these things were flashing across anyone other than my ma. She was getting sick of standing here in the dark. On the beach there were kids everywhere, drinking, getting high, just like always. It hasn't changed a bit."

"It's always been that way," says the DXM man. "We thought we invented bonfires by the lake."

"The Indians beat you to it," says Nelson. "And whoever came before them."

"I kept my distance at first, stayed far enough away so all I saw were their shapes. Remember the time we threw a quarter barrel in the lake and swam away with it when the cops came?"

"Standard protocol," says the DXM man. "Wait in the water until they leave, then haul it out. What were they gonna do, swim after us? Lazy pigs. How long did you hang out?"

"They started to look like—I don't know how to describe it—a bunch of see-through glow-in-the-dark robots with weird symbols flashing all over them." He hyperventilates and looks away from his guests and leans back and disappears in his chair. "They had the scorecard thing on their foreheads, but they didn't have as many markings as your friend does. And he doesn't have as many as my ma. That's what makes me think they're keeping some kind of tally."

"Why don't you sleep at night?" says the DXM man. "You can avoid this. Third shift sucks under ideal circumstances. Why live this shitty schedule if you don't have to?"

"I want to understand what I'm seeing. That night I totally lost it. It's the furthest I've been from home since I got back. These kids came up to me, asked if I wanted to buy a cup. I told them, '*You were made*. Something programmed you. I don't know how or why but it's written all over. Doesn't that freak you out? You're a fancy robot or a character in some 3-D video game. Do you think you were programmed to drink beer?' One of them said he was but he was joking. He doesn't know why he was made."

"Did you buy a cup?" says the DXM man. "Remember to avoid romance at those gatherings. They might look grown up and pretty, but only Uncle Sam can determine the freshness date. You should see if anyone still hangs out at the Thirsty Fox. It's nice and lit up in there. Some of the girls are legal."

"What were we programmed to do?" says Nelson.

"I don't know. I don't know and I can't figure it out and I feel like I'm not supposed to, like it's a fluke I'm seeing it at all. We weren't programmed to know what we were programmed for. And nobody else cares. Ever notice? Is that a bug or a feature of the system?"

"I have to go and say hi to your mom," says the DXM man. "I don't want her to think I'm rude." He puts a hand on Nelson's shoulder. "I'll be right back."

If awkwardness could be quantified this would not be quantifiable. Is the man whispering to himself or is moonlight chafing the sheet, wearing away at it like some otherworldly tide?

"I heard you were in Iraq."

The man looks in Nelson's direction and exhales. "When we were little we used to play with army men in the sandbox. Used to blow them up with firecrackers. Our secret weapon was a magnifying glass. It turned the enemy into a green and black puddle. One time we saved a wounded soldier by freezing him in a cup of water. My ma made me take it out of the freezer. Then

we revived him. We never learned to play like that. My dad never showed us. None of my teachers taught me. It came naturally. Like it was programmed.”

“What about the real thing?”

“I know what you’re thinking and you’re wrong. What I saw in Iraq has nothing to do with what I’m seeing now.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw people scraped off the gravel. One second they were there, the next they were a streak of chunky puke. Not once did I think, ‘Wow, something made him.’ He was chunky puke all along. I just didn’t know it. He was camouflaged to look like something else. What the fuck is going on? What *are* we? Keep asking yourself that question. Watch what happens. I dare you.”

“Do you think other people could see what you’re seeing under the right circumstances?”

“All I know is there’s no way I’m projecting it. Take another breath. Hold it and stick out your chest. Wait. There’s a zillion little markings where your lungs are. Swirling spirals. Some clockwise, some the other way but going slower. Inside them is an upside down . . . it looks like a four with two funny lines around it. What the hell is that supposed to mean? But the symbols on your forehead haven’t changed.”

“Maybe you’re not giving your mind enough credit,” says Nelson. “This could be a new form of synesthesia. Instead of sounds being turned into visual patterns, you’re experiencing—”

“What do you need, an inscription on your freakin’ ass that says made by so and so? Would that convince you?”

“You think this is all some giant video game?”

“It’s no sillier than any other answer. We can’t be the bottom floor of reality. There’s something deeper than us. What do you think it is?”

“I try to avoid the question,” says Nelson.

“I don’t have that luxury anymore. I miss it.”

“Who’s running the program?”

“Look at all the crazy-ass stuff we can do with computers and technology. What will we be able to do in a thousand years? You think it’s impossible that some other civilization beat us to it?”

“What’s in it for them?”

“Distraction from their shitty lives. It’s why we do most of what we do.”

“Where did the programmers come from? What makes them the bottom line?”

He pounds the wall with his bat to silence his mother in the corridor.

“I can talk in my own house!” she says. “If you act like that to your friends they won’t come and see you.”

The DXM man opens the door and closes it behind him and sits on his haunches next to his buddy. “You got any head meds you don’t need? You must have seen those warnings on the news. Don’t flush them down the toilet. You’ll poison the water. Think of the children and puppies.”

The man’s laughter falters at first like some long dormant instinct aroused. Then it comes in bursts. “Yeah, help yourself. I got this new one that can turn your piss blue.”

“That talent would give you superhero status with the beach crowd.”

“I won’t be going back there. You need some clothes?” he asks Nelson. “No offense.”

“He’s been through worse shit than us,” says the DXM man. “He was married.”

. . .

Nelson and the DXM man march through dark alleys like feral things prowling drainage ditches. “Every time I go there it’s like stopping at Goodwill. And there’s never a dull moment.”

“He should keep the lights on,” says Nelson.

"It's called HPPD: hallucinogen persisting perception disorder. I think."

"Whatever he's seeing, that can't be healthy."

"You don't think we're living in someone's version of *Grand Theft Auto*?"

"Games have winners."

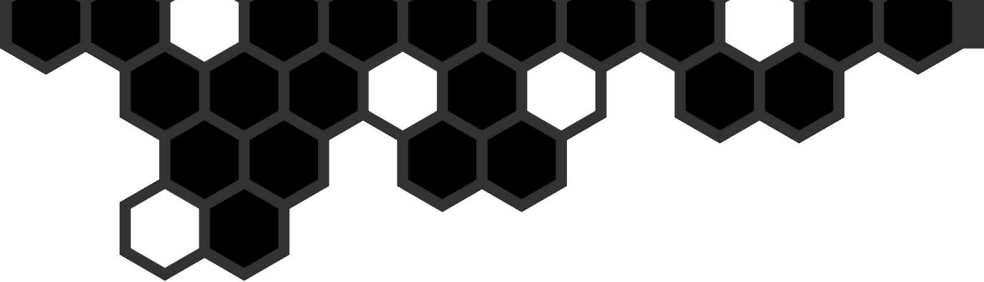
"Not inside them. The players are on the outside."

"Games have rules."

"Checkers don't know why they're jumping around."

"Checkers are mercifully oblivious."

"Take three of these pills."



## SEVENTEEN

### *A Natural High*

“Hello, I’d like to make an appointment with Vicki for a haircut. ... When do you expect her back? ... Yes, this is. ... Did she quit? ... Oh no! I’m so sorry. When? ... This is terrible. I’m so, so sorry. ... An envelope? Don’t the police need to see it? ... I understand. ... I certainly will. ... You have it there at the salon? Alright. Thank you.”

. . .

“Did he sound sad?” says Vicki.

“This is totally messed up,” says Kelly, pressing the phone against a sweater so tight it appears to be painted on her chest, its fractal design akin to the temporary tattoos available to exhibitionists at Mardis Gras.

“This loser is a potential rapist.”

“Are you sure it isn’t illegal to lie to someone like this?”

“It’s protected by freedom of speech,” says Tyler.

After days of screening calls on a conference connection, an eternity spent staring at his reflection above a horizon of scissors, clippers, hair blowers, and bottles of product while enduring the interminable jabber of stylists and their clients, he puts a phone down and folds his fingers into a triangle. “We’re dealing with a man who’s unlikely to use the legal system.” He stands and kisses Vicki on the forehead. “I can barely recognize you.”

"Doesn't she look beautiful with red hair?" says Kelly. "I like the blue contacts."

"She'd look good bald in a burlap sack. It's just a precaution."

"How long have you guys been dating?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my girlfriend," says Tyler. He puts on his coat. "I'm heading to Duncan's. Kelly, text me the instant you see his car."

"What makes you think he's going to give a shit? If he's a potential rapist doesn't that mean he's a sociopath?"

"Maudlin narcissist."

"Is that bad?"

"It's awful, and spreading like a plague."

"He's never going to know this was a prank, right?" says Kelly.

"You have nothing to worry about. He would only be angry at me if he found out. When you hand him the envelope, give him a bear hug and pour on the sobs."

. . .

Tyler slouches below the dashboard, smoking and reading *The Onion*, waiting for Duncan's car to leave the alley, trying to ignore the obvious contingency that he might not even bother to show up, that he'll start from scratch with a new intern or zombie or however he conceives of them. There may be a line between sociopaths and narcissists but nothing's stopping them from holding their annual picnics together.

*He won't want anyone else to see the letter. He has to go for reasons of self-preservation.*

*There's nothing in it that could get him in trouble.*

*He won't know that until he reads it.*

Pranks only seem deterministic, where your brilliant strategy entails  $B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D$  through  $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow$  and the recipient shitting himself with the logical certainty of seven following six. The



more you plot, the firmer the framework feels, until you forget how all plans are held together with string and sticky tape.

A dreadlocked man stands beside Tyler's window and says, "Whaddya lookin' for?"

"Enlightenment."

"I got Pineapple Kush. It's dank."

"Is *dank* a good thing?"

"It's the best thing."

"Define *dank*."

"I can only show you."

"Use *dank* in a sentence."

"Dank weed is indescribable and I've got gram bags for twenty."

"I'm good. Just killing time."

"Kill it in style."

"It drops dead all by itself." Tyler buzzes up the window.

The lights go out upstairs at Duncan's. Tyler slides down in the seat and feels a peculiar been-here-before tingle. Those must be part of some instinct that releases natural opiates during moments of great anxiety, because he's never been in a situation even remotely similar to this ...

Except maybe the night long ago when he was peeking in Duncan's bedroom window, watching him make out with Terri when his parents were out of town. What triumph of faith over reason could have compelled them to leave their wayward boy alone longer than ten minutes? And why was he squeezing the poor girl's face like that? In which 80s movie did Nicholas Cage do this? Maybe it increased the passion by restricting blood flow to her brain, making it an entry-level version of erotic asphyxiation.

A ragged figure fills the driver's window and raps on the glass. Tyler buzzes it down. "What are you looking for?" says an urchin.

"The solitude that Thoreau found at Walden Pond."

"I got what you need."

"A cabin in the woods where I can shoot solicitors? How many acres?"

"I ain't going anywhere with you," says the urchin, walking away. "That's messed up."

The lights go back on at Duncan's. What did he forget? "You're not going on a cruise," says Tyler. "Go to the damn salon and pick up your envelope."

His remembrance of peeking in Duncan's window and watching Terri unwrap and apply a condom with the solemnity of some royal ceremony, is it inducing remorse or the sweet nausea accompanying an Oxy high? Were they afraid of putting it on sideways? Tyler ran to the front door and kicked the living hell out of it and ran to the safety of a neighbor's yard, foiling capture in the event Duncan swept the perimeter before resuming his conquest. Once they commenced he used the back door like a gong.

Another knock at the window. Another urchin. "Wassup."

"How did you know I was here?"

"I saw the top of your head. What do you need?"

"Bear traps spread along that side of my car."

Duncan's car leaves the alley. "I'm into natural highs," says Tyler. "You should try one sometime. It's more work but the buzz is incredible. This could be the best I've ever had." He gets out of the car and sprints across the street.



## EIGHTEEN

### *The Klonopin Cafe*

“Miss Sockwell? Do you have a son named Octavian? ... I’m sorry. Wrong number.”

“You got fifteen more minutes on my phone,” says the girl. Piercings on her lips, nose, and eyebrows glimmer in the light of a computer screen.

“I might need to purchase another half hour,” says Nelson.

“The price might go up.”

“I might not offer as much. You’re not getting a bad deal for—Miss Sockwell? Do you have a son named Octavian? ... That’s what I was hoping. I—Yes, ma’am, I know he’s incarcerated. I was his cell mate and I wanted to—Yes, that was my impression. I have no doubt he’s innocent, a victim of circumstance who was—He’s doing very well. He’s using the opportunity to improve himself. Every time he saw me getting depressed he’d say we have to make something good come from this, that we can’t let it get us down, that hard times are used to test us. ... Judging from his physical strength I’d say he’s very healthy. Despite what you’ve heard, the food isn’t too bad. Casseroles and sandwiches are great if you’re lifting weights everyday. ... I heard he’s being moved to Minnesota. He wanted me to tell you he loves you very much, and he’s sorry this ever happened. He told me this more than once, that he’s proud to be your son, that no matter what—Ma’am, please, now I’m getting

choked up. . . . No, don't you believe it. Eight years means four, then you subtract three for good behavior. Ma'am there's so much more I need to tell you. Could I take you out to lunch? I'm only in town until tomorrow."

He shuts the phone and hands it to the girl, the only other form of biological life in the dingy internet café. Like doomed survivors of an earlier epoch, they recognize but ignore their replacements.

"What else do you have?" she says.

"I'm not a dealer. I have some Klonopin but it's expensive. I can only spare a few."

She squeezes his arm. "How much?"

"You've got to be kidding. You'd take that nasty shit to catch a buzz?"

"When you mix it with wine it's like you're not even there."

"To think I wasted my youth by showing up for it."

When the transaction is complete the girl leaves and Nelson pops a pill and works on a free website called Sites2Go. How careless some people are with personal information, or how difficult it is to keep the fundamentals of your life secret. Privacy and reclusion will seem to future generations like some colorful quirk of a bygone time, no less atavistic than cocaine in soda and prohibition.

The granules of the medication douse the activity in Nelson's brain like flour thrown on a fire. In dreamy lethargy he admires the second-hand Timberlands peeking out of his second-hand Levis. A fresh coat of paint can sure perk up an old house.

Outside he walks down the street past a bank whose sign may or may not correspond to the absolute objective temperature and heads toward Home Depot to pick up some supplies for lunch with Miss Sockwell.



## NINETEEN

*PS*

Parked outside Rolando's Liquor, Duncan squeezes an envelope and holds it to his face as though an act of will or longing or regret has the power to return the ink from its final state back to an innocent viscous blue which could be used to write a grocery list or draw doodles or create an infinite number of documents other than the one he's holding. Vicki's scent lingers, a ghost who will not need to drag chains or slam doors to accomplish its haunting.

I'm sorry Duncan. I know you didn't know this and I should have said it but I considered you a friend.

Tears flow as if to protect his eyes from a terrible glare. Nausea forces him to open the door. A mouthful of Johnny Walker does not help. The earth, once tethered by moorings unseen, comes adrift. If only it would head straight into the sun.

I was creeped out at first by that game you were playing with Tyler but maybe it is "funny." I hope you win.

Duncan vomits on the dash. Cheerios cover the last three digits of the odometer. The portion of his brain that scores above average on spatial visualization tests reconstructs a pizza crust from lunch.

I know it sounds impossible but this is for the best. My uncle had serious mental issues. Things didn't turn out too good for him. Even though everyone in the family loved him he broke their hearts over and over.

Duncan drinks the remainder of his pint and smashes the bottle on the side view mirror, deterring none of the three customers approaching Rolando's Liquor.

I'm positive my recent problems are caused by the same genes. How else could I be seeing Jim Morrison!? I refuse to live like this. It wouldn't be ME anymore. Whatever you do Duncan, don't forget there was nothing you could have done to prevent this. Please remember me. The only way we survive is in the hearts of our friends. I truly believe that. Love, Vicki.

The mind that had these thoughts, that performed this frantic syllogism ignorant of a crucial premise withheld by Duncan, no longer exists except as markings on paper. *Was it ever there at all?* The question has teeth and a cruel grin. It should have been obvious. The primary difference between messages from the dead and living is the inability to clarify matters with the former. They do not accept apologies. All you're left with is the last words you spoke and memories of how you treated them, perceptions distorted by feelings you can't control. Facing an aggravated poltergeist would be paradise by comparison.

Duncan roars like a bear caught in a trap. A towel-snap behind his eyes reveals a flash of her face and the softness of her voice when she offered heartfelt advice about not moving to the Mojave. She couldn't even say the words *bald* and *fat*. Many girls have no problem with their articulation.

Attempting a Y-turn out of the parking lot he either miscalculates the distance between his car and a Dumpster or no longer cares. Similar equivocations of motive occur when he collides with an elm, scrapes against a concrete abutment, and plows through the door and back wall of his garage.

He storms into the house and cuts the power to the lower flat, giving Succubus Disembowelment their unplugged debut. Satanic death metal acquires a folksy brightness when acoustic. Upstairs he fills pillowcases and the garbage can and several boxes with his bobbleheads and drags them to the backyard where he dumps them in a pile and douses it with two cans of WD40 and a container of Kingsford Lighter Fluid.

With the flick of a match it becomes a cartoon crematorium. Acrid and inconsistent flames melt the hollow creatures. Duncan considers the Hindu tradition observed by widows at funeral pyres but rejects it due to the likelihood of this blaze being like napalm. He runs upstairs and falls into bed and writhes like some primitive man caught in a storm. If his conscience is a fairy tale so are hurricanes and earthquakes.

He prays. To undo what is done. That the world be different than it is, the substance of prayer itself.



## TWENTY

### *Lunch with Miss Sockwell*

The gangly young man in the framed picture must have been caught in the midst of a laugh.

“He’s grown,” says Nelson.

“That’s from ninth grade,” says Miss Sockwell, handing Nelson a glass of Margarita-flavored juice.

“What was he like in high school?”

“He was bored. That never leads to good. Too many other things seem fun at the time.”

“I didn’t like it either, and I went on to college. High school is a warehouse for kids until they’re eighteen.”

“What else should they be doing?”

“Most should learn a trade. Not everyone has the ability to sit in a desk and learn things they don’t care about. They shouldn’t be punished or stigmatized for it. Our current system was an experiment. It’s not how people have always taught kids and prepared them for life.”

She hands him a plate with a grilled cheese sandwich. “I’ve tried making these every whichway and that’s the best. Muenster and honey bread and nothing else.”

“Trial and error is the best teacher.”

“My mom is the best teacher. She made them like this. It’s how I did before trying all sorts of other recipes.”



Young Octavian stares at Nelson, laughs at him like some malevolent sprite, harbinger of the approaching creature. Could things have turned out differently for him? Could he be partying in a dorm somewhere, slouching towards a bachelor's degree with the rest of the dolts? Who couldn't. There but for the grace of a ZIP code. Or is it DNA? If all groups aren't equal Nature displays an unnerving partiality for bullies.

"Sure is a quiet neighborhood," says Nelson.

"The hell it is. Come back at night. The car stereos are louder than a concert."

"As you go deaf you have to keep turning them up."

Nelson looks out the window at what his grandfather called "the Polish part of town, now under new management." He said they saved their money to buy the lots and lived in the basements until they could afford to build the rest. They spent their lives making every possible improvement, a reflection of them and their values. Then they fled a campaign of ethnic cleansing, a war waged one mugging and shooting and rape and dilapidated house at a time. He always said now look at it. *Look what they did to it.* Little Nelson said that was racist. His grandfather said everyone is but some folks make a virtue of hiding it.

Miss Sockwell reaches in a cupboard. Nelson watches her muscular calves. She couldn't have been more than sixteen when she had Octavian. Knocked up at that age, poor as dirt. She had as much control over the trajectory of her life as an arrow shot into the sky. If the arrow could think, it would feel the air rushing past and the crazy velocity of its journey and see the ever-changing landscape. It might even think it's steering.

"Were you locked up for long?" she says.

"Long enough, and it didn't take much."

"Takes a lot less to go back. Once you're on probation they got you. They catch you with weed they lock you up. What's the point of putting somebody in a cage? How is that supposed to make them better?"

"It gave me time to think. It's supposed to make you not want to come back."

"Well it ain't working. That's for sure."

Sunlight fills the short distance between the kitchen window and door, growing orange blossoms on buckled linoleum. Nelson's buckets cast shadows like smokestacks or top hats and look larger than you'd think five gallons would occupy. The tool belt still has a price sticker attached but so what.

"He was a good kid," says Miss Sockwell. "When all your friends are doing something it don't seem wrong."

"If you don't join in they pick on you. I was a nerd in high school. There's nothing worse than the judgment of your peers. There's nothing more important than fitting in."

Miss Sockwell stands in front of him. "What's the real reason you came to see me?"

"It's what I'd want someone to do for me. And I was in the area for a job."

"The stuff you told me on the phone don't sound like nothing my son would say. Is he alright?"

Nelson reaches into a pocket and puts a pill under his tongue and taps his forehead and says, "Migraine," and one of his professors is telling the class that every trait of every living being arose as a mutation, including complex human things like morality. Endorphins percolating during acts of cooperation helped a troop of hominids take down big nasties on the Savannah. It made the difference between kicking every other critter's ass and cowering in caves. The consequences of this aren't for the pure in spirit. Moral conceptions don't correspond to some Absolute Reality any more than the length of a giraffe's neck or a zebra's stripes or a turtle's shell. Guilt is a 1970s-style antenna stuck in our collective attic, wiring we can't unplug.

"Is Octavian alright? Is there something you need to tell me?"

"He's fine. He watched my back in there. It's the first time I was in. Can I have another drink?"

Damn Google. Of all the projects where a man needs practical how-to advice, Nelson's undertaking has to be near the top. Not even Ask.com had anything to say.

No doubt it's chauvinistic, but Miss Sockwell is far stronger than he expected.



## TWENTY-ONE

### *Sweeter Than Honey*

Duncan's sobs rend the night. A listener with no knowledge of the context would swear that a whale is trying to communicate with a coyote. The erratic percussion of objects smashed against walls acts as a primitive but effective form of punctuation.

"Turn it off," says Vicki, covering her ears. "What if he finds the device you planted?"

Sprawled across the bed with eyes shut and mouth agape, Tyler says, "This is better than the first time I heard *Exile on Main Street*. I want to get some caviar, French wine, Russian cigarettes, and listen to it in a hot bath." Groucho's monstrous head peeks out from under a blanket, then retreats.

"This is so wrong."

He turns it down and puts an arm around her. "How can you not enjoy this? Think of the things he made you do. Think about his theft of your time and dignity. Do you know where this was headed? You were going to be his slave, in the most literal and crude sense of the word. Bask in the white hot rage of that. Imagine the other girls he's done this to. There's no way you were the first. Now, listen to the man who would be your master." He turns up the volume. A mucous gurgle disguises the human source of the noise until it moans Vicki's name. Tyler strokes her cheek and looks into her eyes. "Because of what we did he has been brought to justice."

"Is that what this is?"

"Are you suggesting he's not getting what he deserves?"

"He definitely deserves something."

"That's justice. That's what it fundamentally is. It puts things back into alignment. And it nourishes the souls of those who've been harmed. It would be wrong not to enjoy this, like wasting food."

"Then why do I feel guilty?" she says.

"Civilization has fallen and it can't get up. When you watch the news, how often do you see people who've lost a family member forgive the killer, as if it's virtuous, like it's an ideal for the rest of us."

"They want closure."

"No such thing. Life doesn't come with reset buttons."

"What would you do, send the killer a can of nuts that snakes pop out of?"

"A box of laxatives disguised as chocolate. Or I'd start up a correspondence using pictures of a hot model. Then I'd go visit him and snap a picture of the look on his face when he realizes who he's been baring his soul to. I'd string him along for at least a year before—"

"What am I supposed to do now? I'm out of vacation time."

"Do you think Duncan's going to stop by every once in a while to see if you're still dead?"

"My name wasn't in the paper. If he has one moment of doubt all he has to do is check. You didn't think this through." She stands and crosses her arms and paces. Wagging his tail, Groucho galumphs after her. "What if he wants to talk to Kelly and I answer the phone? He's going to need someone to talk to."

"Don't answer the phone for at least six months."

"What if he stops in to see her? She hugged him. That's probably like getting to third base for Duncan."

"There are too many sports-themed dating analogies for it to be a coincidence. I'm not a big baseball fan. Remind me: What's third base?"

"You were just on second. What if he kills himself?"

Tyler adjusts the volume while Duncan segues from sounding like a colicky infant to a crow in distress. "Narcissists spread their misery. They won't obliterate it with death."

"Is it safe for me to move back into my apartment?"

"He's a registered sex offender. Harassing a woman is the last thing he should be doing."

"That's the exact opposite of comforting."

Tyler turns off the receiver and rubs his unshaven chin. "This could change Duncan in unpredictable ways. When he's through mourning—mourning the inconvenience your death caused him, forcing him to admit the world exists independently of him—this will be directed at me. I don't see how else his warped ego can deal with it."

"When can I expect his unconditional surrender? That was your big plan, remember? I'm free on Monday, Tuesday, and every day. Would you really have trusted him to hypnotize me again?"

"This is no different from warfare," he says sheepishly. "You go with the best plan and make adjustments in real time."

"What's the next plan?"

He watches the floor and sighs. "We can't stay here. It's not safe for me either. This is the perfect final chapter, but to ensure it's final we both should move."

Vicki puts her arms around Groucho and kisses his head. "I'll miss you, giant scary monster dog, more than your master." She stands and puts her hands on her hips. "I could have moved in the first place. So you're finished with me. When do I have to leave by?"

Tyler kneels and takes her hands and squeezes them. "You don't."

She mouths the words, "Oh my ..."

He presses his face against her and looks up. "Will you?"

The words, *those* words, create a path not there a moment earlier. She tries to see through the haze enshrouding it, twilight of her current life, dawn of another. Does it lead to an enchanted grove or a cliff? If only she could explore the fading trail before committing herself.

"Marry me and we'll move far away and change our names and never think about any of this again. We'll start over. I'll renounce my former life for you."

"I hardly know you," she says. "We met for the first time the other week. And most of that time was spent—"

"You mean, per the current standards, which are the eternal truth since they're the latest, we need to fill out compatibility profiles to see how we match in sixty categories, then date for two years, then live together for five, then have three kids, and only then will it be safe to make a serious *commitment* like marriage—until we divorce five months later. If we skip the abstract *relationship*, the all-important agreement not to have any binding agreements, the promise to make no promises, the gray zone where we use each other for sensual gratification until the wind shifts directions, this would result in ... what? An earthquake? Okay, let's wait for absolute certainty. Though you can't have it when asking if you'll be alive in two seconds, maybe if we put off our decision long enough it'll magically appear."

Does her laughter mean it's out of the question, too crazy to warrant a conventional response? Perhaps it's the result of an emotional power surge, the way women sometimes cry after an orgasm.

"If I say no will Groucho eat me?"

"Everything but the shoes. Too chewy."

"Okay. Yes. I will!"

And the darkness fighting for dominion of Tyler's heart and the darkness of space and all darkness however ominous is revealed as layers protecting him from a great Light beyond.



## TWENTY-TWO

### *Sweeter Than Anything*

Nelson sits in a booth at George Webb and conducts studies in the philosophy of food. Is his double cheeseburger twice as delicious as a single patty or exponentially better? Would the chocolate silk pie have tasted as good if he'd eaten it after the bowl of peanut butter ice cream?

Sleeves rolled up on his flannel shirt reveal a thermometer watch, which he consults between mouthfuls. The bank sign down the street is telling lies but it's none of his business. The itch-like urge to throw a brick or Molotov cocktail or fire a shotgun or drive a truck at the damned, propaganda-spewing, deceitful atrocity has been tamed to a mild desire. His friendly demeanor with the waitress borders on flirting. With health comes a list of grievances against illness:

*It would be nice to date again. Of all the things they've stolen that's the cruelest.*

*And when your date asks what you do just say you're a travelin' man.*

*When she runs a background check and finds citations for criminal destruction of property, tell her bank signs weren't the target. They happened to be in the way while you were practicing your curve ball. You're a major league pitcher with poor eyesight.*

• • •



Filtered through fishbone branches shaken by the wind, the sun quivers on the pavement as though the day is writhing in throes of death or pangs of birth. It is. Dusk, burial ground of all days prior, womb of all to come. This instant, the knife-edge of Now, cuts the umbilical cord of what will be and slays itself.

Clasping his buckets, Nelson walks down the sidewalk indistinguishable from any other worker after a hard day. Only the fire in his eyes and thin lips pressed together in determination or exultation or defiance of pain hint at something beyond the pleasure found in a job well done.



## TWENTY-THREE

### *Jammin' with Succubus Disembowelment*

From a lower flat on Oakland Avenue roars a hideous cacophony, an explosion without end. Perhaps an absentminded Hobbit forgot to close the door to the earth's engine room. Once hidden behind a sound-proof vault, the secret motor grinds, in need of oil or replacement. Given the planet's silent movement through space one would have expected high-performance parts.

Jettisoning the aforementioned theory, some *thing* joins the noise, growling like a demon with strep throat. "From the molten pool of bobble hell, the anti-bobble shall arise," it *sings*, if that be the proper term. "Bobbles in the abyss, damned for all eternity. Before Count Chocula all must kneel. Coo coo for cocoa puffs, we summon thee." Either a guitar or a train derailling changes the noise, arguably making it worse, though the subjective nature of pain renders this judgment contentious.

Furious pounds on the door interrupt the performance. Upon opening it, the shouter of Succubus Disembowelment receives the equivalent of a whack from a Zen master's stick. Instantaneously transmitted to him is all the wisdom one could derive from a class titled How You Know It's Time to Move 101. The vision is far greater than the totality of its components, a product of some diabolic synergy. Like a collection of thematically related horror stories, each aspect imparts a gruesome legend connected to the others in enigmatic ways.

Nude and struggling to remain upright, their landlord stands in the threshold with a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and a blue-steeled .357 in the other. Just as rings inside a tree indicate its age, the shadows under his eyes gauge the extent of his torments.

"I'll ask you one more time," says Duncan, not looking at the members of the quintet but rolling his head from side to side. "Please stop playing that song. I don't mind the ones about human sacrifice, torture, and orgies with Santa."

"Satan," says the drummer. The bassist turns to him and puts a finger to his lips.

"Whoever. I'm starting to hate your songs less than I did. Maybe that's the first step toward liking them. I don't even care if you perform human sacrifices down here. You can start with me." He takes a long, long drink of Jack and vomits some of it back into the bottle. Then he has another slug. "But not the bobblehead song, okay?"

The shouter tries to smile, waiting for an opportune moment to shut the door. But then what? Should they climb through a window and run for it or hide out here until morning?

Duncan staggers into what remains of the flat and utters the only statement more dreaded by musicians than *Do you mind if I search your car?* "Hey, I used to jam a little."

Unaware of his bodily functions or unconcerned by them, he urinates on the floor with no assistance from his hands while surveying the rental property. Porcelain shards from the sink are strewn across what may have been the dining room. Bottles from every sale Rolando's Liquor has had in the past six months cover all flat surfaces. Painted on the walls and ceiling in different calligraphic styles are the band's name and a symbol incorporating a geometrically flawed five-pointed star draped with intestines that look more like earthworms.

"I fixed this place up to be a yuppie apartment. Now I'll be lucky to get ten bucks a month from crack dealers. That's cool. Rock and roll!" He fires a shot into the ceiling.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, which for people who have abandoned sleep in favor of stimulants can be difficult, the shouter says, "Dude, I swear we'll pay for the damage."

"It's all good. I used to give a shit about things like this until I figured out what really matters in life."

They watch him use a farmer's handkerchief by plugging one nostril with his gun and spraying snot all over his feet. Hopefully he won't share what he's learned. If this lesson, taught in some classroom of the damned, constitutes the apex of understanding, ignorance of it is more essential to survival than food.

"Gimmee that guitar," says Duncan, putting the .357 between his legs, a mighty blue phallus dwarfing its counterpart. "I'm gonna start hanging out with you guys. We'll party. I'm sick of being alone. We're all in this together. Here's to Succulent Bowel Movement!"

The guitarist looks away as his Ibanez is pressed against Duncan's mangy groin. Surely microscopic immigrants are fleeing their rancid jungle for a journey on his magnificent ship.

"Sorry I cut the power. Can I join the band?"

The original members exchange terrified stares. "We're having auditions tonight," says the shouter. "You're just in time."

"Let's all drink to that." Duncan offers them his bottle, part whiskey, part recycled whiskey. "C'mon, everybody take a swig. I'm not partying with wussies."

. . .

Nelson peers between the boards of a fence where PERVERT and CHILDREN BEWARE THE MOLESTER are painted in Tyler's neurotically perfect handwriting. Through a broken gate he enters the yard and gives a vile-smelling fountain a wide berth. The ground beneath his feet looks strange and he squats to examine it. Like a gynecologist at the Barbie Planned Parenthood he retrieves a little limb and the fetal head of either Milton Berle or Vincent Price. The shuddering revulsion they provoke bespeaks some

horrid confrontation in the distant past, an ancestral remnant like our fear of snakes and spiders, irrational but all-pervasive, familiar in its unfamiliarity the way a traumatic birth causes claustrophobia. The plastic gore becomes a swirling porthole and Nelson clutches his buckets and runs to the window. The light within and the dark without cast a spell of invisibility.

"This is a song about a girl," says Duncan, plucking a bar chord, eliciting a solid *chunk-a-chunk*. "She said we were friends. Then she left me forever." He begins to cry.

The bassist laughs. The shouter smacks him in the arm and makes a gun sign with his fingers and points it at his forehead.

"If I leave here tomorrow, will you still remember me?" wails Duncan in a tone that has to be a matter of concern to every dog in a two-block radius.

Nelson watches in jubilation. What could have happened to him? Tyler's got game, that's what. He glances over his shoulder. Is it inching closer, creeping up on him like the Blob? *Those were bobbleheads. Why am I freaked out by—*

Like a bag the sky falls over his head and he gulps for breath and slaps his chest as though these futile gestures will comfort the prisoner pounding on the bars of his ribs. *The air is phony! Someone replaced the good air with this bullshit. No wonder the temperatures don't match. You have to prove it, to make people listen, to—*

*Stop! These are the bad thoughts. This is how they've kept you on the run. How long since the last pill?*

It doesn't matter. When you need them you need them and the cure is worse than the illness, like putting a burn victim into a coma to keep him alive. Which is worse, thoughts you know are false that sneak into your head like wasps through a hole in the attic and sting your brain until it throbs and itches and itches and itches, or a head plugged with so much insulation you become a pathologic dullard suffering from sleep apnea and an IQ of 60? Tough call. He takes two of the awful pills and sucks them

until they're gone and walks to a corner of the yard and puts his buckets down and takes a spade from his belt and begins to dig.

"This next song goes out to a special girl," says Duncan. "She meant the world to me. You guys follow my lead. It's called 'Smoke on the Water.'"

The band groans and curses.

"Don't worry. I'm going to put a dead metal spin on it. I've been meaning to ask, how can an inanimate substance like metal be anything other than dead? The name of your genre has a whiff of redundancy to it. No offense. Then again, so does country western and classical music."

"It's *death* metal, not dead metal," says the guitarist, hands clasped behind his back, a prisoner watching his lover ravished and degraded.

"To the extent that I can understand what you're screaming, most of your songs are social commentaries. But if you're Satanists shouldn't you be complaining about all the good things in the world instead of yelling about the bad ones? You've taken sides with team evil. You're being inconsistent."

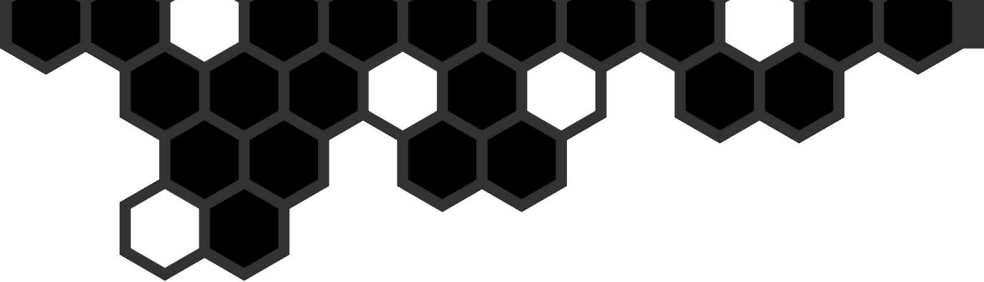
"We're not Satanists," says the drummer.

"I don't care if you are. As long as you're not into alternative spirituality. Maybe you're playing socially conscious metal. Is that considered a genre?"

"I think we know what the fuck we're playing," says the bassist. The shouter slaps him.

"Hey, it's cool. I just want to know a little bit about the band I joined. Okay, let's do this. One and two and—"

Nelson pries the lid off a bucket and dumps its contents in the hole. Moonlight spreads a caricature beside him as though deploying a miscreant apprentice.



## TWENTY-FOUR

### *Retirement of a Theologian*

Whoever said the world contains more misery than happiness never had a filterless Camel after three McDonald's hashbrowns. Tyler refutes them thus while perusing the 401K documents he needs to discuss with Human Resources. Like a man recovering from cataract surgery, he's noticing things that have always been there, seeing them afresh.

Eight lines of latter day chariots stand motionless along a silver carpet rolled out to the horizon. Clouds waft past, smoke signals from the Big Chief, ignored by Tyler's fellow travelers with the same indifference they reserve for the miracle of their lives—until a doctor informs them the end is near, at which point a scramble ensues to extend the heretofore ignored miracle by six months.

“Why shouldn't the testimony of Joy be given the same credence as Despair?” says his inner theologian. He's taken on a mystical approach lately, eschewing pure reason for bolts of bliss. “Who's to say which is more objective? Maybe Joy is a microscope that amplifies the hidden structure of things. The design of reality evades the myopic gaze of weary cynics. Look how many times you've taken this route, oblivious to the underlying goodness of everything around you.”

*What's the point in hiding it most of the time?* wonders Tyler.

“Constant awareness would be disabling, making life impossible. Consequently, all the whining about there not being sufficient evidence for God’s existence is nonsense. Rock-solid proof would strike a man dead or drive him mad. The Creator keeps a low profile for humanitarian reasons.”

Tyler sips his coffee and smiles. If only the other drivers knew he was on familiar terms with the deepest mysteries. Bliss seeks company. Unfortunately they would taser, Mace, or shoot him if he left his car and approached. And if he shared the tidings with his former coworkers ...

“What’s the bride wearing, a leather corset and stilettos?”

“Did you find a gimp suit with a cummerbund?”

“Is the best man brie or Swiss?”

“Where’s the honeymoon, a dog kennel or cheese house?”

Tyler turns on the radio. Anything but 90s classics. A man shouts, “So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil.”

Tyler feels the earth hurtling through space with no brakes or seatbelt or railing. He peers into the whirlwind of vapors rising above the idling chariots and puts his hand to the dial. Why not listen to hits from the 80s for a change? Alternative Spirituality was usually an interesting blend of philosophy and deism.

The radio man shouts, “What do you think HaShem is saying? Repent! How much clearer can it be? More importantly, repent before it’s too late. The evils you choose will be judged some day. You might forget them or get in the habit of thinking they aren’t all that bad. Here’s your tip of the day, your tip of the week, your tip of the month, and the only tip you’ll need for the rest of your life. Do not assume the Master of the Universe shares your stupid standards, which change six times between lunch and dinner. He doesn’t. The Judge of the whole world will act justly. According to Maimonides, one essential ingredient of



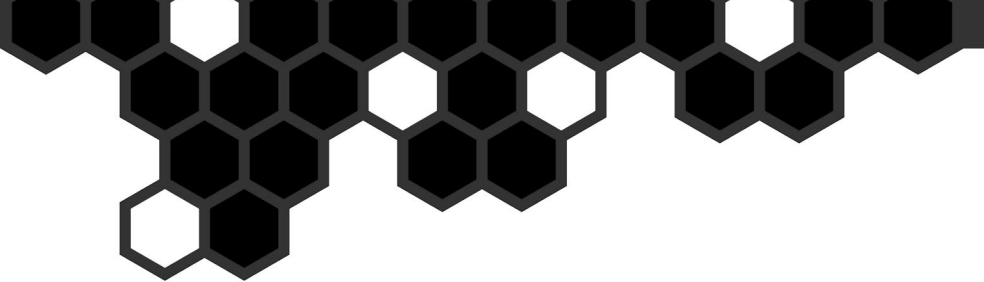
repentance is obtaining forgiveness. If you wrong HaShem, beg Him for forgiveness and knock it off. If you wrong your fellow man you need to seek his forgiveness.”

Tyler opens the windows. It’s as if the radiance of the underlying goodness swelled to noonday proportions and afflicted him with heatstroke.

“What evidence would suffice to overturn the testimony of a nation?” says the radio man. “I know you have friends who think all religions preach the same basic truth. That is complete nonsense. Only someone ignorant of all of them could believe that. There’s truth and there’s lies and there’s an end on it. You don’t like Torah Judaism, is that the problem? You’d rather shove a crystal up your ass or pray to a tree or whatever those idiots in Hollywood are doing this week? I’m curious. I’m just dying to find out. I can’t wait to hear what standards you’re using. On the one hand, the Source of Reality commands you. On the other, some arrogant little belly-button spelunkers whine about how it offends their reason. Poor babies. They’re too busy bitching to notice that reality offends our reason on an hourly basis and it’s alive and kicking and bearing its fangs. Nothing is more unreasonable than reality. Now pull your thick head out of your reasonable behind and listen. Where were you when the Creator laid the earth’s foundations? Did he ask for your approval of the blueprints? You are a speck of dust and you dare to pull out a grocery list of requirements *He* has to meet. Are you asking the Master of the Universe what options *He* comes with? His Nature does not change to accommodate your whims and wishful thinking. Fashions apply to women’s clothing, not here. Do not mistake the Prophets for sleazy salesmen. They were not all things to all men. I don’t have good news for you. I couldn’t care less how you perceive the truth. HaShem Is Who He Is and nothing can change Him and you’d be well advised to deal with it because there will be serious consequences. No one is going to wipe your sins away. Gentiles like me and most of you will

be judged according to our compliance with the Seven Laws of Noah, and there's an end on it."

In the way Augustine utilized Plato, just as Thomas Aquinas incorporated the teachings of Aristotle, Tyler's theologian tries his hand at a cost benefit analysis. "You should play it safe. The ideal time to repent is when your adversary is crushed. It's better than doing it when he's on top." Then he gets out of the car, bids Tyler adieu, and walks in front of an oncoming truck.



## TWENTY-FIVE

### *While Duncan Sleeps*

Stealthily the members of Succubus Disembowelment cart amplifiers and copper pipes to their van, ignoring the bemused construction worker watching them. With their tattered clothes and pasty skin they resemble vampires who shop at Goodwill. Nelson walks across the street and joins them.

“Is your landlord still alive?”

“He’s in the basement. We smashed a mirror and held a chunk of glass by his mouth. It clouded up.”

“That was very thoughtful. He’s been under a lot of stress.”

“You know him?”

“I’m going to see he gets the care he needs. I only wish his family had called me sooner. What set him off?”

“Some girl was friends with him. Then she changed her mind or something.”

“Then she died,” says the bassist, trying to squeeze a maple kitchen cabinet into the front seat. “This has to go in sideways or we’re gonna have to take it apart.”

“Do you know who she was?” says Nelson.

“Some hair stylist. She worked at that place next to Taco Hut. I’ve never seen any guy get this flaked out over some cunt.”

“I think he blames himself for her death,” says the shouter.

"He's very sensitive," says Nelson. "His family asked me to nurse him back to health. This isn't the first time it's happened. Don't worry, I'll take care of the damage he did to your place."

Smirks spread from one band member to the next. "That's okay. We're moving out. We'll tell Mr. T someone else is going to cover the damages."

Nelson takes a step back. "You're associates of Tyler?"

"I don't know what the T stands for. He said he'd be our manager and pay our rent. We sent him demos but he never got back to us."

"I need to touch base with him. It's been too long. I forgot the address."

"He made us promise not to give it to anyone, not even his phone number."

"Was that a condition of your contract?" says Nelson.

"It was the only condition."

"And now you're leaving, which makes the arrangement null and void. To say nothing of his mismanagement of your career. None of this is in writing, is it?"

"No."

"Aren't you the least bit worried that when he sees this place he'll decide to tack on a few more conditions? Who do you think a judge will believe? You lived here and trashed it. Paying your rent doesn't make him liable for your actions. You'll be lucky if he doesn't call the police."

"You know those condos off of Bender Road, the old ones with the L-shaped swimming pool?"

. . .

Duncan's flat could be mistaken for Bedlam after a hurricane, but at least it doesn't stink. To rectify this, Nelson looks through the fridge and finds a half-gallon of milk and pours it under the bed. Then he opens two cans of salmon and one of tuna and unscrews several vents and dumps the fish down and screws the vents back on. He marvels at the hodgepodge of computers

before sitting in front of a monitor. With a search engine he finds the email addresses of the Pentagon; CIA; NSA; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; even the lowly FBI. He types:

You warmongering unconstitutional sons of whores. This has gone far enough. A great man once said disobedience to tyrants is the will of God. I hereby announce my conversion. Don't bother sending your goons to my house. I'll make it easy and save you a trip. I'll send you some packages. Open them nice and slow. That pink mist covering the walls won't be Tropical Punch. It'll be your fucking heads. Your conspiracy is now exposed on my website for all to see. By killing me you will only help spread my message. Martyr me you fascist dogs and my followers will rise up to overthrow you and your foul minions.

The phone rings. "Hello?" says Duncan's recorded voice. "Duncan? It's Tyler."

Nelson jumps up as though the two apparitions are about to materialize and seize him.

"Hello?" says Duncan's voice.

"C'mon, it's me. This is urgent. I need to—"

"Hello. Is anybody there?"

"We have to talk," says Tyler. "This is an emergency."

"This is a recording," says Duncan. "Geez, you're not too bright. No wonder I'm avoiding you. At the beep please leave your message. Or don't. I haven't had an important one since they invented these stupid things."

"Vicki isn't dead! It was a prank and it was entirely my idea. This is over. Completely. I'm out. I'm leaving the state. I'm repenting of my evil deeds and you should too. I'm sorry. I'm sorry this ever started and I'm sorry for any harm that's come to you and—" *beeeeeeeep*.

Like a scientist gazing at a planetary alignment slated to occur once every 500,000,000 years, Nelson watches the little red light flash on the machine. "I'll call him back and we'll get

Duncan on his feet and explain what happened,” he whispers. “Find out what they did to me. Undo it. Get on with our lives.”

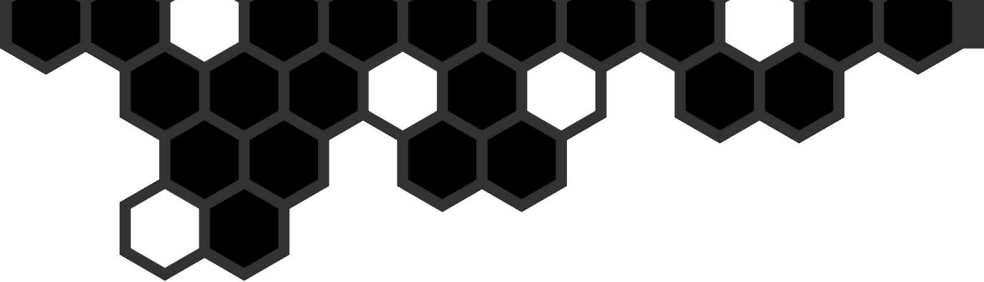
It could be a contingent miracle of natural forces that man is endowed with a numinous faculty called *free will*, enabling him to mark the territory of the Actual from the frontier of the Possible, to select what *does* happen from the vast set of what *can* happen. Or it could be that our fondest hope, that we pick and choose our destinies like cars, is a faith more quaint than most, heralded by the same adamant witness insisting the earth is stationary.

Nelson erases the message and unplugs the phone and finishes his email with, “See you in hell! The Trustee of Truth, Duncan Brandle,” and clicks Send. He uses the refrigerator as a urinal and returns to the former gallery of bobbles and unscrews the fluorescent tubes from the shelves and places them under Duncan’s sheets and crushes them with his boots. He squats over the leather chair he once sat in to admire the collection and defecates. With a knife and bowl he writes a message on the wall with his excrement:

u need maid  
y not viki

A book on the table is conspicuous in its presence, a sole relic from the Dark Ages before the dawn of the internet. Numerous bookmarks suggest someone has been using it, perhaps studying it. He examines the cover. “What the fuck. Of course!”

He puts the remainder of his feces in the microwave and sets it for thirty minutes and goes outside with the book under his arm into the warmth of the sun and walks past trees starting to bud and children heading to school.



## TWENTY-SIX

### *The Dream of Tyler*

“Imagine these are scrambled eggs, the kind your mom used to make,” says Tyler.

“Yours can’t be any worse,” says Vicki, leaning over a laptop at the kitchen table.

“Don’t open emails from anyone you don’t know.”

“Duhhh.”

“They could have the hypnosis phrase in them.”

“I’m already seeing Duncan as Jim Morrison. Wouldn’t the phrase turn it off?”

Tyler stirs white, yellow, and brown gnarls in the pan. “I’m not sure how it works. The fact that he was using you like a Guinea Pig almost makes me regret apologizing.”

“Can I tell anyone we’re getting married?”

“Not yet. I need to speak to your father. I should have asked him first.”

“The sperm donor is missing in action. For my real dad you’ll need a psychic.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He had a stomach ache. He ignored it. For a year. When he couldn’t ignore it anymore he found out it was cancer. Is that why we outlive you, little things like seeing a doctor when you’re in pain?”

"Time runs at different speeds for the sexes. Women have stopwatches. We have sundials. You call it procrastination."

"Have you ever Googled yourself?"

"If all is vanity and chasing after the wind, that takes the cake. Why would you be Googling me?"

"Better safe than sorry."

"It's too late. You said yes. Speeding in a construction zone shouldn't be illegal on a Sunday. There wasn't a single damn worker."

"This is an interesting website. I think."

"Website?"

"Wait a minute. Are you saying the Holocaust didn't happen or that other genocides were worse?"

Tyler drops a piece of toast and stabs a grapefruit with a butter knife and throws the mutant eggs against a wall. Groucho bounds past him like a rodeo bull and removes every trace as though they never existed.

"It says you're the Eminent Emissary of the Legion of Light. It has your picture. This must be from high school."

"That's from my Cupid's Bow account."

"What was the single white male seeking? Did the special guy seek a special girl? So lame. It's amazing how much people age after they post their pictures."

"I was doing alright. It's better than meeting people in dives like Bobbleheadz."

"Ouch. Where should I have gone? Java Junction is way too intellectual for me. This is one of those free sites you can set up in an hour. It says Duncan is the Trustee of Truth."

"Does he look like the Lizard King?"

"There's no picture of him. So he's a Nazi but you guys are friends? That would make a cool MTV special."

"No, no, no. This is the work of Nelson."

"I thought he was sidelined."

"Rumors of his retirement tend to be exaggerated."



"Geez, this guy is sick."

"Not sick, *evil*. It's no less real than the color red. They're both properties some things happen to have. Can I file a complaint without giving an address? This must be illegal. Defamation? Slander?"

"I think it's more like posting nude pics of your girlfriend without her consent."

"Did that ever happen to you?"

"No!"

"Tell me if it did. All the pranks that have worked against me and Nelson and Duncan can be recycled. Your enemies are my enemies now."

"That would make a beautiful Valentine's Day card. What do you call people who say the Holocaust never happened?"

"Assholes. Writing numbers in a dungeon would be a day at the spa compared to what I should do to him. Bookmark it. We need to finish packing. We'll get breakfast on the road."

"Why can't we use movers?"

"You can't pay someone to keep a secret. Movers are no exception. We need a little elbow room concerning our destination."

Groucho stands against the door and swats it with his paws. His barks quake the floor. "What's in the yard, little Grouchy? Does he always go this berserk when he wants to go out?"

"He already did his business. This is about reconnaissance. All the things he buried in the fall are ripe."

"Poor little Grouchy."

"It's *Groucho*. He can't keep digging up the garden. I don't want the buyer to fall in a hole the size of the Chicxulub crater."

"Is that the one that killed the dinosaurs?"

"It was lead paint, fluoride, chem trails, and vaccines."

"I was into dinosaurs when I was little. Did that make me a tomboy?"

"Duncan and I used to dig for bones. One night we dug a quicksand hole in Nelson's yard." An asymmetric grin spreads

across Tyler's face. His eyes lose their focus. The only barrier separating Then from Now is a distance finite and definite, measurable by the hands of a clock, each minute connected to the next like a series of steps leading inexorably between two towns. Yet that time long ago could just as well be Atlantis. "His mom fell in. Then he got stuck trying to rescue her. One of the neighbors had to call the fire department."

"They could have died."

"They didn't. We were kids."

"Maybe Nelson's the way he is because of what you guys did to him. Did you ever think of that?"

"Makes perfect sense. His actions are nothing more than a line of dominoes. His mom falls in a mudhole and the dominoes lead straight to him setting up that evil website. He's not responsible. How barbaric of me to blame him. Then again, my actions are just dominoes too, including the blaming."

"Easy, big shooter. Did you guys ever find any fossils?"

"This was classic. One night I buried a plastic skull. It was about the size of a football. I forget which species. It looked like real bone. When Duncan found it he was dancing around, jumping up and down."

"How long until you told him?"

"Why would I ruin his fun? The science teacher showed him a marking that proved it came from Hong Kong. He didn't talk to me for a month."

"I dated a guy who thought dinosaurs were smarter than we give them credit for. He said there's no solid evidence anything killed them. All sorts of other explanations are ignored."

"That was an independent thinker, a slender athlete surrounded by gluttons at the ever-changing buffet of science. God might have used dinosaurs for a specific purpose before retiring them, just like a carmaker pulls a line of vehicles, sometimes for no obvious reason."

"He said they mastered space travel and had nuclear weapons. That huge crater and all the fossil layers are from a war they fought before fleeing the planet."

Tyler dumps a drawer into a U-haul box and shakes his head. Oftentimes the enemy of your ideological enemy is a loony tune. "I sure have some big shoes to fill. Talk about illustrious predecessors."

"I bet you've met a few gems at Java Junction before finding me."

"You have to admit that's a bit nutty. Did your ex think the aliens who visit us are returning to the old country?"

"They hate us because we're the furry bugs who survived Armageddon. We treat their descendants like shit, raising them in tiny cages for KFC and hunting them."

"I give up. How does a brontosaurus control a spaceship?"

"Tyler, this guy was so smart. That's why it was weird. You could have an intelligent conversation with him for hours. Then one night he drops this bomb. We were watching some show with computer-generated dinosaurs. They're eating each other and hatching from eggs and doing all the usual stuff and he starts ripping on it, saying they had a civilization greater than ours."

"How long until you dumped dinosaur boy?"

"It had nothing to do with that. He was more interesting than guys who talk about NASCAR or football or video games. I tuned it out most of the time. Every guy has zany beliefs about something."

Tyler throws a shirt on the floor and glares at her.

"That's not what I meant."

"What are my zany beliefs?"

"You're the most normal guy of all time. Should we leave under the cover of darkness or wear disguises to avoid being killed by your friends?"

Groucho jumps on the couch and looks out the window. Wolfish properties crest his features like some distorted shadow

from a distant object, as though the blueprint was left out in a storm, smearing the design, changing its shape. What careless chronicler neglected to fix the boundaries? Are the ones demarcating man indelible? Tyler turns away.

"Look at Grouchy's tail. He's my chubby pony." Vicki's arms barely encircle his barrel chest. He leans back on her like Frankenstein's teddy bear. She buries her face in his neck and makes pig grunts. "How's he in the car?"

"He's fine as long as he's in front. He has to see where we're going and what's happening at all times."

"We can't both fit."

"I know. The stereo sounds better in back."

"I don't want to listen to Alternative Spirituality."

"Welcome to my world."

"When are we leaving?"

"An hour ago. We can't take any chances."

"The travel guides for Alaska and British Columbia aren't exactly subtle. Are you going to nail them to the front door?"

Tyler tapes a box shut. Groucho sniffs a mélange of anxiety and ecstasy and longing and exhaustion and sensations there are no words for. The ones that don't last long enough to name are no less real on account of their brevity. "What did you tell Kelly?"

"That Duncan was stalking me. That's all any of my friends know. The details are insane. No offense."

"But she knows where we're going."

"I told her to call the cops if he approaches her, to not even talk to him."

"He won't. Harassment would violate his probation. Wait a second. Why didn't I think of that? We could have enticed him to—"

"Tyler!"

"Nelson is the one we have to worry about."

"I'm sure he isn't going door to door looking for us. Doesn't the fact that he's resorting to bogus websites prove he's unable to find you?"

"I don't know what he's capable of. I keep thinking of Duncan calling me from jail, begging me to explain how it was a practical joke."

"That went way too far. Nelson's the one who crossed the big line."

Tyler observes his new ally. They say living well is the best revenge. Could such a hackneyed cliché be true? "Nelson doesn't recognize any moral boundaries. There's nothing to stop him from going further. I have this nightmare where I'm in the hospital and I can hear the doctor telling me about an operation. The voice sounds familiar but I don't know who it is. After the anesthesiologist turns on the happy gas the doctor stands in front of me and lifts off his mask and it's Nelson. I try to run or scream but I can't move. Then he lifts off his face and crumples it up and there's a dark hole behind it. The longer I look into the darkness the more terrified I get. I try to see to the bottom but the attempt fries my brain, like it wasn't meant to look there or think those thoughts. I can hear it sizzle and smell it burn and feel it dripping out my ears. When I wake up after the operation everything looks upside down and far away and my legs and arms have been replaced by chess pieces."

"Which ones?"

"The legs are castles. The arms are bishops."

Groucho watches intently, his bucket head cocked as though trying to determine if his master's dream represents the disguised fulfillment of a suppressed wish or a terrible portent.

"Did he make changes to any other part of your body?" says Vicki, putting a finger to her lips.

"That has a chess theme too. Those little stubby guys become kings if they make it across the board, right?"

"Pawns are promoted to queens."

"Then it's worse than I thought."

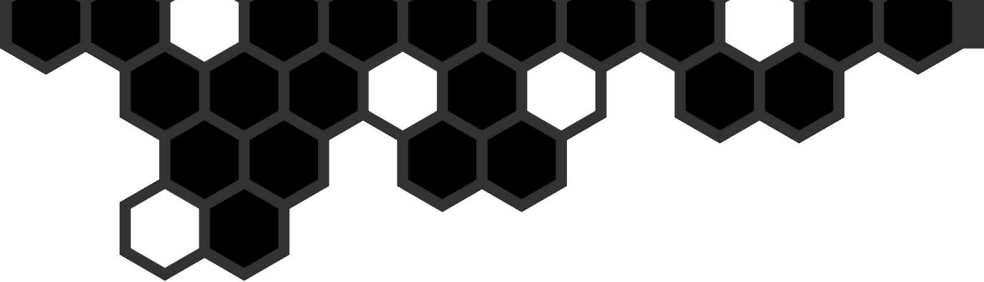
“Queens are the most powerful piece on the board.”

“But they’re female.”

“Sexist.”

“Damn straight. Especially about that part of me. What’s weird is I can’t stand chess.”

“That’s why it’s a nightmare.”



## TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Unconscious Ju Jitsu*

“Welcome to Superclips. My name is Kelly. What am I doing for you today?”

“Surprise me. You can’t make it any worse.”

“You just need a little styling.”

“What this hair needs is a good lesson. I’ll teach it to mess with me. Leave an inch on top and a half inch on the back and sides.”

“Scissors or clippers?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“You wouldn’t believe what some people think makes a difference.”

“This is your lucky day. You get to pick. Sure is quiet around here.”

“You’re my second customer.”

“What happened to the other girl who worked here?”

“Which other?”

“I think her name was Valerie. Something with a V.”

“She’s . . . at a different one now. So, you off work today?”

“I thought I’d slip out for a haircut between clients.”

“Are you in construction?”

“Just doing some remodeling around my office.”

“You a lawyer?”

"I help people with a different type of problem, internal ones."

"A psychologist?"

"Getting warmer. The only thing they do is ask about your feelings and throw pills at you. If you want to drop twenty pounds, quit smoking, or improve your self-esteem in a few visits with no side-effects, who do you see?"

She stops clipping and stands in front of the chair. "A hypnotist?"

"*Hypnotherapist*. Fully licensed. My specialty is Vibrato Hypnosis. It's more powerful than the ordinary version."

"Does that really work?"

"The only debate on its effectiveness is propaganda from pharmaceutical companies. If you're susceptible, and not everyone is, it harnesses the power of your willpower. It's unconscious ju jitsu."

"Can you make someone do something they normally wouldn't? We saw this guy at a comedy club make people talk like babies. He made one woman forget every word except *airplane*. It was kind of scary. He sent her back to her table and then he called for volunteers. She raises her hand and he asks what her name is and she says, 'Airplane.' She knew something was way wrong. Then he asks what she's drinking and she says, 'Airplane.'"

Nelson leans back and watches a ceiling fan. Its *whirr* only exists if he concentrates on it. Sometimes everything seems like this. Why couldn't he have thought of hypnosis first? If there were a panel of judges watching their skirmishes, Duncan (of all people!) would receive the award for the most inventive and sweeping prank. The Toad would take home the Oscar. The judges might even subtract points from him for stooping to cruel and unusual – *To hell with it. The only "judge" is the last man standing.*

"He asks what her boyfriend's name is, her favorite food, and a bunch of other things and she starts bawling, 'Airplane!'"



Airplane!’ like it’s the worst curse in the world. Her boyfriend tells him the game’s over. The hypnotist says he should take her home and see if he likes it when she moans it during sex. ‘This is your captain speaking. What am I riding?’ That’s when her boyfriend jumped on the stage and threatened him.”

Nelson envisions Duncan and Tyler dropped off near Miss Sockwell’s apartment after a hypnosis session. They go into a crowded bar for directions and use the only word they know, a vile epitaph charged with centuries of scalding hate. They’re chased from the premises like pariahs, then brutally stomped in the alley, then tasered by cops who try to help but resent the slur, then beaten half to death in a holding cell as they plead for mercy with the only word at their disposal. Sorrow descends from the realization that neither would let anyone shake anything within a mile of him.

“If you can do that to a person you can completely control them,” says Kelly. “There’s no way she would have normally forgotten every word except one.”

“People at parties are more susceptible by virtue of their presence there. They want to have tricks played on them. It’s called the Moebius Effect. It’s a shame this powerful force is used as a magic trick when there are so many people who could benefit from it, so many people hurting. I would never ask a client to put blind trust in me. That’s a violation of the ethics of my profession. During my sessions a third party is always present. She’s a grad student in cognitive science. And I have no objection to sessions being recorded.”

“How do you tell if someone’s susceptible?”

“Whether you’ll be a good candidate can be determined in less than a minute.”

“I take an antidepressant. If I get hypnotized would I still need to? It kind of kills my— Well, I don’t like the side-effects.”

“Ninety percent of my clients used to take those poisons. The main reason people consult me is to get off them.”

“Can you see if I’d be a good candidate?”

"I can't hypnotize you here. I can only do that in my office after a careful assessment. You have to fill out some forms about your medical history, and I need to interview you about your expectations."

"But can you check to see if I'd go under?"

"I could gauge your aptitude. But I shouldn't. You're working. I'll give you my card and you can set up an appointment."

"C'mon. Please. Your haircut's free."

"Turn sideways. A little more. There. Keep your eyes straight ahead on the door. Watch the red light in the mirror with your peripheral vision. Do not look directly at the laser pointer. Take three deep breaths."

He zips the light in circles like a fiery lasso, practitioner of an alchemy stripped of all mystery and grandeur, replaced by a technique no different than rubbing a lizard's stomach to induce slumber. Outrage accompanies thoughts of all the lazy morons using Duncan's puerile book to turn women into automatons, cheating at the most fundamental game, just like they purchase term papers and pay others to take their exams, just like they'll spend the remainder of their fraudulent little lives cheating, as though the distance separating cradle and grave isn't an obstacle course in some great race but a series of inconveniences. How do you compete with desperate animals like Duncan and Tyler? Kill or capture them before they trample you.

"What does the sign on the door say?" he says.

"Closed."

"That's because your mind is closed to everything except what I have to say. Do you see a light out of the corner of your eye?"

"Yes, a flashing red one."

"That's a stoplight. It stops all ideas from entering except the ones I'm going to tell you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

*How did that brain-damaged frog goof this up? Over-confidence?*

*He didn't. Where have you been living? What employers would you need to list on a W-2?*

"The roads inside your head are empty except for my voice and the thoughts it gives you. How do you feel?"

"Not good or bad. Quiet."

"When you shut your eyes there will no longer be a closed sign or a flashing light. My words will be able to move anywhere inside your mind. Anywhere at all. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Shut your eyes." He walks to the door and locks it and flips the sign and returns to the chair. "Where is Vicki?"

. . .

"Why are they getting married in Sedona?" says Nelson.

"Vicki thinks it's romantic and beautiful. Tyler doesn't care. He says they're already married because they became one flesh."

"How much money do you have in the register and safe?"

"About \$900."

"Bring all of it to me."

She does, her movements fluid as though arising from the clandestine dynamism of her will and not some fledgling puppeteer.

"Is that a real security camera or a dummy?"

"It's real."

"Do you know where the hard drive for it is, where all the data is stored?"

"Yeah."

"Go get that too."

She does.

"Have you ever seen a man named Duncan?"

"Yes. I helped Tyler and Vicki play a mean joke on him."

Nelson pumps his fists. "Listen carefully. Duncan and Tyler are white supremacists fighting over Vicki. She doesn't know this. Close your eyes. When I tell you to open them I'll be gone and you won't remember I was ever here. Duncan will be standing in front of you with a big handgun, a revolver made out of dark steel. No matter what he does you won't call Vicki. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

. . .

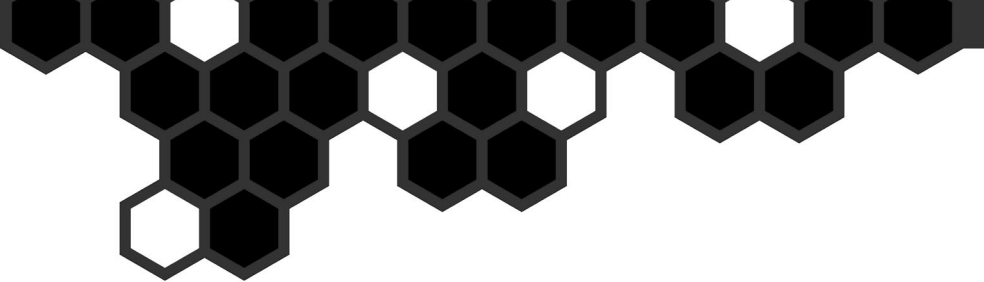
"Look at me."

Sprawled under the counter, Kelly cradles her head and moans.

"If I have to say it again I'll shoot you."

She peers at him through one eye. Its counterpart is swollen shut.

"That's for messing with the Legion of Light. Remember my face. You're lucky I didn't chop you up."



## TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Vicki the Ptolemaic Astronomer*

The desert's beauty comes from the absence of Life, the sanctuary it provides from an infestation afflicting the rest of the planet, a haunting reminder that the origin of sand is every bit as mysterious and deserving of explanation and awe. Don't reflect on this too long. Change the subject before the alien landscape proves Life is anomalous, unnecessary, unwelcome, unimportant, fleeting, a cluster of contingencies destined to return to inert particles. Project some vague spiritual essence onto the dunes and find a gift shop.

Groucho and Vicki peer through a crack in the drapes of their motel. A resident in an adjacent room is entertaining male friends at the rate of one every half hour. Vicki cringes at the logistics, pities the necessity. Across from them, beyond a silver ribbon of highway, the sunset smolders in the sand like the cherry of a cigar abandoned in an ashtray. Desolate and wind-swept halfway to oblivion, a bar down the street bleeds a pool of dark shadows as though stabbed by its neon cactus sign.

Vicki closes the drapes and listens to Tyler snore and watches TV and rubs Groucho's neck and turns the TV off and looks out the window. An impossibly rotund man with an inner tube of fat below his belt steps out of the hospitality room and looks both ways before waddling to his truck. *That poor woman*, thinks Vicki. *That poor man. Who else would?* Before her skeleton bursts

from her skin she slips on a pair of jeans and sticks a Post-it on the mirror:

I'm at my bachelorette party up the block. No boys allowed!!!

She walks outside where the great cigar on the horizon is about to be snuffed out. It must be what burns all the moisture from the air. She looks back at the room where a grizzly bear nose fogs the glass. She walks past empty cars and cars with men nervously checking their watches.

. . .

In the corner of the bar stands an anthropomorphic cactus complete with a cowboy hat and leather vest. Above six bottles of fancy tequila, Vicki's reflection nibbles a French fry. *You don't even know him* has been displaced by the recognition, obvious in retrospect, that Tyler is right. Her friends with their multilayered and circuitous *relationships* have reduced love to the spectacle of a hypochondriac testing his bathwater every few seconds, waiting until it's perfect.

Tyler said the absurd cautions and procrastinations come from a lack of belief in life's essential goodness and the contradictory idea that it comes with a warranty. Pick one. If you know it's good you don't need a receipt. If it's fundamentally malign what assurance can there be?

She orders another Margarita and drums her nails on the bar. The door opens. She lowers her head and smiles. No doubt his lecture will highlight the importance of redundant security, how there's food and booze in the room, how taking needless risks when they've come this far is crazy. Is there anything better than the feeling that someone loves you? Does its absence not devalue your existence, as if confirming the infallibility of market forces, how all things are only worth the value ascribed to them by others?

A man sits on the stool beside her. She turns to him. *Don't stare. Quit staring! What's wrong with you?*

"It looks awful, don't it?" he says.

Above a denim shirt with a bootlace tie, clusters of scar tissue and gristle line the ravine between his forehead and jaw. The single eye seems forlorn, as though outraged by its abandonment, a lighthouse surveying a dead volcanic lake. Exposed teeth demonstrate the illusory essence of emotions. The Big Grin that lurks behind all smiles and frowns will endure long after they're forgotten. It was there all along, mocking them.

"This ain't contagious," he tells the bartender. "A triple Jim Beam on the rocks. Get yourself something. And a drink for the lady."

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to—"

"You should have seen it before all the fancy surgery. Now that was a mess."

*Is he joking?* She glances at the reflection beside hers, forgetting that his post-face can convey no clues about the secrets behind it.

Amid slurping sounds he says, "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, ma'am. I hate to do it. But I'd hate myself even more if I didn't. Your boyfriend done this to me. Tyler done this to my face."

A scream fails to reach Vicki's throat. "What are you talking about?" says a voice. It sounds like her, though she's locked in a distant room reconstructing Reality, which does not arrive in one solid piece but requires constant assembly. Just when it seems intact a new part arrives that necessitates starting from scratch.

"I bet he told you the truth but not the whole truth. The man has a way with words. I'll give him that. Did he say this was about pranks and revenge? Is he still saying he's a Samurai or is he Pentecostal by now? Never knew quite what to make of a man who majored in Religious Studies so he'd seem more interesting to the opposite sex. Most guys just get tattoos. Proof is in the pudding, I guess. No disrespect." What sounds like a runny nose

muffles the man's speech until he wipes a stream of drool with a napkin. "Sorry. I'm not as good at talking as I used to be."

She guzzles her Margarita and winces. "Why would Tyler do that?"

"Me, him, and Duncan worked for a man named Nelson. Me and Nelson had a bit of a falling out. In our line of work disagreements with the boss ain't a great idea. Early retirement isn't an option. We don't have a pension plan."

Like some beleaguered Ptolemaic astronomer postulating more and more epicycles to account for the sun's rotation in the face of a more plausible theory, she acknowledges the inadequacies of Tyler's explanation. "What line of work?" she asks, then regrets asking.

"We was running smack mostly, and meth."

*Of course! What else would explain all this? Pranks? You're so stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid ...*

"Nelson sent Tyler after me. I was walking to my car after working out at the YMCA. Bitter cold night. I can remember it clear as a bell. Guy in the car next to mine was looking under his hood, fumbling with jumper cables. I thought the fool was trying to jump his own car. I saw Tyler's face for an instant. He looked all concerned, like he didn't want to do it. Or didn't want to miss. It was a weird green color. I thought it was Gatorade, that he'd tripped and spilled Gatorade. You'd think it would have smelled. I didn't smell nothing. Just made this awful crackling sound like a bathtub full of Rice Krispies. I remember when they removed the bandages, looking at this pulpy mess before most of the skin came off. You know what I thought? I felt lucky to still have one eye. How's that for optimism. It faded quick as the pain pills."

Vicki rearranges the shattered pieces of Tyler, trying not to cut her hands any worse.

"No, she's fine," he tells the bartender, waving him away. "I'm just the bearer of bad news. Ma'am, how involved are you



with him? Rumor has it he's gonna testify against Nelson. Did he mention that? Why didn't the government set you up better? Not that it matters. I don't care where you hide. He'll find you."

"Why aren't you out to get him?"

"I most definitely am. But I'm not out to get you. I'm telling you this as nicely as I know how. You do not want to be around when I get even with him. And if by some miracle I fail to, you sure as hell don't want to be here when Nelson catches up with him. I won't use a man's woman to get revenge. Nelson will start there."

"But Duncan and Tyler *were* playing jokes on each other. Duncan could have killed Tyler if he wanted. Instead he sent me to—"

"Ma'am, look at me."

She doesn't.

"Ma'am, please. Does this look like a joke to you? Maybe Nelson's using Duncan to remind Tyler he can run but he can't hide. I don't know how their sick minds work and I'm glad I don't. I do know that the man you're with did this to me on account of another man telling him to. He followed that order and dozens more like a trained animal. I have babies I'll never see again 'cause I don't want them to see their daddy like this. Here." He opens his wallet. Vicki's tears blur everything but the outline of two little blond girls. The man pulls out a wad of bills. "All I got is \$350. Take a cab to the bus station and get as far away from him as possible. Do it now. Standing by your man is suicide. And foolish. You have no idea who he is. There, I said my part. No matter what happens my conscience is clear."



## TWENTY-NINE

### *United We Fall*

“You want me to tell twelve adults you were playing pranks that got out of hand,” says the attorney.

“Truth is stranger than fiction,” says Duncan.

“Here, let me write that down. I’ll prepare a chart. Our expert witness will be an English professor. Truth ... is ... stranger ... than—”

“What other defense are we supposed to make?”

The attorney arranges folders and removes papers. “I don’t think *we* should be making one. I want you to have a separate trial. A co-conspirator can have one if a joint trial will be prejudicial to him. I have arguments to that effect.”

“It’s going to be awkward at first, but Tyler is in the same boat.”

“I suggest you push him overboard.”

“If we can get our stories straight won’t that strengthen our case?”

The attorney stares into the fluorescent sun scouring the gray room and taps a pen on the table. “The prosecution is going to portray you as the cold-blooded ringleader, and you want your disciple on trial with you. Brilliant.”

“He’s not my disciple.”

“With separate trials I can argue that you were a hapless accessory, an unwitting dupe.”

"His attorney will say the same thing about him."

"That's how the game is played."

"All the evidence is circumstantial, right? Isn't there a chance none of this will stick?"

"Here we go. Where does everyone get the idea that circumstantial evidence is counterfeit or third rate? There are men on death row who would beg to differ. Why were you hiding out in your garage when the FBI arrived?"

"Someone put poop in my microwave."

The attorney reads through spectacles perched low on his nose but forgoes the clarity when looking at his client, as though he does not want a better view of the side he has taken in battle. "An incendiary substance which either failed to detonate or was designed to emit a lachrymatory agent, possibly a vesicant. Analysis pending."

"It was poop."

"Why can't an incendiary device contain excrement? That's all they have to say. If they invoke the Patriot Act they can say a fart is a weapon of mass destruction. Why were you armed? Someone pooped in your microwave so you grabbed a .357 and hid out?"

"I was living in my garage because the house stank so bad I couldn't breathe."

"They're going to tell the jury you lured federal agents with threatening emails—also a felony, by the way—to a house filled with a noxious gas while you waited in the garage to ambush them. How's that for circumstantial evidence? There's more. The hairdresser you assaulted is out of the hospital."

"That's a complete lie! I never touched her."

"She'll make a sympathetic witness. The pictures are gruesome. She claims you beat her senseless because she got mixed up with members of the Legion of Light. And you threatened to chop her up. Nice touch. Good choice of words."

Huge doors open and close in the distance, shaking the conference chamber. The attorney points a pen at his client. "United you'll fall. Divided you might be out before your golden years, depending on the plea deal."

"Can't we just talk to him?"

"It's your money."

The door opens. Two would-be defensive linemen deliver Tyler. A baggy orange uniform droops off him, shapeless like a rotting pumpkin.

"I was telling Duncan it's in your best interest to have separate trials. Why make it easier on them?"

The wraith figure sits at the table. His vacant eyes sweep one corner of the room, then the next, then back to the first, then nowhere in particular. "So one of us could get sent to prison and one might not," he says like a man pronouncing words in a language he doesn't know.

"That's a best-case scenario. It would increase the odds of the other getting a mistrial."

"We need to stand before a judge and tell him exactly what happened," says Tyler.

The attorney removes his glasses and examines the lenses. "I'll need to have a stroke or major head injury before I put either of you on the witness stand. When you sit up there the jury expects a coherent explanation. There are situations in life, and we've all had them, when nothing could conceivably count as an explanation. This is one of those times. Failure to provide a reasonable account will be held against you. It won't get you sympathy. Have you ever heard of Occam's razor?"

"I didn't think it applied to legal matters," says Duncan.

"Nothing is more applicable. It's not only a principle of scientific theories. The human mind naturally gravitates toward the simpler of two explanations."

"It's your job to show why the truth is a little more complicated this time," says Duncan.

"A little? Your defense is that a candle burnt a string and released a bowling ball that opened a cage and the bird shit on the trigger of a gun. We have to offer something at least as simple as what the prosecution has."

Tyler looks in his general direction. "The time for prevarications has passed."

"Then why are you talking to me? What do you think I do for a living?"

"A judge needs to know what happened. From us."

"This isn't like going to the principal's office and admitting you're the naughty boys who started a food fight."

"It's the right thing to do."

"Will it include an explanation of how different parts of a woman wound up buried in your yards? I can try to distract the jury from that minor circumstantial tidbit, but it's not going to be easy."

"We didn't do that," says Duncan.

"The judge and jury need to hear the facts," says Tyler. "The truth is the truth."

"I'll put that on the same chart with the truth is stranger than fiction. You know what's so great about this defense? It works for every case. No matter what any client says for the rest of my career, no matter how insane it sounds, I'll march in front of the court with my little chart and hold it high and the judge will send everyone home."

"Are you calling us insane?" says Tyler.

"Not in the legal sense. That's a bitch to prove, almost never worth trying. In the everyday sense that I would be insane to tell a jury that the reason two neo-Nazis were starting a cemetery chain for dismembered African Americans was because some invincible mystery man was playing pranks on them."

"There's no proof either of us killed her," says Duncan.

"Imagine you just opened a letter saying you've been chosen for jury duty. Pretend you're too dumb to think of an excuse,

too illiterate to write a note describing it, or too lazy to ask your doctor for one. In the rare event you're a patriotic citizen with more than a tenth-grade education who accepts his civic duty, the prosecution and I will make damn sure you're not selected. Now imagine sitting in the jury box and looking at pictures of a badly decomposed human puzzle. Imagine reading excerpts from a website that presents a revisionist spin on the Holocaust. What do you do next? Here's a hint. You won't spend two months debating the threshold of reasonable doubt."

Chords spring taut on Tyler's neck. "I'm not a Nazi!"

"Why didn't you make any attempt to pull the plug on that website if you knew about it? Were you taking it in stride?"

"I was on the run from Nelson," he says through clenched teeth.

"Of course. And it was a coincidence you left town immediately after the body parts were buried. They have experts who can pin that down to the day. It has to do with the bugs that eat bodies. I wish I had a glamorous job like that."

"Nelson must have timed it to—"

"To make it look like you did it. Perfect. This keeps getting better. You've given me a generic defense I can use for the rest of my career. Ladies and gentleman of the jury, I know it looks like my clients are guilty. I concede that all the evidence points directly to them. This is actually full proof that they're the victims of a fiendish practical joke. The more evidence there is, the more innocent they are. Yippee! I'm Alice in fucking Wonderland. The defense rests."

"But we *are* the victims of a practical joke," says Duncan. "Lots of them."

"Here's what I'll do. I'll pack the jury with 9-11 Truthers and Roswell conspiracy nuts. They love this shit. The trial will be over by noon."

"Why are you attacking us?" cries Duncan. "You're here to support us."

"You think I'm a hardass? The DA makes me look like Mary Poppins. You do not appreciate the depth of shit you're in. It's deeper than the Mariana Trench and you've got an anchor chained to your legs. This is why neither of you can testify. It's not about telling the truth. It's about damage control and kicking up dust and praying one of the jurors doubts your guilt. Why didn't *you* bother to remove your Nazi website?"

"I didn't know I had one," says Duncan. "What kind of pathetic loser Googles himself. I was blackout drunk all week, grieving the loss of a friend."

Tyler turns to him. A strange life fills his eyes as though some mad scientist flipped a switch. "So how's Vicki? What spell did you use to bring her back?"

Duncan gapes at him. "You son of a— I feel horrible about what happened to her. How can you even joke about it? If I'd known *that* was a risk I never in a thousand years would have— How dare you."

"Who's joking? It's uncanny how one moment they're dead and the next they're up and doing your bidding like zombies. Did you have to feed her brains?"

Duncan puts his face on the table and weeps. "Why, why are you saying these terrible things? What are you talking about? I'll never forgive myself for what happened."

"I apologized to you. For everything. I apologized."

Feces graffiti flashes behind Duncan's eyes. The smell still burns his nose. *Why were you hiding out in your garage when the FBI arrived?* echoes down corridors in his mind. "This is all your fault. You set me up."

"Don't let your magic powers cloud your head, bobble boy. The only thing Vicki feels for you is pity because you're fat and bald and a pervert who plays with dolls. She suffers from a Mother Theresa complex. If there were any lepers on your block she wouldn't give you the time of day."

Between convulsive sobs Duncan says, "You're just pissed because she preferred guys outside the bell curve, inch worm."

Like some golem arising Tyler stands and shouts, "That's it! I'm pleading guilty and taking you with me."

"Do neurosurgeons have patients who tell them what to do?" says the attorney. "Brain surgery is child's play compared to maneuvering through the legal system. Just sit down and relax."

Tyler raises a trembling fist. "Like the army at Masada, I'll slay myself in order to steal the victory from you. Like Sampson pulling the temple of Dagon down on the Philistines ..."

"There's no death penalty in Wisconsin," says the attorney.

"It's symbolic," says Tyler.

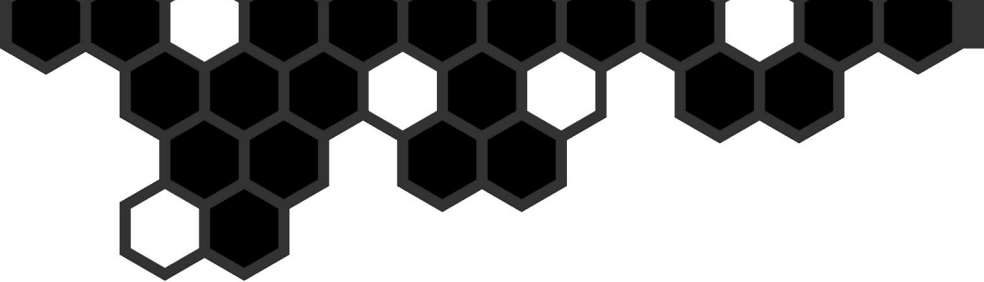
"Of your stupidity. Look, you're going to screw things up for both of you. Calm down and let me do the thinking. Your brilliance got you here. You'll need the insights of a third party from now on. Don't even burp without asking me."

Tyler pounds on the door until guards arrive. "I demand to speak to the judge and the prosecutor. I waive all my rights to silence and an attorney. We killed that woman and buried her. It was Duncan's idea but I went along with it. I will gladly testify against this evil man."

"I think you were right," says Duncan. "We should have separate trials."

"I'm sure your next attorney will agree."





## THIRTY

### *The Spoils*

*If I had died in my sleep this day would be for nothing, a complete waste. No one but me knows what to do.*

With the curiosity of a boy riding the zoo train, Nelson sits on the bus and studies people hurrying to work, their faces solemn or weary, their bodies moving faster than nature intended, like frenzied ants fleeing the beam of a magnifying glass, which they are.

Is it more incredible that they exist or that none will remember this day in two weeks? The most amazing thing about consciousness is the insouciance of those endowed with it. Nelson's disdain for the pomp of their empty lives is fueled by the certainty that the day will be cherished by him whenever he unlocks it from the wine cellar of memory, as if it could ever taste sweeter.

He steps off the bus with an alpine backpack and walks down the street. The eyes of strangers connect to the Universal Mind of a cosmic ignoramus. It goes about its bankrupt business, dozing through another day, shrugging off questions of why it's here and how it came to be, ignoring Nelson's focus on the supreme gravitas of his undertaking.

In George Webb he eats three scrambled eggs and four strips of bacon and drinks a pot of coffee. He looks over his shoulder before pulling a map from his backpack. Yellow dots from a

fluorescent highlighter spiral toward the center like some Day-Glo galaxy. He pays and walks outside and stands on the curb and watches the sun sparkle on a crushed can of Pabst in the gutter.

He's HERE right NOW and it's a miracle because an infinite amount of time elapsed to reach this moment yet infinity can never be traversed.

But it happened. For him. Time crossed the perilous ocean of infinity just for him.

He kicks the can and walks to the alley behind the bank and stops at a telephone pole and looks in every direction before opening his backpack and removing a roll of duct tape and an instrument the size of a pen. On the back of the pole where no one would expect anything to be concealed he secures the device and hurries to the next pole where he checks for observers before repeating the process.

. . .

Shadows spread east, the discarded molds of their sources. The digital clock on a Credit Union posts officious propaganda like some authoritarian android, trusted by all except one brave rebel. Nelson marches behind the building with his shoulders back and his face pink as the fading light on the horizon and attaches his last five thermometers to the boards on a fence.

The truth of the night extinguishes the illusions of the day, replaces them with the certainty of darkness. Nelson sits in a gyro restaurant eating breaded mushrooms and drawing a graph where he can record the temperatures in the weeks and months and years to come.



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The author would like to thank Kristie at 2Faced Design for a great cover and Rob Siders at 52 Novels for his book interior design.