

GENERIC TALES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

By

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May, 2014

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For Danielle

Introduction

The collection presented here bears the title *Generic Tales* as a sort of self-deprecating pun. The chosen structural conceit binding together these un-linked stories is that each is put forward as an example of a popular genre, as indicated in the Table of Contents.

It seems to be a matter of some dispute whether ‘generic’ is the appropriate adjective form for the noun ‘genre,’ but there is no better alternative, and I’m amused by the connotation. Were it possible for graphic design to enter into this (though a thesis, unlike a proper book, is never judged by its cover), I’d like to imagine it with a stark Pop Art cover, just red or blue on white, looking like a store-brand detergent or box of crackers, perhaps with an asterisked disclaimer or a banner reading “Now With 20% More Story!”

During my undergraduate career (2001-2005) as well as in courses at the UH Creative Writing Program, I was exposed to the controversy around genre fiction and its defense against perceived highbrow prejudices, a debate instigated most forcefully by Michael Chabon. While I do not necessarily wish to identify myself with this critique (to the extent that it rests on counter-prejudices regarding ‘literary’ fiction), I nevertheless remain broadly sympathetic to the defense of our less ‘classy’ cultural forms. Yet simultaneously I am a confirmed snob, who despairs of philistinism on a daily basis.

My take on art in general is characterized by this paradoxical blend of typically American democratic egalitarianism and the reactionary cultural conservatism (in the secular, apolitical sense) of stalwart canon defenders such as Harold Bloom. Though,

again, he's a clear and convenient exemplar rather than a specific influence. The barbarians are all around, to be sure, and given half a chance they'll burn down the citadel, but I can't pretend I don't sympathize with their unstudied responses, or that much of what we now enshrine didn't bubble up from the bottom.

Culturally I was born into a received lineage, whose recognition matters...but the marble busts in that hall would include those of Mark Twain, Mickey Mouse, and Marvin Gaye. The intermingling of highbrow and lowbrow was more or less an accomplished fact by the time I was conscious enough to enter the cultural arena as a spectator, let alone a creative professional.

So although I read and write plenty of 'literary' work, I am delighted to present the products of those endeavors as genre specimens, not without irony but without squeamishness.

Nevertheless, I recognize the limitations of this taxonomized or institutionalized approach to imaginative realms. Staleness is inevitable in the rush to recapture what everybody liked about that last thing. The flipside, originality for its own sake, is also something I believe in, and was also characteristic of the 20th century that was the background I inherited. The modernist drive to push frontiers, to make one's mark, to drive things forward, to tell the unvarnished but irreproducible truth, to be a serious *sui generis* genius with a unique and unmistakable angle on the eternal verities: I get that too.

There's probably no way of deliberately setting about to do so, but sometimes I think that maybe the most staggering honor a writer can attain is to create a new cliché, to be someone like Poe or Conan Doyle (those are two of the prime examples on a mass-market level, but one could probably name literary writers who have inspired the same

kind of compulsive imitation). Where these formulae come from—why they catch on, and then retain such a tenacious grip in the marketplace and in our dreams—will always prove difficult to assess. I suppose one could say they're plucked from some kind of Jungian collective unconscious, but that's more metaphor than explanation.

The most vital rationale for compiling such disparate excursions into one volume under a rubric like this is that while pursuing my MFA, I felt a driving need to experiment with a wide variety of voices, characters, subjects, themes, settings, and yes, genres. If this collection can be said to lack unity, well, I don't consider that a weakness. Future psychoanalytic biographers may wish to note that I also got married during graduate school, so perhaps this literary fear of commitment represents some kind of displaced or sublimated promiscuity.

Yet now, having put all these stories under the same roof, it's astonishing to me to see how many themes they do in fact share. Most of them are concerned in some way with a nexus of related concepts: birth, rebirth, innocence, sex, regression, a tunneling into childhood...not only its bliss, but its terrors and pains, and the connections between both of those sides. Perhaps this collection might just as well have been called by an alternate title I was considering at one point for "Precocious": *Juvenilia*.

I think it fits that term in multiple senses of the word. While I'm not ashamed of this work—even at its most bizarre, clumsy, or distasteful—I must honestly say I can only see it as a clearing-out of early obsessions, rather than what one might call an attainment of artistic maturity. The 'genre' conceit seemed like a sturdy framework for corralling these unruly calves and foals. The familiar strictures of genres themselves offer a comfortingly regressive 'escapism,' or so we often hear.

It must be admitted that when pigeonholing these stories, some of the designations I came up with were arbitrary to various degrees. “Hermit Kingdoms” and particularly “A Conditioned Reflex” might have been dubbed historical fiction. “The Reject” could easily have been called fantasy, or a very ‘soft’ sort of science fiction. For that matter, both it and “Munchausen in Airwalks” are told by ‘young adult’ narrative voices, even if those belong to two extremely different characters. The latter story is primarily a comedy, though all of the stories have an element of humor, I hope. I have a romance story and a horror story in the works (and yes, they are two separate pieces). In the future, I could see myself adding a western story and a mystery and so on, to make it a full book-length sampler of my own peculiar takes on most of the popular genres. However, I don’t think I risk any demerits by saying that it’s doubtful whether I’ll ever pursue publishing this. More likely, I’ll take what I’ve learned and apply it to a new project. On that note, let’s move on to the ‘reflective’ aspect of this introduction specified by the guidelines for the MFA thesis.

Although I’m (provisionally) quite proud of myself for coming forth and exposing enough of this work to complete the MFA, as a writer I know I’m still far from where I would like to be. I’m already refreshed by the idea of turning the page on this body of work, even while preparing to send it off for approval. Individual stories in this collection may well be suitable for publication; if so, suggestions of what, where, and how are eagerly solicited...and if not, that’s welcome news in its own way too. The question becomes, what next? How do I recapture a relationship with my writing where the passion outweighs the weariness and terror?

This forum for an exit interview or debriefing is itself a useful step. To say that graduate school did not go as well as I had envisioned would be an understatement, at least from the vantage point of Spring 2014, though from there it already looks better than it did from 2013's or 2012's. With the sweet grace of time (be it enlightening, analgesic, or adaptively distorting), I trust that it will become clear how this experience fit into the overall arc of my creative path and career. At the present time, it's still fuzzy and fraught, though I'm gaining perspective and confidence with each moment. A sort of convalescence is called for, and already in progress.

When I entered the program in August 2009, I was an utterly different person. I was ambitious and cocky and happy and self-possessed. My family was intact and my social life (I lived here in Houston already) was rich and varied. During the three years in which I expected to finish my MFA, I instead endured an unprecedented series of developmental and emotional cataclysms: marked the deaths of my two oldest, closest friends in town (one from complications of cancer and one from a drug overdose); helped rescue my sister from an abusive Moroccan man who was keeping her under virtual house arrest in Japan; endured my parents' second (and thank God final) divorce; and myself undertook marriage, a joyous but undoubtedly life-altering adaptation, which could only be held together by supreme effort in the face of the rest of the above. I was able to do well enough in workshops and academic classes (or teaching classes of my own), but when my final semester rolled around I did not feel what I had produced as a writer was sufficient. This in turn made my writing dry up, forming a negative feedback loop.

This collection's last and longest piece, the runt or rump of a novella entitled "Precocious," deals openly (if through a funhouse mirror) with some of these intense anxieties, and its truncated shape illustrates the paralysis I felt. Still, I worry that it will be read too literally. I was not a particularly young MFA student. Demographically speaking, I was of average age or at most slightly below, as far as I could judge. The character of Tillie was partially inspired by a few different colleagues (including my wife) who went straight into the Creative Writing Program after graduation, in their early 20s. This was not my path. As my undergraduate mentors advised me to do, before I considered creative writing grad school I made it a point to take some years away from academia after college, moving around, having 'real' jobs (including no small amount of hack writing) and trying to soak up real life. After all, life experience is the raw material of fiction writing, and there's much left to be accumulated, a thought which provides me some degree of comfort. But in the face of all that was new and overwhelming and adult and terrifying in my life, I did indeed feel like a helpless child during these years.

Still, I find more to stand by in these stories than I thought I would. Another important question for me to evaluate here is, what can I take away from all this experimenting? I found that the first half of "The Reject" made me laugh out loud. There's some beautiful prose I can't believe I wrote, especially in the early chapters of "Precocious" and in "Hermit Kingdoms." It's possible that the latter remains my most fully realized work at this time. It takes my interest in writing the unwritable by exploring exotic, ineffable states, evident in the less successful "Algorithm Sutra," and adds blood and humor and passion.

A weakness: I'm easily bored. Some of the writers that I read most, and who have therefore influenced me most strongly, could be described as restlessly innovative and occasionally gimmicky: Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Vladimir Nabokov, John Hawkes, Italo Calvino, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, J.G. Ballard, Ursula K. Le Guin, Nicholson Baker. Science fiction in general, with its impetus arising so overtly from thought experiments, could be said to resonate with me more than most genres. It's safe to generalize that with this cerebral approach to fiction, it becomes all the more important (though the more rare) to discover the deep emotional heart of the story, so that something meaningful and soulful can serve as the wind driving the whirligig. I think I manage to accomplish that, a creditable portion of the time. I'm certainly always trying. Again, maybe "Algorithm Sutra" is the cautionary counterexample.

A few (though hardly all) of the writers mentioned above also happen to be incorrigible eroticists, and I must plead guilty to the same. I was heartened to see that "Shagged" still embarrassed me as I revised it. It was tempting for me to tone it down in advance of the defense, but I mostly resisted. I recall with a mixture of discomfort and satisfaction my workshop colleagues' blushing attempts to discuss that one. "Munchausen in Airwalks" explores the sexual impulse as it connects to the storytelling urge. Maybe it's appropriate that a tale so riddled with lies should also be the most candidly autobiographical story I've ever written. Sex figures in "Hermit Kingdoms" (and to a lesser extent "Algorithm Sutra") in its metaphysical, mysterious, mystical aspect. I guess there's even a bit of that in "Shagged," as well as a total Dionysian lack of concern for the usual niceties. That was the most joy I allowed myself to take in writing any story during this period: a pure lark.

The promiscuity that can be found in these stories also extends to my deep interest in the whole spectrum of art forms outside literature. The idea of being a renaissance person is greatly appealing, and I can easily see my work extending from prose fiction into a related field that involves different and perhaps more collaborative artistic practices. Though disappointingly I'll have to exclude it for technical reasons from the formally submitted thesis, my comics piece "A Conditioned Reflex" was one of my favorite things to work on.

It was also inspired by a silent Soviet documentary about behavioral psychology, practically a lost film. I dug it up in the Penn State media archive (it was mislabeled, so they didn't even know what they had) because I was studying its director Vsevolod Pudovkin, who literally wrote the book on film editing. Movies are a consuming obsession. Last year I started giving 16mm screenings at various cultural events here in Houston. The demand isn't exactly huge; then again, nor are there many other projectionists left to choose from. Although filmmakers like Luis Buñuel, Jean Renoir, Michelangelo Antonioni, or John Cassavetes (to name just a few) have had a pervasive influence on my worldview and ideas about storytelling, I am ever conscious of the profound differences among artistic media. Indeed, that difference interests me profoundly as an object of study in itself, and I've read theorists in this area extensively, from Marshall McLuhan to Scott McCloud. Ultimately, such research has led me to find that, even a few millennia later, words are the most versatile of all technologies (not to mention the cheapest). The whole sensory spectrum can be greatly enriching to communication, but often through the brute force of spectacle. Still, I love spectacle.

Certain contemporary writers like George Saunders and Cory Doctorow, both of whom I admire a great deal, share my geeky interest in theme parks, which is often a love that dare not speak its name, even in these days of openly flaunted nerd culture...but all those tacky vacations and coffee-table books on Imagineering paid off in the Disneyland sections of “Hermit Kingdoms.” The total, uncompromising artificiality of such an environment seems to fulfill the Wagnerian ambition for an all-embracing *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and if it’s kitschy and manipulative, again, these qualities do not seem to spook me. But of course in that story, the seductive, regressive qualities of such a place are highlighted thematically.

Saunders seems almost a too-obvious point of comparison for the mixture of satire, sadness, and surrealism in stories like “The Reject” or “Precocious,” especially as he just happens to have gotten a lot of attention in the broader public. I do consider myself a fan, but if anything these connections represent wider tendencies that coincidentally characterize a lot of contemporary writers. The direct influence of Barthelme looms here and is harder to escape, even circumstantially: would I even be here in Houston doing this, were it not for him? It’s doubtful. But apart from the butterfly effect, “Precocious” in particular owes a lot to my reading of his stories, with their enduring and elusive dazzle. That’s the kind of creative energy I envy, which was to some extent gut-punched out of me for a few years but which I hope I can yet live to harness.

Another writer with a similarly savage weirdness was Nathanael West, whose novellas *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Day of the Locust* made up in portmanteau form the single favorite volume I encountered in all my grad school reading. Second place would

have to be awarded to Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, a voodoo-infused telling of the Haitian revolution that I read for the "New World Baroque" class taught by Lois Zamora. Another of the magical realist texts (Carpentier coined the widely flogged concept) from that course that had a direct influence on my writing was José Donoso's *A House in the Country*, a disturbing surrealist epic of familial decay that I couldn't get out of my head.

Surprisingly (because teaching freshman composition had been very discouraging and I didn't feel like I had much promise in this area), one of the greatest experiences of the program turned out to be my third-year teaching assignment: I taught two sections of Introduction to Drama. There was also one of Introduction to Fiction, but because I already knew so many of the short stories in the anthology textbook, I ended up playing it safe in that one. On the other hand, I knew very little about theater. My abiding interests in fiction and film had lent me some cursory knowledge of it, but also preempted any deeper investigation. So I was both insecure and curious about it, what they call "beginner's mind" in Zen I guess. The plays of Chekhov and O'Neill and Brecht and Kushner hit me hard. There's such a different emphasis when it comes to dialogue, character, detail, narrative momentum...everything has to be rethought. It really made me see fiction anew.

One part of it that was not new was the ancient stuff we began with. I was a Latin scholar in a past life and had translated comedies by Plautus and Terence at Rice. The classical world continues to fascinate me because it's so exotically displaced in time that it could be another planet, and yet the important things, the human things, were so much the same. The tragic form is endlessly revelatory to me in its machinations of

inevitability. The story I'm currently drafting is inspired by what I see as the link between tragic catharsis and the horror genre. This semester, while working on this collection, I also read two early specimens of the 'novel' from ancient Rome: *Satyricon* by Petronius and *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius. Their knowing bawdiness and picaresque digressions explained a lot about Chaucer and Boccaccio, and fit right in with some of my own work.

Having an occasion at last to survey this material retrospectively is proving to be a salutary exercise. I don't feel nearly as sad or guilt-ridden about it as I have been feeling. This isn't some perfect artistic testament, but there are enough glimmers in it that I'm remembering why I wanted to do this in the first place, and recognizing that there's a reason to continue. Might as well own up to the facts: a lot of experimentation had to take place and I never did arrive at any one final 'voice.' Undoubtedly that's too much of a burden to put on the process...but for a time I felt that was the *sine qua non* of MFA success. That seems very narrow to me now, though. The experience gutted me of confidence and is only now, at the very end, beginning to restore it. At this point (with apologies to Buddhist philosophers by way of Donovan), the mountain, which was, for a while, not a mountain, is now reconstituting itself in its recognizable, mountainous form. Not that Houston is the best venue for mountain contemplation.

In case I haven't emphasized it enough, that phase of dissolution was predominantly circumstantial, only partly due to the pressures of creative writing pedagogy generally speaking, and in no way the fault of anyone at the University of Houston, who were pretty uniformly wonderful, whether faculty or peers. I just wasn't in the best place mentally to take advantage of all that ambient brilliance. My deep gratitude goes out to everyone for being there anyway. The best consummation of that gratitude

would be for the meek brainchildren that follow to offer some hours of true entertainment to the readers on my committee, who happen to be some of the people that made the writing possible. Please enjoy.

The Reject

Mr. Cousins had caught us on our way out to the parking lot and freedom, so Darby and I were stuck watching the spring talent show. A team of theater kids was recycling the old skit about the dead parrot. Their British accents sucked my ass. Occasionally there was some polite laughter. I wanted to get drunk and break things. The air-conditioning vents looked crusted over, and the auditorium smelled like mold and dish soap.

Glenwood was in a hot-shit neighborhood, but most of us were bussed in from other parts of town. In retaliation, the locals had started to send their own kids to private schools. Well fuck them too.

We still had some rich kids hanging around, but a whole lot more poor kids. A few smart kids in the Honors Program, a ton of dumb kids like me. White kids, black kids, Spanish kids, ESL and refugee-type kids, sped kids, even a nursery for the kids of the knocked-up kids. Whole lotta deaf kids, for some reason. It was a well-rounded school.

I was well-rounded too: I sucked at everything. Well, I was on the wrestling team, I guess. Wrestling didn't make you popular, but it let you pretend that you were. Kind of like the drama kids, except no one would ever burst our bubble about it, unlike with them. The logic being that, even if we were losers, at least we could beat you up. Still, I knew we weren't exactly highly respected, in private. On the one hand, we were technically athletes. On the other hand, the action shots in the yearbook made us look like we were buttfucking each other. So it was basically a wash, as far as girls.

In other words, we weren't about to go up on stage and wrestle. So Darby and I sat there being talentless. The next act was some gospel music. I wondered if I could make a fuss about the school not separating church and state, and maybe get a special pass to go home.

At the end of "Jesus Be A Fence Around Me," this one fat chick went nuts and bolted off the stage. Her glasses flew off ahead of her, but she charged ahead, staring up at God instead of looking where she was going, and she crushed the glasses with her white K-Swiss. She was running up and down the aisle, jumping up and down. Her boobs were everywhere. Like I said, she was pretty fat. I only mention this to emphasize how much you'd expect everyone to be cracking up. But I swear to God, we were all scared silent. I've never seen a fat chick move like that, in a frenzy, like she was trying to trampoline off of the scuzzy gray carpet.

The school cop, Officer Griffin, was right there when she came to a stop, though she kept kind of spazzing in place. He had no fucking idea what to do. I saw his hand brush his Taser for just a second. Luckily her friends surrounded her, calmed her down, and took her out the doors. Only then did every kid in the auditorium start to breathe, laugh, clap, and/or gossip.

"Did you see that?" I said to Darby. "O.G. came this close to throwing 50,000 volts on top of an epileptic seizure. That'd be a guaranteed lawsuit."

"She doesn't have epilepsy, Lee. She was just feeling the Holy Ghost. Or maybe they staged it ahead of time so that act would win. Either way, it should. That was the first thing I've seen today that didn't make me want to kill myself."

“Holy Ghost,” I repeated, like I’d never heard of It before. I had, of course, in Sunday school. But I never expected to see It grab someone and shake them like a can of spray paint. It reminded me of the Exorcist. But a more uplifting version. But still fairly creepy. No offense. (I’d cross myself, but I don’t think I know how to do it right.)

Following that act would be a bitch for anyone. Sadly, they saved the worst for last. These two girls did some kind of routine to “Genie in a Bottle.” They kept cracking up, like they were really into themselves, how cute and funny they were, but they just came off nervous, like they didn’t know what they were doing.

This sad display was winding down to scattered applause, and they were about to start the judging, when I felt this sort of lurch in my hips. No, friends, not a boner. It was like an involuntary muscle spasm at first...then an instant of utter, total, roller-coaster panic. I remember my hair even felt wrong. Maybe I had been Tasered? If only. They say you piss yourself when that happens. Fine, sure, whatever: that would have been easier to live down than the freak show my life was about to become.

I had no way to process the trip from my seat to the ceiling. What I mean is, I couldn't even realize I was flying through the air, because it didn't make sense. It must have been like a somersault, because my knee hit first, shattering a light fixture. Thankfully the house lights were still turned off for the show. Chips of glass flew up past my face and rained down on the terrified audience above.

At first I was clutching the light fixture, less afraid of electrocution than of breaking whatever rope had yanked me up there, and falling back down to my death. But I wasn’t tethered by anything visible. I was just sort of sticking to the ceiling. I felt no tug of gravity, at least not from the usual direction. My next thought was that I was being

held by a giant magnet, but that didn't make much sense either since I'm not made of metal.

The fire department came. They set up a parachute to catch me in, and told me to let go. My knuckles loosened, my legs wobbled, and I braced myself to fall, but I wouldn't fall. After a few minutes of failing to coax me down, the rescue crew actually started to get pissy with me. I told them I was trying, OK? Finally, I was desperate enough to do something drastic: I stood up.

The sight of me standing fully upright, upside-down, threw the firemen for a loop. I took a step and they winced. My knee felt okay. I squatted and pushed off for a jump, hoping this thing would fix itself if I could move a couple feet vertically. Of course if it did, I'd be hurtling a few stories headfirst, but at least it would wrap this up.

They pulled me down with a rope, grabbed an arm or a leg each, and strapped me into a stretcher. I'm sure that usually this process only requires a head guy and a foot guy, but here there were half a dozen firemen holding me down in the thing, like pallbearers at the funeral of some uppity zombie.

Blood rushed to my face and the straps dug into my limbs. The sky overhead, underhead...wherever it was, I could see that it wanted to devour me. With the white-hot evil sun in the dead center, like a big drain in the sky that I was gonna get sucked through.

A couple of the firefighters looked as scared as me. I saw one glancing skyward. He was praying it wasn't contagious.

When they loaded me into the ambulance, I don't think anyone knew where to take me. We went to the hospital as the default, but I wasn't badly hurt. And when we got

there, the hospital had one of those tiled drop ceilings, which I would have wrecked, so I was stuck in the stretcher. I wondered if there were any less claustrophobic accommodations. An iron lung, say. But I wasn't there long.

From the hospital they took me to a smaller government building, where I was introduced to somebody named Dr. Marshall. He was in charge of my case and seemingly of everyone in the building. But I knew somewhere, someone else had to be in charge of him. Probably military. Top-top secret classified, you got me? Silver high-and-tight hair, silver mirror shades, talks all in acronyms and numbers and doesn't take any shit off anybody. This guy never came by in real life, but I hoped he existed.

This place wasn't like jail, but it wasn't like freedom either, though it did feel good to stretch out again. This ceiling was solid but fairly uncomfortable. I had learned that about ceilings. Somebody had the bright idea to just tie an air mattress up there, but I had to do the work myself. It kept floating out of my hands toward the floor, like it was filled with reverse helium.

Apparently this was nothing that had happened to anyone before. Or, not during the time when you could take pictures to prove it. Maybe it happened a long time back, but a) you'd probably be outside then anyway, so you'd just die, and b) any victim, or witness even, would be labeled the village lunatic, or tortured until he admitted the Devil was involved. If I really had gotten Devil powers, that would be pretty metal. No one would ever fuck with me. That seemed too good to be true.

Or, it was also the kind of thing that might happen in a comic book. But in a comic book, what happened to me would happen in such a way that I could be a superhero. Whereas I didn't see myself doing much crime-fighting from my air mattress.

One afternoon a fuckload of random scientists were brought in to observe me. They left not long after, muttering about dark matter and Einsteinian some-bullshit-or-other. A ponytailed guy got pretty worked up about the Gaia hypothesis. None of them seemed to think each other's explanations were any good. They kept using the word "rejected." I had been "rejected" by the Earth's gravity. Well, Earth, fuck you too.

I had the same nightmare every night back then, and I still have it sometimes now. I'm walking across a vacant lot—cracked pavement, gnarly weeds, but vast, a whole city block. The sky is dark, deep, so that after wondering all this time (ever since kindergarten), I finally understand why indigo gets its own chunk of the spectrum, while other bullshit colors like pink or yellow-orange do not. The next thing that happens is a sudden retching feeling inside me, only I don't vomit. I am the one who gets vomited. Up, up, accelerating, and everything just gets bigger and colder and darker and emptier until I can't tell if I'm going the speed of light or simply stuck frozen in endless nothing.

I often woke up with droplets of sweat soaring away from my temples and eyes, all the way to the cool white floor. I thought about how safe it would feel if I could be lying there instead. Only time I wanted to sleep on linoleum when I wasn't even drunk.

Dr. Marshall and his staff acted like they were doing me a favor by not letting me talk to reporters. But I was dying to see how it was being covered. If I was famous yet. If they were even telling the truth about it. Whatever that was. And if people did know, was anyone from school curious enough about their fallen comrade to come entertain me? They'd probably forgotten all about me, the rotten bastards. I was yesterday's news, like Bobby Smolensky getting a handjob behind the band building.

After what seemed like another eternity, one of Dr. Marshall's aides turned up, this time clipboard-free and looking a little out of place. "Your girlfriend is here," he said. Well, that was interesting. I didn't have one, and was almost dumb enough to say so, but I caught myself in time. Maybe it was some hot young reporter with icy blue eyes, being clever and edgy and action-news. I'd give her the scoop all right.

Imagine my surprise, standing there upside-down trying to fix my hair without a mirror, when the big girl from the gospel group walked in. "Hi," I said, presumably looking puzzled. She just smiled and nodded. My head was at boob level, which was embarrassing. They were hard not to stare at under normal circumstances—the size of medicine balls. She still hadn't said anything.

"You told them you were my girlfriend?" I had been conscious before opening my mouth that this might sound rude, and I tried to make sure it wouldn't. Yet it still came out that way.

She didn't seem to notice. She reached into her white vinyl purse and pulled out a gardenia, or a tulip or something. I don't know dick about flowers.

She handed it to me, stem toward my feet.

"Wow," I said. "Thanks."

Then she held her hands together in a praying position. She gave a nudging nod at me and I figured, okay, what the hell.

"What are we praying about? Are we praying for me? I mean...sorry, I have a lot of questions."

She had her eyes closed and kept smiling. Waiting for me to shut up, I guessed, so I did. I closed my eyes too and prayed: that whatever I had done wrong, it could be

forgiven, and if I hadn't done anything wrong, then I would know the difference and figure all this out. But I think deep inside I knew I never would. So instead I just prayed to walk again, on grass or asphalt like normal people, and not fly off to a death I could never be buried from.

I sensed motion and opened my eyes just in time for a hug. It put me right against her chest and I was swallowed up. I thought I might suffocate, and maybe that was okay, and would be no stranger than any of this adventure.

But I did not suffocate. Instead she backed away, bent down, and kissed me. Not a Spiderman movie kiss: a sweet, full-lipped but pure-hearted kiss, a kiss from the beloved Italian grandmother I never had.

For a second, I honestly thought our kiss had flipped everything right-side-up again. How Disney would that shit be? But nope, I was still hanging there like an idiot.

She giggled a little (swear to God), and ran/skipped out of the room, not frantically like her ecstasy at the talent show, more like a puppy. I never saw her at school after that. People I asked would vaguely say she had moved away. I wonder if she's in the stratosphere. Or they have her in a place like this now, studying her. Hell, she's probably just getting home-schooled; after all she was Christian and obviously a bit weird as well.

When she left, I was disturbed, or stunned, and I did not react for at least two or three minutes, I'm sure of that. I sat on the ceiling by the corner of my air mattress, doing nothing. Like there was anything to do in there! (They hadn't set up my coffee table and TV yet.)

I started laughing. I mean I laughed my ass off. My abs spazzed up—that kind of laugh. And I was gasping, and my throat tasted like dry ice, but warm. And I took the rest of that breath in, and just let it out, like after you’ve been walking around summer city streets thirsty all afternoon and you get home, go to the kitchen, pound an entire glass of water, and somehow the drink can’t be over until you sigh loudly enough for anyone in the room to hear even if there’s nobody in the room and all your muscles go slack—that kind of breath.

Something inside me did relax and I lurched forward a little, like when you’re going to sleep and you seize up. But I didn’t stay startled; I tried to breathe like that over and over, to see if something would give. I was still convinced a week or two later that it might work. I keep telling the scientists that, but they just told me to stop straining myself. Don’t hold your breath, the nurse says. Like that’s funny.

Shagged

In a late model silver car, bobbing uphill and downhill in a suburban freeway's slow lane, a young man and his fiancée were being standoffish with each other.

It was a type of car that insinuated things like, 'I am making money, but am conscientious,' and 'I have now settled into a committed long-term relationship with a desirable young woman, and am no longer afraid of appearing slightly gay.'

Grant Schumann was in his second year as an attorney, specializing in environmental law. His blonde locks were not yet jumping ship en masse, but his widow's peak had been honed a little, in a way that he thought looked imposing. He had grown a beard, but a very crisp, disciplined beard, to enhance this effect.

He had been on the swim team in college, and had continued to work out in the years since. His chest was flat and broad and at the V of his unbuttoned polo could be glimpsed a restrained tuft of hair, which he never waxed but often trimmed.

Vanessa Tang's mother and father were from Phnom Penh, but she was from Santa Cruz. She spoke with the saccharine lilt of a California chick. Her face was flat and symmetrical, with a nose like a mushroom if mushrooms can be cute. Her skin was supernaturally soft and she wore no makeup except lipstick. Her body ran to the rounder side. This was especially noticeable when compared to her parents, whose limbs felt like baseball bats. She hated them for this when she was young because when she ate the same as they did, she got fat easily. But she had mastered herself in many regards as college approached, and been very popular there. She had a relaxed, inviting aura and was never shy. A reputation ensued.

They were being standoffish with each other because that morning, she had woken up horny and begged him to fuck her. When he said he just wanted to go back to sleep, she asked him wasn't it boys who were supposed to wake up with morning wood. He had gotten defensive and said he was just tired. She pointed out they had to leave for work in less than an hour anyway, and the alarm would go off any minute. He felt all the more pressured, and managed to stall her until it was too late. Now they were carpooling into the city together to save Mother Earth, and neither one was particularly pleased with the other.

“Are you ready to talk to me?” Grant said.

“Yeah, me? I can talk. Why wouldn't I be talking?”

“You've been looking like I shot your puppy all morning. What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“It's the same old shit,” Vanessa said. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“Well you're making me feel guilty. Listen, you can't tie your moods to my sexual cycle. It's too weird and unpredictable.”

She turned her seat warmer up from 2 to 3, then looked at it anxiously for a second and turned the dial to the maximum 5.

“I just don't see how it's that much to ask. Granted, not your mouth, first thing in the morning, and yeah, maybe you're too tired to actually bone, but a finger? I can even do it myself—it's embarrassing, but I would.”

“How is it embarrassing?”

“I mean, it’s one thing if a guy’s watching you and digging it himself. But having to jack off in the same bed with your boyfriend who doesn’t want to help you, it’s just humiliating. Even just some dirty talk, so I could feel like you were in on it.”

“You know I’m not into getting...you know. Verbal. About stuff.”

“What I don’t get is, it’s not like you’re not a sexual person. Once you decide to get started, you’re mind-boggling in bed. You’re totally sensual, you don’t have a problem keeping it up or anything, you just—it’s like you can’t let it be my idea. And if I wait for it to be your idea it’s like, three times a week.”

“I just get freaked out sometimes, okay? I’m trying to get better. It just takes a really long time for me to trust someone, to get familiar enough.”

“I mean, nothing...bad ever happened to you, did it? You know if there’s ever anything...I mean, I want to know all about you. It’s good to, like, talk—”

“You mean was I ever raped. Did some babysitter diddle me, or did my coach make me go down on him, huh? That’s the only thing that makes people weird about sex.”

She didn’t seem to know what the appropriate response was here; her mouth came barely ajar but she held on, hoping he would continue unprompted.

After a long silence, he only shook his head and laughed. But she was relieved, because it almost looked like he was about to say something mean, and had changed his mind.

“You want to hear the worst thing that ever happened to me?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Alright. I was in junior high. We made the state championship, not that that’s a big deal in Maine. I only qualified for diving that year; I was still pretty slow. Fucking polluters!”

A glob of muck had come off the truck in front of them and splattered on their windshield. He rinsed it off with wiper fluid and changed lanes.

“Anyway, so it’s my turn. I’m up there, the diving board’s trembling under me, I’m really keyed up for this big moment, and like a hundred people—who see me every day, or they’re total strangers, or they only see me at these things and it’s all they can judge me by—everybody’s quietly focusing on me in that instant, from every vantage point in this humongous echoing space, space, space, right?”

“And then I see this girl, Sarah Hodges. She’s on the other team, but I went to elementary school with her, before we moved out of zone. I used to notice her in Mr. Pruitt’s fourth grade homeroom. She had this Beverly Hills 90210 lunchbox. I think I figured that was something sexy.”

“But it’s been four years now, and it’s that horrible time when the girls are looking about three years older than the guys, and the guys are thinking things five years before they can really pull them off? Eighth grade is just the fucking pits.”

“For y’all. Try being a girl in about sixth. You’re falling in love with these gross, intimidating creatures, that are still a terrifying mystery to you, and one day you start bleeding out your kooch.”

He laughed. A blimp was floating through the sky, a blinding spot reflecting the late afternoon sun. He wordlessly pointed it out to her. She watched as it disappeared behind the skyline, but continued speaking:

“Two or three years later, you’re hot shit and guys will do your homework just for the smiles and laughs. Hell, they’ll take you out and buy you shit just to let them get *you* off.”

He frowned.

“You know I don’t like to hear about that stuff.”

“I know baby. I didn’t mean me. I just meant, girls. In general. I’m sorry.”

“Me too. Trying not to be weird about it. It’s just, when I hear things like that, it’s not you, the you that I know. So it makes me worry that you’ll, just....”

“Wake up one day and go back to being a slut?”

“I didn’t say that. I’ve never said that.”

“It’s okay. Listen. I’m not going to. Everything is different now. If some sexy dude starts to flirt with me—don’t make that face, we’re talking hypothetical sexy dude—you know what the only thing is that runs through my mind? ‘Oh dear, this must be awkward for him. How do I politely convey that I have a man who makes me so much happier than anyone in the world ever, ever could?’”

“But I don’t make you happy. I can feel you. The stress in the air. You just waiting for me to come around. You think that makes it easier? And if I tell you it just doesn’t feel right today, you sit around all miserable and frustrated.”

“You’re my boyfriend, I shouldn’t have to beg you for a mercy fuck. It makes me feel so worthless. You’re supposed to *want* to.”

“Don’t you think I know I’m defective? It’s not like you’re the first one to say it. That’s why I almost married Beth, she never wanted to fuck anyway. I hate this conversation. It never goes anywhere. It just makes it worse.”

The flatbed truck they were now stuck behind was carrying a forklift, and Grant muttered something about OSHA regulations and how the forks weren't supposed to be out.

“I know it doesn't. I know you hate it. But so many times I don't say anything and I have to swallow it like it doesn't hurt. Communication makes me feel better. Even if it sort of backfires, in terms of getting what I want or whatever. It means a lot to me. Speaking of which, weren't you telling me something? About eighth grade? Sarah...?”

“Yeah. Sarah Hodges. So I'm on this wobbling diving board, and I've made eye contact with her in her goggles and swim cap, and she even looks cute in that.”

“Aww. Let me guess. You took one look at her cupcake-sized titties and blue spandex cameltoe and got a fuckin' massive boner. Just popped a huge tent, right in front of that little junior high vixen and all the world.”

She was smiling. He glanced at her and laughed, sort of, but he didn't mean it. He looked like she had pinched him.

“No, I just couldn't look away from her as I started the dive. I slammed my face on the edge of the board, cut my eye and smashed my nose. I came up through this big mushroom cloud of blood, and they had already jumped in to pull me out of the water. I was screaming.”

Vanessa gasped. “Poor baby.”

“Only it was kind of a gurgle. The blood got all over the grown-ups. I secretly hoped Sarah Hodges would come make a fuss over me, but she looked terrified and didn't come anywhere near. She barely knew me anyway.”

Vanessa's face felt flushed for making fun of him. She wished she could go back in time and hold him that day. She wished she could hold him now, too, but he was driving, so she simply squeezed his thigh. It tightened against her fingers as he pushed down on the accelerator.

He looked over at her and caught waterlogged eyes.

“Hey, don't. It's okay. Look at me, I'm fine and it happened to me; you shouldn't cry. I'm not saying it's some big Freudian thing or whatever. I just thought it was a funny story.”

“It's a sad story to me. I hate thinking of you hurting. I love you.”

“I love you too. Don't cry.”

“I can be a big girl. I'm trying. It's just hard for me. You and I express things in different ways, that's all. There's lots of ways to express love, I know. But that's the one that really breaks through to where it counts for me. For whatever reason. But I know you told me from the beginning you needed time to feel comfortable. You've been patient with me and I'm sorry I suck at being patient with you. It's only been six months. We're doing okay, right?”

The forklift truck driver threw a lit cigarette out the window and it bounced into the grass. Grant shook his head and exhaled like an aggravated bull.

“We're doing great. I just need to step down these damn antidepressants. The trouble is, finding a few weeks when it's convenient to be suicidally unhinged.”

“It's okay. If you're down to try doing that, we can. I'll take good care of you. But there's no rush. I need to stop acting like you've got issues and I don't. I should be able to go one day, without feeling like you don't like me anymore.”

“A day? More like six hours.”

“Oh come on,” she sniffled. “I’m not that bad.”

He just stared at her. After a few seconds, he lifted his eyebrows and grimaced, a mock pained smile. They both broke out laughing.

“Hey,” Vanessa said. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“We’re running a little bit early. What do you say we stop for an Egg McMuffin?”

When she said this, the forklift broke loose from its chains. A padlock was first to pass through their windshield, slung from its taut chain with such speed that it kept flying straight out the rear, eventually rolling to a stop in a beautification patch among gayfeathers and evening primroses.

The forklift itself followed a second later. Its forks happened to be spread just wide enough to decapitate them neatly. When the car came to rest in a median drainage ditch, the forklift was left jammed into it, snug, sitting on the hood like a mechanical child in its parent’s lap.

Grant and Vanessa died together, reconciled and loving. Before being severed from their bodies, they had less than two seconds to experience some alarming sense-impressions and panicked half-thoughts for which “WTF” would have been the most fitting approximation. At that time in human history, there was hardly a better way to go out.

At least for them, subjectively. The young couple’s next of kin would have chosen, given the power, a more dignified exit for them. Preferably some other day.

Sadly though, they had not been given the power, and the best means of earthly justice available to the parents was a civil lawsuit. But this was by no means pointless. It would provide them with the feeling that they had done something for the dead, even if they could not resurrect them. Any damages assessed would serve as a deterrent to negligent corporations who put the bottom line ahead of human safety. And after all, certainly Vanessa and Grant would feel better in Heaven knowing that they had left their families a little extra financial cushion, to keep them comfortable during these difficult times.

Ike Merriwether owned the contracting outfit whose flatbed truck it was, whose forklift it was, and whose financial liability if not moral burden it might also be. A week after the accident, Ike sat at his desk, thinking about these things, feeling glum.

Ike's head was like a pink jumbo pearl. The scruffy tonsure that remained of his hair looked like a fraying headband just barely holding his ears on. He dyed it with a box he bought at the grocery store. His color was called "red penny." The box had a woman on it with eerily Photoshopped green eyes, perhaps to make her hair look more natural by contrast.

Ike's baldness was the thing other people made fun of behind his back, but he was not bothered by it, only by the graying. As he stared at his email inbox blankly, he thought back to their funeral. He had attended secretly and sat in the back row. Only one person, a first cousin, asked how he had known the couple. He looked down at his nattily pinstriped legs with shame, and what came to mind was, "I was their tailor."

He said this with a small stutter. It went unquestioned, but added to his load of guilt and unbelonging. After the service he exited the church before another mourner could speak to him.

A careless or cynical observer might scoff that of course Mr. Merriwether came to pay his respects: the costs would be extracted from him soon, why not get his money's worth? But in truth he was a poor villain. He cried when he heard the news, for himself perhaps a little, but largely for the unfair, random annihilation of two strangers. And he cried intermittently at his wife's breast that first weekend. And he cried when he would hear the back-up beeps of light machinery in the lumberyard. And he cried throughout four separate meals. All breakfasts, curiously.

Nevertheless, he had to try beating the suit. People just weren't building buildings anymore. He had always been a meticulous number cruncher, and in its whole history—98 fiscal quarters—his company had never announced a loss in back-to-back quarterly reports. Until the last seven. Now he was headed for a loss again. What profits he had made over the years were concentrated in real estate and stock; he held an investment portfolio that was drooping and disintegrating like a botched soufflé. He had hoped, with luck, to retire at sixty-five (the very next year), and pass the business to the eldest of his four sons, who at thirty-two was nearly ready for it, but one thing he could not bring himself to do was hand off a ruined business that might, by the time he died, have shrunk to nothing.

The eldest son and his wife had just sweetened Ike and Myra's lives with a baby girl, their first grandchild. But diapers were likely to pile up quickly: his second son was engaged, his third son was moving in with a perfect match, and his fourth son was in his fifth year of college, a hopeless wastrel.

And these dead lovers, he thought, what domestic dreams might they have been planning? Perhaps they had conceived that very morning. Nausea gripped Mr. Merriwether.

A new email appeared in his inbox, bold, with the subject “Bid decision for Glenwood project.” His company had been outbid on a proposal for a new mixed retail/residential development. This was wretched news; it meant a difference of 1.3 million dollars for his struggling company.

His lawyer had advised him that the more acutely unpleasant of these disasters could hopefully be settled out of court with a mediator, for funeral expenses plus some reasonable sum out of sympathy for their suffering. He felt his gorge rising again, but all that he managed to puke out was a stifled moan. He hung his head and sobbed, and rubbed a warm, moist palm over the pink cannonball of his forehead.

“Mr. Merriwether,” his assistant Darryl said, “go home. I’ll wrap things up for today. You’re falling apart.”

“You’re right, Darryl,” said Ike. “I’m trying to stay pieced together. It’s just, you spend so much time trying to make something, a lasting source of good, for yourself and people around you. Then you watch the way it works out some days, and you think: is this much bad just built in? Was I ever going to come out ahead?”

“I’m telling you man,” said Darryl, “go forget it. ”

“I know,” said Ike.

But after leaving his desk at work and driving home, he immediately sat at his desk there. Except for their old english sheepdog Wunderbar—who insisted that one bone be thrown for her to fetch, but then sat politely chewing on it—he was alone in the house.

As he eased into his ergonomic chair, he farted loudly, and it was like the exorcism of a malevolent ghost.

He took a deep breath and reached into the side drawer of his desk, pulling out a black cylinder. It was a false vagina, housed inside a plastic tube with a screw-off top, designed to look like a flashlight. So its creators called it a fleshlight. That name was its registered trademark, but surely a product so quintessential of its niche must be lowercased and reclaimed for the common tongue, like kleenex (which Merriwether also had handy). He screwed off the top, put it aside, then squeezed a generous dollop of water-based lubricant into the hole and hid the bottle away in a drawer.

The fleshlight came in colors and shapes, mostly representing the gamut of anatomical cavities as well as the “non-descript [sic],” whose entry was an unadorned notch, for the customer who prized discretion. Ike had opted for the “original pink lady,” being a traditionalist still in some ways, though he felt proud to be also, among his demographic cohort, an early adopter of a rather nifty gadget.

If in these times it was deemed a matter for polite discussion, or even open celebration, that many men his age had become smitten with a certain modern marvel—boner pharmaceuticals—then why should Merriwether feel any shame about using other novel technologies to enhance his golden years?

He often wondered, despite the hammock-infested greeting card imagery of Cialis ads, whether the average wife was really so thrilled to find her elderly husband would not be going impotent after all. Especially when you considered the amount of spare time retirees had, and the fact that erections under *four hours* in duration were apparently healthy. Ike and Myra still had an active sex life, but he was sure she would not mind him

outsourcing some of his urges to his trusty handheld device. Not that he ever spoke about this particular part of his life.

He had learned about the fleshlight from a pop-up advertisement while cruising for porn. Masturbation was not new to him, but pornography in his youth had seemed such a limited pleasure: furtively flipping through magazines and stashing them bedside; braving a Times Square-style creep convention; paying per view in a hotel to spice up a vacation with the wife? He had never felt much of a need for these things.

But the Internet was something totally different. For him, discovering online porn a few years before, at sixty, was like unearthing Pompeii. No: unocaning Atlantis. Once you figured out how to navigate it, the pornosphere was like a vast, magical grocery store with all the delicacies of the world, stacked to the sky-high ceiling in a delirium of plenty. On any given evening he might be in the mood to see a blonde woman his wife's age valiantly taking on a roomful of uncircumcised Czech dongs, or two black college girls 69ing in the top bunk while a third got fucked in the bottom, or a pregnant Japanese lady who made noises of agony when a man pressed a corded vibrator against her, but then came for a solid minute while her swollen breasts lactated like ceiling sprinklers.

But tonight he was in the mood for something more normal, comforting even: a clip of one-on-one intercourse between a well-hung African-American gentleman and a cute Latina. The video's preview promised that special attention would be lavished on his sperm trickling from her sex after the deed had been done. As mentioned, Ike was a bit of a neophyte, but even in his short career as a pervert he could swear he had started to see a shift toward these "creampie" clips from what seemed the time-honored finale of pulling out and spraying all over somebody like a human fire extinguisher. He speculated that

perhaps, with paternity crackdowns and AIDS, what was truly taboo and raunchy nowadays was to ejaculate where nature intended. Inside was the new outside. But this was no time for cultural criticism; after all, he had a hard-on to minister to.

He brought the plastic cylinder slowly down upon his dick, and if it was not, in fact, “just like the real thing!” as the website’s frequently asked questions asserted, it still felt undeniably delightful. He kicked out his foot involuntarily, banging the leg of the desk and causing a jar of pencils to spill. He would pick them up later. The starlet before him, whose name was ostensibly Lexi Lopez, was sucking on an immense dark penis with a tangled skein of veins like an inverted relief map of the Amazon Delta, or the roots of an ancient tree you might find there. At first Lexi sucked with a leisurely, worshipful loll, but when she began to gulp more insistently and shuttle her head at hopefully not literal breakneck speed, he mimicked the change of pace for verisimilitude, despite the fact that he was supposed to be in another sort of orifice.

He almost came a lot more quickly than he intended, but then he heard Wunderbar barking. He paused the movie by tapping the space bar. When he heard the jangling of keys in the front door, he pulled the fleshlight off of his cock and closed the video window, maximizing his email inbox. Without remembering to cap it, he shoved the device in a drawer, stood up and pulled up his pants. Myra Merriwether stood before him in a zipped leather bomber, jeans and black cowboy boots. She held a paper bag, which she set down on the counter.

“You’re home early, sweetheart.”

“I didn’t feel like yoga tonight. I called the office and Darryl said you had already left, so I thought, well, I’ll come home and see him instead. I brought wine and fixings for pasta puttanesca.”

She walked over and kissed him, just on the cheek, but her hand found the swelling in his pants.

“Packing a rod, or are you just happy to see me?” Myra said in her best Mae West, to whom she bore a decent resemblance, perhaps mixed with a latter-day Debbie Reynolds.

She eased to the floor to blow him, visibly proud of her wifely attentiveness. She had not done this for him in a month or two, and she knew how much terrible pressure he was under. She pitied him for what he was going through. Myra wanted Ike to be able to relax his nerves, take a load off.

But he remembered that his dick was still tacky with lube. She would notice right away and it would be gross and difficult to explain.

Like an artist seized with inspiration, he grabbed hold of her and purposefully led her to the bed, arranged her on her back and stripped her down with an impatient flourish. Her mouth was wide and her ribcage heaved frantically like a billows. As she peeled off her rose-embroidered black panties, they accidentally shot off her ankle like a rubber band and caught on a blade of the motionless ceiling fan. She laughed, and he looked up for a moment to grin but she dug her nails into his hip and he zoomed into her with nil friction like a maglev train. She aimed her painted toes for the north star and clutched his flabby shoulders.

When he was getting close, residual fantasies from the porno film made him want to bury it as deep inside her as he could. But she scooted back from him at the first twitch, slapped his chest and gritted her teeth almost angrily as she tugged him with her soft aged hands, wringing his seed out onto her thighs, one drop in her belly button, but mostly all over her patch of brown curls and the full, baroque folds of her, infinitely more rich than the tanned professional teenybopper on his computer, much less the streamlined factory model in his desk. Her body looked unimaginably alive, radiating the spirit of life, the ardor. She seized the crescent of hair on the back of his head and angled it downward, as if to say: watch. Look closely. Just when he thought he had reached his final pump she grabbed him by the wrist and smeared his hand against the mess he had made of her, then guided it to her mouth and sucked his fingers, churning her tongue around each.

He was awake for perhaps another two and a half minutes, but they were tenebrous and doped. She relished her handiwork, the limp mammal dozing atop the sullied sheets, and smiled, her wrinkled cheeks luminescent with both orgasm and rosacea. He might not wake up for dinner tonight, but he would not stay awake crying all night either. Thank Christ; she couldn't bear to witness it again. Kind of pathetic, if she was being honest.

And now she, for one, was awfully hungry. The pasta could wait; she'd settle for a Pop-Tart and some leftover green bean casserole. It was that kind of hunger. But the microwave and toaster were plugged into the same outlet, and after three seconds of humming and buzzing they shorted out the power for the entire house.

The orange coils in the toaster slowly faded and all was dark. Ike's laptop, still running on battery power, was the only light source left for her to make her way towards. When she got there, she thought she'd dig around the drawer for a lighter or something. A flashlight. Even better. As she walked outside to the side of the house to find the circuit breaker, she kept hitting the button, but it would not light up.

She stared down the barrel of her tool, much like the proverbial coyote, darkly yearning to be laid low yet again by the roadrunner's canny brinkmanship. And not unlike that storied coyote, she could be seen to flinch upon her first glance, fearing a bright burst, but even after a longer second peek her whiskers remained uncharred. Between her astigmatism and the quarter moon she could not resolve the bald rubber vulva.

She shook vigorously and felt no batteries shaking around inside. She put the broken torch down on the ground with a shrug and used her phone screen to light her way. While she fumbled with the fuses, Wunderbar picked up the flashlight and trotted with it into the front yard, where she lay down under a tree and began to chew it. It didn't have much give along the length, but one end was soft and smelled like her master's sweat, which she liked.

Wunderbar gave the silicon slit a good deep tonguing, but the water-based lube was not to her liking, and she smacked her tongue distastefully against the roof of her mouth in an undignified attempt to rid herself of its stickiness. Anyway, being both heterosexual and spayed, the only puss she had ever had any ambition to eat was the uncatchable tabby next door, so she simply decided to bury her find for now. Perhaps it would taste better with age.

The dog had not yet covered the hole she dug when she heard Myra warbling “Wunderbar... Wunderbar!” and she went bounding back toward the house.

It was a very rainy week after that, and Wunderbar did not go outside much. The hole that she dug became a mud puddle, and she forgot entirely about the curious toy. Over a few days, the flashlight sank deeper into the muck, then, with another flood, slowly bubbled up through the sediment like a casket in an old New Orleans cemetery.

The afternoon the sun came out again, a ten-year-old boy named Keith Newcomb was dropped off on the corner by his school bus. Usually he had his neighbor Colleen Riley to walk with. She was a girl, and a sixth-grader, and so it made him feel pretty cool that they were friends, even if their parents having houses across the street from each other was the only reason how come. But this week she was home sick with tonsillitis, so he felt uncommonly loserish on today’s walk.

A black sliver of plastic by the side of the road gleamed in the sunlight and caught his eye. He had hoped maybe it was a gun, but when he dug it out of the mud, it was just a flashlight. But a pretty awesome, heavy-duty looking one. Good for playing detective at least.

Keith brought it back to his own front yard and before even stepping indoors, he washed it off with a garden hose. At the wide end of the flashlight seemed to be a mouth, with something else pink caught in one corner. Maybe a Skittle, or the tip of a tongue. But why would a flashlight have a mouth? Was it missing an incandescent set of dentures?

He dug his fingers in—there was a snail inside that he pulled out, and opened up the lips and rinsed it some more. The mouth kept going as far in as he could reach. He

waved it around to dry the thing off, and it occurred to him that it could be a handle for a killer sword.

Keith looked around for a blade: there was a piece of a gutter, no good, wouldn't fit, and a branch, which he pushed all the way back into the slot but it just looked like an antler. There was a post loose on his family's white picket fence, though, and after weighing how much he would get in trouble versus how much fun it would be to wield a big black and white and pink sword he had made, he went ahead and pried it off. It locked into place, the lips hugging the wood in a perfect rectangle.

He began shadow-fencing with his fencepost foil, first lunging at random spots, then hacking lightly at the poles of his swingset for a satisfying clang, and finally hoisting it high and slamming it down on a stump. The vibrations gave him pins and needles in his hands.

Imagining himself as a ninja with mystical powers of speed, he spun around with as much force as he could muster, spun and spun and spun until his inner ear was a cartilaginous dreidel and he felt quite stoned, and he fell down as the fence post flew off through the air and clattered against a tree that yelled back at him in a hideous scratching voice, "Shit! Watch out."

A moment later he realized it was not the tree's voice, but the irritated vocal cords of Colleen Riley, whose shape slowly came into focus as he gripped a clump of grass so he would not fall off the Earth. Her red hair was matted, suggesting she had not left her bedroom in days, but she was wearing a clean royal blue sundress.

"Aren't you supposed to have tonsillitis?"

“I do,” she said, and she definitely did. It sounded like she had sand in her throat.
“But I saw you outside and I wanted to check out what you were up to with that thing.
Looks like you got ripped off.”

“I didn’t buy it, I made it. I found this part in front of Mr. and Mrs. Merriwethers’ house.”

She took the handle away from him and examined it. He expected her to be curious but was surprised when she exploded with abrasive crunchy laughter.

“You don’t know what that is, huh?” she rasped. “It’s supposed to be a twat.”

“A what?” he said.

“No, a twat. Poontang. Vajayjay. A girl’s privates,” she said in her sub-Joan Rivers croak.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, as though he knew all those words, had studied them for a vocab quiz. He was flustered. Why would girls’ privates come in a plastic can? Were you supposed to drink out of them? He awkwardly twirled the sword behind his back and looked at Colleen’s shoes. They were fuchsia Nike high-tops, chunky and vivid and only about a month old.

“You’ve never seen one,” she said. She had a wicked shine in her eyes and was probably making fun of him. She gave up on giggling devilishly when it just sounded like throwing rocks against a brick wall.

“Yeah huh,” he said. He had a rough idea of what one looked like from a standing position: on a grown woman, a triangular Brillo pad, on a juvenile, a non-descript notch. He looked down in the can. This one was different. Wavier. Without hair.

He lifted his creased brow from the canned poontang and saw Colleen sitting on one of his swings, holding a white pair of underwear in her right hand. As she picked up speed and swung higher, her own vajayjay began to loom within a few feet of where he stood.

Keith looked from one to another, and wouldn't you know, they were about the same. Colleen's was smaller, and not in a can, of course, and it wasn't solid pink all over but faded to pale like the rest of her skin, but overall the plastic version seemed a passable imitation. He poked at it with a thumb and felt it give pleasurably under the force. He looked back at the live one for comparison. It did have a smattering of hair, though not a wooly beard, like in art books, or like his mother's the time he accidentally ran into her coming out of the shower.

When Colleen swung all the way forward, the setting sun caught the fine red hairs and they looked like tiny gold blades of fire. She jumped off at the height of its motion and her bright sneakers thudded in the grass. She collapsed on her bottom and parted her legs to nearly 180 degrees, like a frog. With one thumb still noodling the top of the flashlight, he timidly reached out one hand toward her pursed labia. The splintery laugh came again but this time self-consciousness did not stop her, and she sprang up and ran all the way back to her house until he could not tell her distant laughter from her sneakers mashing her gravel driveway.

He shrugged and put his sword back together, and swung at the shadows until his mom called him inside.

Munchausen in Airwalks

We stood in the stone ditch where we stood every morning to wait for the bus. It was me and a pair of brothers from up the street. All three of us were in a weird zone between sleep and wakefulness. We had laid out rows of “monkey brains” in the street; that was our name for these fruits that dropped from a neighbor’s tree every fall and rolled down to the corner. They were neon yellow-green, the size of softballs, covered with patterns of bumps and ridges that made them look, slightly, like brains. The neighbor with the tree had told us they were really called “horse apples.” We liked our name better and kept using it.

A silver tinge to the morning air made me almost glad I had left my bed, despite the late autumn chill. It was the first week we had needed jackets. Our noses were pink from the wind.

The distant growl of a diesel engine roused us from half-sleep. A yellow rectangle paused at the end of the road and, turning onto it, became a square. By the time it got close enough for us to see the fat gray curls of the bus driver’s hair, the bus had rolled over more than half of the “monkey brains” we had set out, crushing them beneath its wheels in a series of gratifying, yellow-green explosions.

The bus driver sort of frowned at us as we got on. The brothers went to the back of the bus and sat down. I was trying to follow them when this girl Robin thrust her leg out in a fake attempt to trip me. Robin had red hair, and it deranged me, the way a matador’s cape does to a bull. She also had blue eyes, what we at that age considered a “great body” (meaning a small strapless gown wouldn’t fall straight off her), and an

interesting, mischievous smile. I waited a second for her to invite me to sit down, and when she didn't, I invited myself. The older brother grinned at me. I had told him about how Robin and I were having sex.

He shook his head admiringly, but his younger sibling looked confused. I had made the older one swear not to tell, not only to spare tender young ears, but also because it would be a real mess if news of this passionate affair ever got out— especially since it was all made up. I had spun stories about our outrageous romps for a handful of my friends. I relished in giving away fantastically lewd details as they stood slack-jawed, having never even heard of some of the acts I described.

Nor was Robin the only subject of these yarns. I had also fucked Ashley, Erin, Jackie, Karina, Lindsey, Haley, Molly, Sarah, Megan, Tiffany, Katy, and not one but two Elizabeths. I had had Valerie in the stairwell, Kristin in a treehouse, and Vanessa on the hood of her father's car. My fantasies were anything but humble. Entirely unbelievable. Yet my friends, by and large, had believed them. It may be that this gullibility was what made them my friends in the first place. Or maybe believability was less important than other things to our fourteen-year-old minds. Things like vividness, bravado, and the thrill of forbidden knowledge.

I did have a fairly thorough understanding of sex, on paper. It was more the product of extensive library research than actual fieldwork.

Though the thing is, I was pretty good with girls. I knew how to talk to them, how to make them feel as though they were part of some appealing energetic *thing* when we spoke, how to joke with them in a way that kept their attention without being overbearing. The strange and frustrating thing about my lies was that most of the girls I

talked about, I probably could have gotten somewhere with. Not to the wanton extremes dreamt of, but at least some quality making out, which, let's face it, was probably as much as I could handle anyway. Only recently have I forgiven myself for not giving it a sincere effort. But as easy as I found it socially, I had no confidence in myself as a physical creature. I had a growth spurt or three to go before I would catch up with my peers in height and shed the baby fat. Naturally I was also insecure about my dick. I had no point of comparison really, but I assumed with some degree of paranoia that mine would not impress.

But long before that could ever become a practical concern I would have to start at the beginning, at first base—and first base was fenced off with barbed wire. I hated my parents every time I thought about those damn braces, but even without them I would have been mortified to admit that I didn't know how to kiss.

All these obstacles held me back in the real world, but not in my imagination. There I could skip the usual first steps and soar on into flights of orgiastic fancy that, no matter how outlandish they were, in some sense became real enough in the telling. I told a few of these stories to random acquaintances like the kid up the street, when I was bored, or sensed I had a trustworthy and appreciative ear, but mostly I told them to my best friend David.

*

After school that day David and I walked about a mile to the local mall. We hung out in the parking lot for a while, smoking herbal 'bidi' cigarettes, which gave us less of a buzz than we'd have liked to admit. David was a good best friend, because like me, he was obsessed with vice. I listened as enthusiastically to his lessons on the drug culture as

he did to my epics of depravity. He filled me in on how to turn an ordinary apple into a bong, and explained that smoking the seeds would make you impotent (the marijuana seeds, not the apple's). I told him that to get in shape for eating pussy you should place a Life-Saver under your upper lip and try to make it dissolve from the hole outward, but that on the first couple of tries your tongue was likely to tire or even cramp.

We butted out the bidis and went inside. I had saved up money to make a very important purchase: a pair of Airwalks. Skateboarders wore those. I did not skate, but in those days skater shoes were the choice of most kids who wanted to be cool. They were comfortable enough, suede with rubber bottoms, but that wasn't the point. If the hip kids threw away their skateboards and took up golf, I would probably have walked around on half-inch spikes.

The mall lost its appeal after David tried to buy a CD at Sam Goody and was denied because of the PARENTAL ADVISORY: EXPLICIT LYRICS sticker, so we called his mom collect on a pay phone and sat outside on the curb. We were talking about this girlfriend he had, Luann. Both of us had factual “girlfriends” at the rate of three or so a year, but this did not have to involve seeing them outside school more than a couple times a week, and the arrangement rarely lasted a month. When we did see them we would take them on “dates” to movies and such, holding hands and occasionally pawing at each other awkwardly, keeping mouth contact to a timid minimum. Or at least that's how it worked for me. I had no way of knowing what his love life was truly like.

I picked up a small rock from the concrete and dinged it off a lamppost.

“You're not going to believe what happened the other day,” David said, looking as though the sound had brought him back from some terrible amnesia.

He told me a true whopper about Luann, himself, and this tall brunette I barely knew named Palmer. About how they got it on in bathroom at this very mall, locking the exterior door and then crowding inside the stall for a fast and dirty threesome. The logistics were baffling. And no girl I knew would kneel in a public bathroom to save the lives of all the puppies and ponies in the world.

But I did believe it! Or maybe that's not the right word; maybe belief was beside the point. It was such a memorable image, such an extravagant, over-the-top lie, that I simply had to give him credit for it. It was on my mind the whole time I sat in the station wagon, making small talk with David's mom.

*

The next day, our social studies teacher was feeling lazy and set us off to the school library. I read a biography of John Lennon instead of the Benjamin Franklin one I was supposed to. My dad's Beatles albums had been the soundtrack for much of my life, and I thought of John as just about the coolest man in the history of civilization. I was stunned to find out he had done heroin. That was at least understandable; but why had he given up infinite groupies for the sake of a homely, avant-garde control freak?

I went over to the magazine stand where David was screwing around and waiting for the bell.

“Look on that magazine cover, you can see her panties.”

It was a copy of *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. Jackie Joyner-Kersey was jumping a hurdle. I rolled my eyes at him, then picked it up to get a closer look.

“What's that?”

David picked up the object that had been under the magazine, an unmarked, homemade notebook-paper envelope. He opened it, and inside were a few dozen of these pearl-like things. They were smaller than real pearls, and had no holes to indicate they had come off of a necklace.

The bell rang.

Somehow, through the transformative magic of sheer boredom, we convinced ourselves they contained LSD. We were not dissuaded when they refused to dissolve in our mouths, and with an occasional “crunch” as we tried to break through the psychedelic nougat at the center, we fake-tripped our way through Algebra I.

David may or may not have taken acid before that time; I would not be surprised either way. But my conception of it was fuzzy at best, so I tried my best to ape what he was doing. He would dart his head around madly and alternate that with staring on some fixed but seemingly random point for a minute or two. It was the last period of the day, so the teacher was probably used to this, but he definitely looked over upon hearing the pellets being crushed in our mouths. I'm lucky I still have all my teeth.

*

The placebo wore off with the real euphoria of the two'o'clock bell. I ran out to the empty school bus, and collapsed across a seat with my legs hanging out in the aisle. After a moment of daydreaming I got a light kick in the shin. It was Robin.

“Falling asleep already, Ethan? Must have been a long day of class.”

“I wasn't sleeping, just waiting.” I moved next to the window so that she could sit down next to me, but she didn't. She sat across the aisle.

Then after it became apparent that the bus was going to be nearly full, she switched over. She scooped closer to allow a fat kid to pass. I felt her shoulder on my arm, and her thigh against mine.

The bus lurched through the suburban streets, extending its little stop signs every few blocks to let someone off. Robin said something about how her friend Palmer had “borrowed” her parents' car and got pulled over.

“They just took her to juvie to scare her, though. Her dad picked her up and agreed not to tell her mom.”

“Is she grounded?”

“No, she just has to help him clean out their garage or something. Have you ever driven your parents' car?”

I didn't feel like talking about that so I said the first semi-related thing I could think of. “Did you know she had a threesome with David and Luann?”

I immediately felt a twinge of regret at mentioning it, but the enraptured look on her face banished any further thoughts.

“No way!”

“Yeah-huh, I heard all about it.”

The bus driver said, “Hey, you getting out or what?” We were in front of Robin's house.

She got up, but said, “Is it okay if I give you a call in like fifteen minutes?”

My corner was the next stop, and I ran through the gloom our morning prank had left behind in the street, grabbed the mail from the box and sped into the house. I let the dog out and myself in; my parents would both be at work for a few more hours.

I was under the influence of a strange mix of feelings. I now had a full-blown crush on this girl, and I was overwhelmed that she was about to call me. On the other hand, I had begun to worry that David would not be happy one of our “secrets” had leaked to an actual girl.

I opened a Dr. Pepper and sat on the floor of my room next to the phone. It was made of clear plastic so you could see all these colorful wires and things that made it work (even if you couldn’t understand how). I held the whole apparatus in my lap and perused its innards until suddenly a bulb lit up inside it, and it rang. I gulped, inhaled, and answered.

She sounded so cute, and so entertained by my tale, that I ended up not only giving her all the morbid details he had given me, but touching the story up with a few of my own. This was not proper, to speak in mixed company of blindfolded sex play with shoplifted ties, or tandem blowjobs on a baby-changing table. But she encouraged me. I prattled on with no thought to the wisdom of what I was doing. Finally I decided to remind her to keep this between the two of us.

Before I could articulate this, she had said, “I gotta go for a second. Is it okay if I call you right back?” and I had agreed.

Immediately upon hanging up it occurred to me that it might not be okay at all. If this got out, reputations would be destroyed. Probably not Luann’s or Palmer’s; I knew somewhere in a more sober part of my mind that the story was bogus. They would be embarrassed, of course, but then they would turn it around on David. He would become known as a lying pervert. In turn, he would probably lash out at me by spilling all I had told him. I began to think about what it would be like to go to school after everyone knew

my secrets, after they knew the worst secret of all, that these secrets were not true. I could feel a drop of sweat rolling down my right temple. I picked up the phone again and dialed her number.

It was busy. I worried myself sick about whom she might be calling. She was fairly good friends with both Luann and Palmer. I became more and more convinced that she had to be talking to one of them. I had sown the seeds of my own destruction.

But then I considered: if I called David, I might be able to head it off by explaining it to him first, emphasizing that I didn't tell her I had heard it from him. It could be just a rumor of unknown origin. He would likely be mad and embarrassed that I had told Robin at all, but surely he would understand. It was just pillow talk. My mind having been loosened by our passionate exertions, I let it slip. I was sorry, naturally, but we could spin it our way....

I picked up the phone and dialed 2-5-9-7, the first four digits of his number. But what if this story did not play as well out loud as it had in my head? The recorded voice had just begun to apologize for my call not going through when there was a knock at the back door. I hung up the phone.

Robin was standing on my back porch, behind the screen door. She did not wait for me to open it, but sauntered in through the kitchen to my room. I stood there for a second, worried and confused, and went in after her. She sat on my bed and turned on the TV. I stood just inside the door and watched her change channels for a minute.

“Hey, you didn't call Palmer, did you? I was wondering, cause...” I had no idea what to say at this point.

She must not have either, because she just sat there and looked at me, smiling in that same way, only it no longer made me curious, just annoyed.

“Listen, I made that stuff up. Please just forget about it, I don’t want Luann to get mad at David.”

She laughed. “You made it up? C’mon, Ethan. I’m not stupid. Why would you make something like that up?”

I couldn’t be sure how she meant that, so I didn’t respond.

“He obviously told you about it himself.”

My stomach seemed to lower itself until it sat like a boulder on my intestines.

“But don’t worry. I haven’t told anyone. I won’t, either.”

That was a relief at least. But who was she on the phone with? Hell, maybe she had just left it off the hook.

“If you had made up a story, like that one,” she said, and paused for effect, “you would have been the main character. Right?”

Her eyes did not move. She dropped the remote and let it bounce and settle on the mattress.

“That’s what you boys do, huh? Make up stories about fucking around with girls. Because you don’t have the guts to go ahead and try.”

I was about to launch into a passionate disavowal of such sleazy behavior, but something in her grinning, freckled face warned me against it. She would have shut me right down.

“You’ve thought about me like that, haven’t you? I bet you tell your friends you’ve slept with me.”

I'm sure I turned bone-white.

“Don't lie, coward. I heard it.”

Someone sold me out? Maybe our mutual neighbor told his loudmouth little brother on the bus. I tried frantically to figure out who to blame for this outrageous rumor.

“I want to hear it from you. Every little dirty lying story you've told.”

She stood up. I winced, thinking she was going to attack me. She did. She grabbed the front of my pants and kissed me violently. I hurtled backwards into the hallway, and she kept coming. I took a few more steps back, started stammering something, and tripped over a boot into a pile of coats and mittens in front of the hall closet. She got on the floor and started crawling toward me. Her smile had turned unmistakably predatory. I trembled with fear, and came close to screaming. In a few seconds she was on me, and there was nothing to do but surrender.

That night I talked to David on the phone. He asked me what I had done all afternoon. I told him I had gone skateboarding.

Hermit Kingdoms

Private James G. Franklin passed under the shade and the rumble and whistle of a railroad bridge, and got his first glimpse of the castle.

Its towers were painted a powdery pink. They jutted into the sky from behind a wall of false gray stone. Flurries of people blew into, and out of, a dark semicircle beneath the castle where the wall opened. The crowd stretched around him, in all directions but especially forward. Most of it was made up of white people with their families. Franklin, an unaccompanied black man, was neither eyed nor avoided. There was too much else for their eyes. Veterans Day had gotten him in free, but he wore civilian clothes. He felt indistinct, maybe invisible. Right then, it felt nice.

He had been feeling self-conscious lately, looking in the mirror at the gray crowding out the black in his hair. He was handsome, though, with curved lips and upward-pushing eyebrows the people in his life had seen as trustworthy, or weak, depending on what kind of people they were.

The zone between him and the castle was Main Street. Everything was painted bright, done up with white woodwork. A barbershop quartet was warbling across the way. On his left was a firehouse without any hint of emergency or even the possibility thereof—but with Dalmatians. If this was what America used to look like for white people, no wonder the idea of having to share it bugged them out. The smell of sweets, the flower gardens, the bricks and gingerbread: a whole sundae of gee-golly Midwestern innocence. Main Street hit him with the force of a memory. It could not have belonged to his life, but in dreams you remember things that never happened to you. This place was

like that. Franklin told himself Main Street was false. He thought maybe he should resent the image on behalf of the real, rough world it painted over. But all he wanted was to lose himself in it.

A horse and carriage clopped by and a small clod of manure hit the ground. A man in a pinstriped vest appeared from nowhere, scooped it up, and vanished.

A voice rang out behind him, loud, full of enthusiasm and affection. He pivoted around, expecting a man with a microphone. But it came from somewhere hidden. It said, “Hello, and welcome to the Magic Kingdom.”

*

He could still picture the shoddy canvas in Pusan, WELCOME U.S. ARMY, and the shirtless soldiers dangling boots over the balcony above. Below the makeshift sign was the building’s original one, with floral insignia, Korean writing and the words PRIMARY SCHOOL. It felt right to enter such a place as part of a disoriented herd, everyone looking around, excited, self-conscious: the first day of school.

They were lined up in a hall that ended at the school cafeteria. There a nurse gave him a cup of coffee and a doughnut. He was also handed a cardboard carton full of baggies and cans: a C-ration. He had parted from the people he landed with somewhere, so he picked a round wooden table that wasn’t all white guys and sat down.

“Hi there,” said somebody. “What’s your name?”

“James—” He stopped to swallow a piece of doughnut. “Jimmy Franklin.”

“I’m Steve. This here is Samson, John, Al, and, shit, I’m sorry—”

“Gordie, Gordie Ellis.”

They all looked pretty fresh. New recruits like himself, Jimmy assumed. It did occur to him that he would probably never talk to any of these people again, even Samson and Gordie, who were black and thus probably at least in his regiment, but nonetheless he meant it when he said, “Nice to meet you all.”

“We were talking about why we signed. Samson here thought it would be fun. See the sights, fuck the girls, all around the world. Al believes that every man must stand up and fight the menace of Communism. I just never liked Orientals. What’s your excuse?”

For a second Jimmy had thought he might actually spill: that he was a breech birth, in a hip brace until age four, that his mom never stopped babying him, that after a childhood of being last-picked he had pushed and pushed himself, hoping that eventually he would feel able in the world. But that would just have become fodder for another joke.

“There’s a cause worth dying for.”

“Shit,” said Samson. “Ain’t none of us dying. As soon as they see what kind of firepower we’re packing, they’ll drop to their knees and whistle Yankee Doodle.” He took a gulp of coffee and exhaled with satisfaction.

“You’re in for one hell of a lesson if that’s what you think,” said Al. “That’s what the Nazis thought when they went into Russia. They didn’t understand what Communist brainwashing does to a man. They just keep coming. It turns you into a crazed animal. Like how you read in the papers, what smoking reefer does to n...”

A beat or two later Al remembered his audience and his face flushed, filling in the white expanses between his many pimples. Jimmy looked to see how Gordie would respond, but he only stared into his C-ration and sighed softly through his nostrils.

“Al, keep your stupid mouth shut,” said Steve with a scowl that indicated his fun had been spoiled. But then it faded. “Allow me to apologize. What the gentleman meant to say was: what smoking reefer does to colored gentlemen.”

A good group laugh gradually broke out, until even Al joined in.

“But like I was saying,” said Samson, “even if they put up a good fight, once the rest of them united nations show up it won’t even be close. We’ll be back in Japan in time for Christmas, and a stocking full of all the geisha ass you can handle.”

“You haven’t balled a Japanese girl yet, did you, Samson?” said Gordie.

“No,” Samson said cautiously. “Why?”

“You haven’t heard? Their pussies run sidewise, ‘stead of up and down.”

“No shit?” said Al. Earnest.

The table rocked with laughter.

“You are one gullible motherfucker, Al. Do me a favor: keep away from those Commie brainwashers!”

*

In another place that could only be remembered in dreams, he was looking up to a golden-red haze, happy and wet. He knew nothing of dryness. Beneath intestinal gurgling and the occasional pop of joints, a slow, hypnotic beat was kept, always. The harsh sounds of outside were dull, distant. Floating around had kept him occupied for a long time, so the space shrinking around him was dismaying, but he was learning to accept his shrunken world as cozy rather than restrictive. He would suck his thumb. Then, when that got old, he’d grab the tether on his belly. Feeling it pump in his hand was reassuring, even fun. Sleep took him easily, when it had to. When it didn’t, he just floated.

*

Jimmy sat with his platoon in a boxcar rolling north from Pusan. Most of the boys Jimmy had trained with were white, but the 24th Regiment was all black, at least the enlisted men. The white platoon leader was Lieutenant McKee. He was short and lean but had broad shoulders, and though he could not have been more than thirty-five his wispy mustache was white. The mouth beneath this mustache was giving a speech, bits of which were occasionally audible over the clanking of the rickety train:

“—die. But remember: any man who gives ground may be responsible for—”

The men were sitting Indian-style on the wooden floor, clustered by squad. Lieutenant McKee stood in front of the open car door, at times grabbing the doorframe to prevent losing his balance. As he spoke, the terrain behind spun by. Jimmy gave up trying to read the sergeant's lips in favor of sightseeing. Outside Pusan was hilly and rural, in the sense of having a thin population, but to a child of Missouri, it did not fit the correct image of 'country.' Instead of the teeming tiles of corn and wheat between St. Louis and Chicago—instead of what one ought to see from a train—there was a ragged patchwork of small, soggy, sad-looking rice paddies, many turned into mere pools of brown muck by the flight south.

The refugees they passed were starving and filthy, carrying whatever they had owned or come across that was worth its weight. Very few bothered to stare back at the train. Was the poverty and grief inflicted here really enough to deaden even the dumb-animal reflex of curiosity? Or was one more mob of boys with guns simply the last thing worth one's interest? God, the things that must have happened to these people.

“—in good hands. General MacArthur has—”

After his speech the boxcar filled with chatter. At one point Lieutenant McKee stopped by and sat next to Jimmy's platoon sergeant, a black man named Sergeant Wilkins. He quickly shook hands with each of the men and asked if there were any burning questions. McKee seemed approachable, compared to the other white officers Jimmy had contact with in training and in Japan. He decided to speak up.

"Sir, I was wondering about the land. How has it been ruined so much if the North Koreans haven't even made it this far south? It's all dust where it ain't mud."

"The Japs tore it up for half a century. Once upon a time they called this place the Hermit Kingdom. You see, the Koreans had been conquered so many times they closed off the border, shut down their ports. They were left alone for almost three hundred years, getting poorer and poorer but at least not getting fucked with. Japan, meanwhile, grew into a serious power. Eventually it was time to have their way with Korea. The erosion's because they went and stripped the forest"—he thrust his chin out toward the view, now a field of stumps and dead brush—"and exported the timber, a lot of rice, and some slave labor. They didn't really care what happened to the land. Hell they lived across the sea! Now one might think they'd want an asset worth the invasion, and they'd take at least good enough care of the place for their own profit. But no, they trashed the joint. Like a pack of Deuce-Four boys in a Tokyo bar, if I hear the stories right."

He smiled, and a chuckle moved through the squad.

"In fact, we owe the Japs some thanks. This railroad was here to take all the plunder home by way of Pusan. Now we're using it for imports: big guns and big balls."

More laughs. But Jimmy started to gawk outside again, and McKee turned to see why. Sometime while he was talking the wasted river basins had transformed into

awesome mountains, some more forested than anything so far but mostly snow-topped, hard-looking rock, pushing towards the sky.

“Those are the Taebaeks. Where you from, Private Franklin?” he asked.

“Around St. Louis, sir.”

“You’re not in Missouri anymore, Toto. Get used to the feeling.”

The train lurched to a stop.

“Alright men,” said Sergeant Wilkins, “let’s un-ass this boxcar.”

*

Accompanied by the jolly, bouncing sounds of a canned polka, James Franklin buckled into his bobsled for a ride on the Matterhorn. A scale replica of a Swiss mountain, built up among the orange groves of Southern California from plaster, lumber, and steel. The speed of the ride was intoxicating. At the end, when his sled popped gracefully out the mountain for a gentle splashdown into an Alpine pond, Franklin laughed out loud and clapped his hands.

Though Franklin loved the roller-coaster rush of the Matterhorn, generally the rides that relied on spinning and jumping and other dizzy physical sensations hadn’t moved him like the slower indoor ones. He had spent most of his day in Fantasyland, lining up for short rides through the dark. He was hypnotized by their three-dimensional storytelling, moving him through sequences of nearly life-sized dioramas, everything carefully orchestrated, spaces and sights arranged to create precise feelings for his passive pleasure. At times the images were lovely, like the miniature London his Peter Pan pirate ship dangled over, a nighttime scene complete with a foreshortened Big Ben chiming, and little lights moving along the roads. Sometimes the effects were more garish

than charming. When the hideous crone from Snow White popped out, he was surprised how much it tore his composure, and when the fat, vengeful Red Queen chased him, all of Wonderland an angry mob behind her, he felt for a second that he was actually in danger, the object of hatred and pursuit and attack. But the rides typically ended on a sweet, resolved note, and he would feel a rush of relaxation, accomplishment even.

But the Matterhorn was his last ride ticket. There were still another three hours until park closing, and he craved more experience, but he was down to five dollars and ten cents. He worked as an auto mechanic in Long Beach, and his next paycheck was three days away. Which was fine, as long as he didn't waste any more. Anyway, there was enough free stuff to do and see that it was worth staying simply to wander around.

Franklin went to Frontierland. The sun was setting over Tom Sawyer Island. Children were scampering through caves. Nearby was a pack mule ride, a miniature horse corral and a pair of Indians in buckskins and feathers looking nonchalant while toddlers swarmed around them, pretending to shoot at them with fingers and being scolded by parents for pulling on the costumes' leather tassels.

Adventureland had little to offer besides darkness and the twitterings of non-existent animals from the dense foliage of the Jungle Cruise. With ride tickets there might be something worth seeing. He turned around and walked back to Frontierland.

Franklin stood in front of the Frontierland Shootin' Exposition, an open-air arcade under a wooden shack. There was a bar with a row of rifles cabled to it, and a diorama full of targets. After a moment's deliberation he fished one of the two nickels from his wallet and inserted it into a slot beside where the rifle was plugged in. With a limited number of shots, he had to find and hit the choicest targets. His first was at a gray tail

poking up over a ridge. When he hit it, a terrified-looking coyote popped up and howled. The rifle made real shooting and ricochet sounds, and when he hit a shovel propped up in the graveyard section a skull burst from the ground. A possum emerged from a stump, squealing angrily at Franklin, and flipped over dead, or perhaps was just playing. With a deadly serious look on his face, and marvelous efficiency and speed, Franklin spent the fifteen or so shots he was allowed. When at last the rifle only clicked, and nothing moved in response to his shots, Franklin immediately put in his second nickel.

He shot even faster this time, at spinning birds, blooming cacti, shuffling headstones. He began to lose control, missing shots, his chest heaving with panicked breaths. Aiming for a desperado atop a miniature bank, he hit a cloud against the back of the gallery, and a ghostly cowboy rode across the sky with a scream. Franklin pulled the trigger again and the rifle clicked. It clicked again and again but he continued for a minute. A cool breeze struck the sweat beading below his hairline, and he put the rifle down, feeling lost and embarrassed. A few rifles over, a chubby kid in a ten-gallon hat had been watching him. The boy turned around and ran after his family.

Main Street's shops glowed, trimmed with small white bulbs, none of them burnt out. People streamed out to the parking lot while sentimental music played on. Franklin had come here not because it was the way out, but because he wanted to see Main Street again. He watched a teenage couple at a soda fountain. The boy behind the counter had a paper cap, a bow tie, and acne. He eyed his female customer when her date couldn't see.

Over the speakers boomed a bittersweet message: "Attention all guests. Disneyland will be closing in fifteen minutes. We hope you've had a wonderful and memorable stay and that we'll see you again soon here at the Happiest Place on Earth."

Franklin didn't really even begin to mull it over. In some strange way the decision had already been made. He would not be leaving.

*

Jimmy gripped a Howitzer, pumping shots from the hillside down into a jeep full of North Koreans. They fired back, but only with pistols. To his right he heard a whoosh and then a tremendous boom. His squad leader, Sergeant Pittman, had fired a rocket into the jeep, now only a broken, flaming box tilted into a weedy ditch. Half a body landed on a bush next to the ditch. Its intestines were draped all the way to the ground on the other side, and one pantleg was still burning.

After ten days at the Pusan perimeter, Jimmy had still never killed a man up close. He had seen it done. The soldiers who had done it didn't crack, and Jimmy himself in witnessing it didn't even come close, but he felt that doing it himself might be different. Private Jones from his own squad had taken a bayonet through the midsection from a dying Red two days earlier, and pints of his blood spilled into the dust. After another of his companions avenged Jones, Jimmy was sent back to get the sergeant.

Jimmy got the sense that he was not esteemed very highly. He was not one of the fastest in the platoon, awkward in a sprint and prone to leg pain over distance, and though keeping up was sometimes a struggle, here as in training he tried hard not to let it show. Nor was he one of the strongest. And though he aimed his M1 reasonably well, he was a little hesitant.

He had problems socially, too. The guys all thought of him as a goody-goody because he got along so well with Lieutenant McKee and had little to say when sex, drinking, or any kind of controversy came up. He had had a somewhat sheltered youth.

On leave in Japan he had felt more like strolling around on his own, to explore, than carousing with the other soldiers. And why shouldn't he talk to McKee, if the man liked to listen to what he had to say? The lieutenant had a way of making Jimmy want to do better without making him feel inadequate. Jimmy was not going to give up one valuable friendship for a remote shot at others with people who did not naturally like him.

For lunch that day, besides the corned beef hash, cheese and crackers, and pudding of their C-rations, there were some eggs they had found at a farm whose occupants had been killed. They hard-boiled the eggs over a fire in steel helmets.

Word was, the Chinese had joined the fight. The North Korean army had been falling apart, but with Russian support and now China sending soldiers to die for the communist struggle, there was no telling how long it might last. The platoon was talking about this new threat, some finishing lunch, others smoking, when Lieutenant McKee stepped in.

“Don't let that shit get to you. Quit talking about it. That's a direct order. We need to buck up so no dickhead back home or in Korea can say any of you men bugged out and proved them right. I will personally shoot anyone I see bugging out, before Joe Chink gets a chance. You hear me? Have some fucking pride.”

“Yes, sir.”

The 24th had become known as the “Bugout Brigade.” White soldiers had been spreading rumors that the black regiment tended to panic and desert in the face of danger.

Private Haskins, known as “Slim,” spoke up: “You're all shitheads, if you didn't see this kind of shit coming. You know what they say? They're saying we just sit around camp singing the ‘Bugout Boogie.’ Got lyrics and everything.”

“How’s it go?” someone asked.

Another began to chant, “When the mortars started falling ‘round the CP tent/Everybody wondered where the big brass went/They’re buuuggginn’ out/Just—“

“It don’t matter how the fuckin’ song goes,” Slim shouted, and the singing stopped.

“The point is, we’re out here going through hell for a whole bunch of people who hate our goddamn guts. Even if I make it home, it don’t matter what I did for democracy. I never got to vote before. Doubt I will now. Not if I end up back in Wilson County. On the other hand, what good would bugging out even be? Where in the fuck would you go?”

“There’s always the old S.I.W.,” someone suggested.

“What’s that?” Jimmy asked.

“Shit, don’t tell *him*,” said Slim. “He’ll run and tell Sarge you were talking about it.”

“It stands for self-inflicted wound. You hurt yourself, make it look like the enemy did it. Then it’s back to Japan: real food, bed rest, beautiful bitches.”

“Or court martial, three years in the hole, dishonorable discharge.” said Slim.

“Probably make you pay back your own medical bills. And that’s if you get found before you bleed to death. Being a coward’s one thing, but a dumb one...”

Slim was very opinionated. Few ever openly disagreed with him, but most people got tired of listening. Jimmy ended up the audience for many of these rants by default.

That night they marched in silence through some rice paddies, over a narrow ridge with the marsh on either side. Chinese forces were reportedly near. But it had been a long

day on the move, and they were all very tired. Jimmy nodded off while walking, lost his footing and crashed into the paddy. For a moment it sounded like it would be the last noise in history. Whatever had been chirping, frogs or crickets or something, had stopped dead. Jimmy sat up in the water and looked at Sergeant Pittman hovering over him, index finger to lips. Silence made his moonlit expression of fury all the more intimidating. The entire squad stared at him, horrified, listening for any movement in the distance. Pittman lifted him by the hand out of the paddy. Jimmy marched the last two miles soaking wet, expecting an ambush any second and hoping that he would not survive to be blamed.

*

The womb had continued to tighten around him. It occurred to him at one point that he might be more comfortable if he flipped so that his head faced down. But he decided to hold firm. His legs were now up around his neck, bent at the hips but with the knees extended. He was quite flexible; holding this pose caused no discomfort or pain.

Then one day he was squeezed, hard. It was scary at first, but when he learned to anticipate it, he found it funny, pleasant: half tickle, half massage. He enjoyed the attention and would squirm in response. But after some time, it stopped being nice. He was being squeezed too hard. Too often. Something bad was going on. He tried to readjust a little, to take some of the pressure off, and it only started pushing him harder. Then he felt the world open up under his bottom. All the nice wetness was flushed out from around him. He was only a little uncomfortable still, physically, but terrified. He did not know why the hole had opened underneath him. Then the squeezing started again. Only this time it was much harder, and far more often, and it was no longer squeezing. It

was pushing. He was being forced through the hole, out of the only place he had ever known, to some horrible future, or maybe none.

*

Private Franklin hid in the woods behind Fantasyland until the early hours of the morning. He was drawn to the castle, though any number of hiding places might have been more practical. He snuck by a gardener outside, jimmied a lock on the exterior with his P-38 (the astonishingly versatile can opener designed for use with the C-ration) and found himself in the backstage for the Sleeping Beauty walkthrough attraction, a series of dioramas that told the fairy tale in a rather cheap, static way. Nothing like the rides. But its dullness came in handy; relatively few people came through in the time he was there.

He camped in the diorama where the heroine was awoken by the kiss of Prince Charming. Each night he would remove the miniature couple from their bed and use it for a pillow, being sure to replace them and tidy up until it was just the way he found it.

Franklin bought another day's worth of ride tickets and spent the day moving through other worlds in darkness and solitude, safe and tight in his vehicle. Pirates of the Caribbean was the realest yet. The robot pirates were charming and unsettling at the same time. One of them drank booze with a pig in a puddle of mud.

It's a Small World featured tiny mechanical children from the various cultures of the world. It was sponsored by the United Nations. When his boat floated into the Asian section and he saw the smiling mop-haired kids in robes, dancing in front of a stylized pagoda, he laughed. He laughed uproariously, aggressively. The mother on the other side of the boat from him scooted her young son over to her and clutched him on her lap.

That night he spent his last dollar on a hamburger.

*

Jimmy was marching on a road that changed from gravel to dirt as it progressed. They were on their way to a train that would take them west to the city of Taejon, south of Seoul. When they reached the tracks they met a caravan of refugees trying to work their way south. Lieutenant McKee tried to explain to them through an interpreter that the train was going the opposite direction. They were the thinnest Jimmy had seen, and nearly the dirtiest. He watched a woman split off from the group and go to a ditch on the opposite side of the tracks. He stared, wondering what she was up to. She squatted.

“Hey Jimmy,” said another private. “Whaddya, like watching girls take a piss? Talk about a sick bastard. Why don’t you—God!”

The woman had given birth to a baby, there in the weeds. She chopped the umbilical cord with a rock, picked the child up from a puddle of afterbirth, regarded it for a minute, squeezed it, put it to her ear, then left it on the ground and walked away.

Jimmy felt the breath being sucked from his lungs. His face twitched slightly, the eyelids trembling and nostrils flaring. The two privates stood in silence for a moment. The baby made no cry. Then Sergeant Pittman hollered, “All aboard!”

Jimmy spent the trip to Taejon in a daze. That afternoon, his squad was out on patrol. As they marched through a mountain pass, the sounds of jet engines reached them, echoing louder and louder. They looked all over the sky and could not see anything. By the time they could see the planes they were overhead, a pair of F-84’s, and they were dropping bombs. A huge sheet of rock exploded off a cliff, perhaps fifty yards ahead.

“Friendly fire!” There was another explosion to the rear, and the private who had shouted the warning now lay half-buried in rubble, the lower half of his arm attached only by a scrap of skin and uniform. He was dead.

“Goddammit,” another private yelled into the heavens. “Ever seen a black gook? You blind motherfuckers.”

Sergeant Pittman got them to a protected cave under the cliff face and radioed for assistance, while Slim said, “White Americans killing black Americans. Suddenly makes sense, Truman calling this shit a ‘police action.’”

“Shut the fuck up for a minute, alright Slim?”

*

On the second morning he woke up in the castle, Private Franklin found himself out of money and somewhat bored. He had two ride tickets left, and wasn’t sure what he would do when they were gone. He went on the Jungle Cruise. The boat driver kept up a truly corny patter and the animatronic figures were racist caricatures. It was the first ride that rubbed him the wrong way.

He entered a gift shop upon disembarking. There were fake African totems in both wood and plastic, pith helmets, and a variety of toy weapons including machetes, bullwhips, and pistols, of which he picked up one. It was not old-fashioned looking, just a plain .45 in fact. He pocketed it and, as casually as he could, walked out of the store.

Once outside, Franklin started moving more quickly, toward Tomorrowland. He had grown fond of it there. Everything was a streamlined white, the centerpiece a giant rocket with a TWA logo. He used his last ride ticket on the Carousel of Progress. It consisted of a ring of theaters revolving around a core of sets where an ageless white

Midwestern robot family had its lives improved each decade by advances in household technology. Between scenes, when the building would start moving under Jimmy's seat, the robots would sing a song: "There's a great, big, beautiful tomorrow/Shining at the end of every day/There's a great, big, beautiful tomorrow/Just a dream away." The message was consistent throughout Tomorrowland: in the future, everything will be wonderful, if you just leave it to us. In this case the "us" was General Electric, but it didn't matter to Jimmy who sponsored the feeling; he liked reassurance.

Afterward, he went to one of the Tomorrowland cafeterias, to scrounge food from abandoned trays. He was sitting in a booth shaped like a flying saucer, eating the remains of a smoked turkey leg and some cold, soggy french fries. Across the way he noticed a young girl, walking with a pair of girlfriends to throw away the trash on their trays. She had left her pocketbook on the table. He went for it. Before he got out the door he heard a high-pitched shriek: "Sherry, that guy just grabbed your purse!"

*

He was being sucked into a narrow passage, but the widest part of his body was going first. Something had to give. His legs were torn from their sockets at the hip, as he was crammed through the fleshy bottleneck. Whatever monster had been lurking beneath him, it had now swallowed him up and was beginning to mash his crumpled body in its mouth. He had never known this kind of pain. His body was pressed until it was bruised all over. His head was pounded from above, his balls were smashed beneath. He was suffering, alone, rejected and even tortured by the source of love and nourishment that had cared for him forever. Had he done something wrong? He had the conviction now that he had, that this was all somehow his own fault. But how? What did it matter, what

was the point of living a life in which this could happen? He wished for death even as he struggled against it, puny, ass-first and helpless, feeling no hope at all.

*

Just after dawn in the destroyed town of Yonchon, the platoon came upon a building that was still partly standing. Once they cleared all the debris off of that section, they saw it had survived because its walls were made of thick metal. It was a bank vault. Lieutenant McKee decided to open it up and see what might be inside. He ordered Jimmy to fetch a round of High Explosive Anti-Tank ammunition, and to place it on the lock of the door. Then McKee told everyone to get back, outside the ruins, and they did. He aimed his 75-mm rifle at the HEAT and fired.

The vault door blew open, and pink bills fluttered through the air like ticker tape in a victory parade. But any celebration was premature: they were not dollars but won, the worthless currency of North Korea. Though everyone's dreams of loot were quashed, the men took the won as souvenirs of that moment.

Afterward they met up with a truck convoy in Yonchon, and it was here that Sergeant Wilkins had a premonition. He told McKee that he had suddenly felt, as the trucks pulled in, that there was some danger waiting for them nearby.

“And just what are you going on, a hunch? Anything you can put your finger on?”

“No sir, just something in the air of this place. Like before a tornado hits.”

“‘The Land of the Morning Calm.’ I'm sure everything's fine. Now come on and let's move out.”

“I just feel like something's up, sir. You ever had that?”

“Sure, but what do you propose I do? Not load the men up? We have to be back at the company position by 1100 hours. Keep your eyes open. But keep your balls too.”

Jimmy casually eavesdropped on all of this, leaning against the last truck in the convoy. It seemed like Sergeant Wilkins wanted to say more but his training was too good. There was also in McKee's tone again something of a warning about the temptation to “bug out.” So the platoon loaded into trucks, and set off down the gravel road.

The trucks had just departed the ravaged town without incident, but Jimmy watched nervously for anything irregular. He trusted Pittman's hunch. Lucky for him he had chosen a jeep in the middle of the caravan, because the last one in line was the first to be destroyed by mortar fire as they curved left of a rocky hill. A few more rounds fell from the cloudy sky. Soldiers trapped in burning trucks screamed, and screamed, and stopped, but there were others to take it up.

“Fall back, fall back!” shouted Lieutenant McKee. “Far side of the road.”

Some protection was afforded there by a built-up ridge separating the road from a dried-out rice paddy behind them, so the men evacuated their trucks just as the enemy commenced machine-gun fire. A few were cut down, but most who were not in the hit trucks made it across. Still, it was hardly the best defensive position, especially as no one was quite sure of the enemy's location—until a wave of twenty or so North Korean guerillas charged toward the lousy, fairly inescapable spot where the Americans had retreated. The mortar fire now blew huge craters in the dusty floor of the one-time paddy all around them, no direct hits but enough to distract while the guerillas advanced on foot. They inflicted a few casualties but were soon gunned down. Jimmy hoped this could be attributed to incompetence, not the fact that they had enough up there to spare a few.

Several minutes of quiet passed, and then a mortar round hit right in the middle of their position. Most of Jimmy's squad were killed instantly. The guerillas on the hill had adjusted again, and it was time to run. Everybody scattered, and McKee shouted "Forward! Forward! Any way you can, let's go up there and get those bastards!"

This seemed like madness, since there was no way of knowing how many were up there, but Jimmy cut far around to the other side of the hill. He also could not tell how many of his own comrades had obeyed, how many were dead, and how many had sensibly bugged out. The mortars ceased altogether as Jimmy worked his way up the hill, slow and cautious. A few short automatic bursts punctuated the quiet crackling that was dying out on the road below. Jimmy was sure he would be picked off before he reached the top, but soon he was there. He wondered who was left standing after the fire he heard. Before him were the foundation and a couple walls of a windmill, and the broken sails themselves were strewn over a pile of rocks ten yards away.

There were bodies on the ground: two men from the 24th and four North Koreans. The mortar set-up was abandoned; apparently this was it. Jimmy kept his gun pointed toward the windmill. The inside was still obstructed by the remaining walls, and he had every reason to believe there would be Koreans left around. He came close to springing around the corner, in which case anyone from either army hiding there probably would have killed him, but then he came to his senses. He ducked down to peek through a hole in the wall. McKee lay on the ground beside an enemy soldier. They were both shot through the chest. Jimmy came around and stood over the body of his sergeant. He felt a second's grief, and then the continuing sense of emergency washed it away.

He circled around the back of the windmill until he could see the sails on the other side. He had had the sense someone was lurking there, and his maneuver worked. A figure came out from behind the tattered canvas, probably hoping Jimmy was going back down the hill so he could shoot him in the back. Instead it was Jimmy who followed him, fighting fear with each step, and caught up with him where he stopped at the corner of the mill. He put one bullet through the back of the man's head from about two feet away. The man hit the wall and fell backwards onto Jimmy's feet, oozing blood and brains onto his boots. He was missing his left eye and his nose was a barely recognizable nub.

Jimmy sat against a wall of the mill next to Lieutenant McKee's body, and stared off at the hills. He did not know what he was feeling—whether he felt bad about McKee, or the man he had just slain, or whether he felt bad at all. The one friend he had made was dead, true. But he hadn't even been that close a friend. Jimmy just wanted out, of everything. He picked up a pistol from beside a North Korean body and stared at it. He held it up to his head and then felt foolish. He shook his head, snapping out of it a bit, laughed involuntarily. Just for fun, he winked and aimed the gun at his bloody boot.

“Hey man, not so close,” somebody said, “you'll leave powder burns.”

Jimmy would never have believed he would be so glad to hear that voice. Slim.

“Look, man, the cavalry's coming. McKee went ahead and radioed the company that if we weren't there by 1045 they should come after us. I was thinking: fuck bravery, fuck smarts. We can get away with this if we do it right. I do you, then you do me.”

Jimmy nodded a why not.

“Stand up.”

Jimmy stood straight up in profile. Slim kneeled six feet away and shot him through the buttocks. Jimmy gasped, and a red blotch grew on his pants, but he did not cry out. He fell forward, leaning against the wall. Slim handed him the pistol.

“Your turn, and then we tourniquet these butts up.” Slim posed the same way and gritted his teeth. “Here's to sushi and koochie in Tokyo.”

It was a mistake: the wounds would be identical, obvious. But that was made moot, because Jimmy was delirious and Slim didn't have much fat. The shot shattered his pelvis. The exit wound sprayed blood, bone, and organ tissue onto the ground in front of the windmill. Slim cursed his squadmate furiously.

“I shoulda known, you weak-ass motherfucker. I shoulda put my bullet through that cocksucking head of yours.”

For the first time in Korea, Jimmy cried. He walked over to where Slim lay, kneeled down behind him, stroked the guy's hairline, squeezed his arm, said “I'm sorry, man, I'm sorry,” over the curses. Sobbing, he shot Slim in the forehead.

He took a Korean's jacket to apply some pressure to his buttocks. He lay on his side in the grass and screamed. He didn't care who found him first.

*

The girls followed Private Franklin outside, still wailing and making a scene. They had managed to attract a couple of security guards. He saw them walking in his general direction, but they were not looking toward him. He ducked into a bathroom by the Monsanto House of the Future, locked himself in a stall, and pulled down his pants. He browsed the contents of the purse: makeup, a hairbrush, a collection of notes from someone named Wesley, bobby pins, a pack of spearmint gum, and eighty-five cents.

The bathroom door opened and closed.

“Excuse me, is there anyone in here?”

Private Franklin defecated loudly.

“Why, yes,” he said in his best respectable white daddy voice. “What is it?”

“This is park security. We're looking for a purse-snatcher. Black man, age thirty-five to forty, stole from a thirteen year-old girl, the scumbag.”

“How awful. I've got one that age myself. The very thought of it.”

“Sad times we live in. You haven't seen anyone by that description then?”

“No sir. I sure do hope you find him.”

“Thanks. Sorry to bother you, mister.”

The guard left. Franklin waited a minute, then flushed the toilet. He glanced in the mirror, and did not recognize himself. He still carried a photo from training camp: a 120-pound kid with a hat too big for his head, necktie pressed neatly under his jacket, looking vigorous but untested, proud but vulnerable. He held it beside his reflection. Who was this other wild-eyed man with four days' beard, mustard and cola stains on his shirt?

Franklin had to get out. He took the girl's change and chewing gum and left the purse otherwise full under the sink. He exited and made for Main Street. But at the hub in front of the castle, where Tomorrowland and Main Street met, he came within ten feet of the girls, who had now managed to hook actual cops into their tear-jerker of a case.

His heart skipped, and he tried to blend back into the crowd. But the little girl, Sherry, with tears running down her red cheeks, looked up: “There he is! That's the one.”

Franklin broke into a sprint past the castle, around the Matterhorn peak and back to Tomorrowland, where he jumped a fence into 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. He

followed the edge of the lagoon to the rear border of the park, hoping to escape over the fence, but it was too high. A policeman was running toward him from his left, and he gave up and ran the other way. Another cop appeared, following the opposite edge of the lagoon. Meanwhile the first one was halfway to him along the rear. Cornered, he did the one thing he could do to try to shake them. He jumped on top of a submarine that had stopped to view one of the ride's underwater tableaux. Across the lagoon a live girl in a mermaid costume stood up and waddled away with a shocked look on her face.

He ran along the length of the submarine but there was nowhere for him to go. He might try to swim, but they would get him. The sun shined in his eyes. He took the toy Colt out of his back pocket and began waving it around.

“He's got a gun!” shouted the cop along the back of the lagoon.

“I bought it in Adventureland,” Franklin tried to yell over the sound of a waterfall, smiling and continuing to wave the pistol. He pointed it at the farther policeman, playfully, and took a bullet in his chest from the closer one.

Private Franklin flopped into the blue water, trailing blood as he sank. He was not alarmed that he had been shot, but when he landed on the tentacles of the giant squid, eye to hideous eye with the robotic creature, he panicked. The trail of blood became a great cloud as he struggled away from the squid. He found himself staring into the window of a submarine, with the terrified faces of children watching him die, their parents gradually catching on that this was not part of the ride.

*

Towards the end of his convalescence in Osaka, Jimmy got a welcome surprise. Steve, the joker he met that first day in Pusan, had checked into the same ward with a

broken thigh. It was good to see a familiar face, even a smarmy one. Having nothing to do but lie down and talk all day, they quickly became real friends. Steve was from New York, and Jimmy didn't get all of his jokes. But they made him laugh anyway. Jimmy had been fighting sadness for a long time, and levity was just what he needed.

Another surprise came a week later. He awoke to the sounds of "Happy Birthday" from Steve, a few other patients, and a pair of Japanese women at the foot of his bed. One was an old woman, with big smears of lipstick on her lips, and gray hair held back in a bun, stretching her wrinkled face half-taut. She was holding a blue-frosted cake with a candle. The other one was younger than him, maybe sixteen, and carried a bowl of rice with a black egg atop it.

"So you're nineteen years old," said Steve. "And lucky you made it this far. I was considering getting you a pool cue. You wouldn't need a case. You could just run it through the holes in your asscheeks and really hustle. Every time it was the other fella's turn he'd be too distracted, just staring."

Jimmy smiled, sat up and blew out the candle.

"But I decided to get you a nice piece of ass instead."

Jimmy was still secretly a virgin, even after a year in the military. It bothered him, because he was sure he was the only one, but somehow he had never found the courage to do anything about it. He became tense.

"Yours is the old one, on the right. The other one's for me"—Jimmy gave him a horrified look—"gotcha, didn't I? Anyway, go with Mamasan, she'll take care of you."

The male attendant smiled at Jimmy as he walked out of the hospital with the women, to a house down the street. The old woman guided him and the girl into a room

with pink shades and a flattened mattress on the ground. The walls were decorated with postcards from around the world, probably all left or sent by U.S. soldiers.

The old woman said something he didn't understand. "Shoujo. Enjoy but gentle."

"Excuse me, what was that?"

"First man, big honor. Teach her what to do."

So Steve had found a virgin for him. The pressure was even greater. How was he supposed to show her anything? Then again, how would she know the difference?

"Food," said the girl. Her teeth were crooked, but she smiled brightly, without self-consciousness. She spooned a piece of cake into his mouth, handed him the spoon, and began kissing his neck and grabbing him around the shoulders. He finished the cake more quickly than he ordinarily would, because it was the one thing left there that he actually knew how to do.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at the bowl she had put down on the floor.

She took him by the hand and sat down on the mattress with him.

"Hundred-year egg. Food."

The girl peeled the gooey black layer off and broke the shell. Inside was an amber-colored substance with a green yolk. Jimmy sniffed it, and his head involuntarily jerked back at the smell of ammonia. The girl looked upset, so he decided to try it. It tasted like a sharp cheese. It wasn't as bad as he expected, but he didn't like it. He ate the rest fast, and smiled at the girl. The girl smiled back and clapped her hands. She threw a leg over him and sat on his lap, and began kissing all over his face. She looked excited. Jimmy was just nervous.

She kissed him full on the mouth. There was a lot of tooth in the kiss: jagged, clumsy tooth. They kept trying, and by the fifth kiss it was going more smoothly. She jumped off of him, and dropped down on her back on the bed. Nervousness finally peeked through her expression too. She untied the sash of her kimono.

“Fuck you?”

Jimmy suppressed a laugh while she opened the kimono and held her arms out. She was pale, and her chest was heaving with sharp breaths. He stripped and crouched over her, ran his hands over her small, soft body, over her breasts and stomach and down her thighs. The girl sighed, and reached for his groin. She took him in her hand, a proud, intrepid look on her face, and guided him into her, or almost. Jimmy hovered helplessly. She wriggled into him, grunted, and slapped him a few times on the hip. He took this to mean he should push. He did. The noises she made frightened him, but she held tight around his waist and he kept going. He heard the blood pumping in his head, and collapsed onto her as she moved her soft hands over him.

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After what seemed like an eternity of punishment, he was ejected into scorching light, and a dryness that burned his skin. His eyes shut tight against the fire. He wiped his hands over his brow desperately. A giant pair of blinding white hands severed him from everything that sustained him, and he began to grow faint. Sounds were not soft anymore. An angry, cacophonous world screamed out at him. He screamed back. Following the scream was the sudden, abrasive rush of air into a pair of lungs that had never felt it. He screamed more. He was placed on a hard flat scale, and felt cold for the first time. He was dropped onto a blanket that scratched his tender skin. They gave him stinging eyedrops,

and he did his best to cry them out. He curled up, the way he had when his spine was always supported, and sobbed. He pretended he was back where he belonged, when he was loved. His skin and eyes adjusted quickly, but his body still ached. The sobs slowly subsided, and he went into a sort of exhausted shock, nothing like the sleep he used to know. It was all over, he thought, everything that he loved was gone

But when he had almost resigned himself to a life of hell, he was lifted by a pair of warm dark hands, lifted to a breast. An urge took hold of him. He sucked and sucked, and it gave him faith. There was something here on the outside that treated him the way he had known on the inside. It was not the same thing, exactly. But it was comfort.

Algorithm Sutra

1. Death

The lamas were playing it down.

“Don’t fear, Tenzin. The plague will never reach us here.”

“They say Dharamsala has been destroyed already,” the novice said. Bounded by the blackness of keen eyes and shorn hair, the grooves in his skin betrayed worries unbecoming his youth.

“It can’t possibly spread this far into the mountains. And this is holy ground, of course. The Buddhas will protect us.”

Despite Lama Osel’s words, Tenzin saw the fear in his watery eyes. Decades before the younger monk was even born, Osel had seen Tibet invaded, his elders killed in doomed revolts, his family and his religion exiled. This was worse.

The story, as it circulated in the monastery, was that a gang of wicked computers was attempting to wipe out mankind and conquer the world. Their main weapon in this campaign was a swarm of tiny machines, smaller than grains of sand. They had spread rapidly around the globe, relentlessly devouring everything that lived.

A leaf fell on Tenzin’s foot and he thought about kicking or brushing it away, but just stared at it. “Idiot scientists.”

“Not at all,” said Lama Chogyal. “Scientists are clever. So clever that at last they’ve devised a trap that even they cannot figure their way out of.”

He laughed, not a forced gallows sniff but an uncontrolled, cooing laugh.

Though Chogyal had not responded to Osel's words of reassurance, Tenzin could tell he disapproved, and would have given a more blunt appraisal if he had seniority. But Chogyal also seemed to be the only one who was somehow staying composed. Tenzin felt himself resenting it.

"I'm glad you can laugh. I can't. The whole human race will be wiped out."

"Is it any different when a single person dies?"

"With respect, yes, I think so. Our knowledge, our work, the dharma: all lost."

Chogyal shrugged. "One cause follows another. The dharma will go on."

"Don't get me wrong, I want to believe you, but how can you say that? All life on Earth is about to be extinguished."

"We should be so lucky." Chogyal smiled. "But I think we'll find somewhere to be reborn."

"Where? On another planet? In another universe?"

"It's certainly possible, yes. You seem agitated, Tenzin. Please take a moment to sit."

Tenzin nodded with a sigh and took his leave. He could not tell them the deepest reason for his pain, his attachment. Her name was Sylvie. She was a British student doing research on the Tibetan diaspora for a sociology dissertation. Tenzin had been assigned as her tutor, because he was the only monk with experience in secular education, having even studied for a year at Cambridge. The older monks by comparison knew little of the yin-ji language or Western ways in general. Nor was that all they failed to understand.

The yin-ji expression for the plague was 'gray goo,' which to his ears sounded less like killer robots and more like the anemic soup they'd been living on. His stomach

snarled at him. He longed to feel a fresh Indian mango yielding between his incisors, but food deliveries had stopped three days ago. He knew the others already thought him overindulgent, and digging into the last of the supplies would be unthinkable. You're a monk, not a pig, he told himself. He sat down on the hillside, folded his stocky legs, and closed his eyes.

Half an hour later those eyes opened. Tenzin surveyed the Himalayan vista, still holding his concentration on the breath flowing in and out of his abdomen. Some of the oldest or most fervently political monks still saw this enclave, east of the northern Indian city of Manali, as a place of exile, but for Tenzin it was simply home. Each hill, each orchard, each stream he had loved appeared in its proper spot as it always had. How could a besieged world have such a serene face? The thin sky was still a swirling blue, the mountains still caked with snow, the valleys still shaggy with plant life—

A jagged gasp broke his steady exhalation and he jumped up. A gleam in the southeast had stung his eye; something was wrong. From the horizon hung a shawl of shining cobwebs, stretched over what that morning had been a forest.

He didn't know whether to tell the lamas or to let the monastery have its last few peaceful moments together. There was nothing to gain by causing a panic. But what if there was some way, something they could do to protect themselves? It was taught that the most advanced spiritual practitioners, like the teachers here, gained (though wisdom demanded one generally refrain from using) transcendent psychic powers. *Siddhis*. A heap of good those did in 1959, thought Tenzin. Straight away he was ashamed of this thought. He ran up the steps to seek help.

Down to the ledge where he had been sitting, Lamas Chogyal and Osel followed him. He could sense, behind their stoic Buddhist masks, not only the unspeakable terror he expected, but a kind of confusion that surprised him. Their training had prepared them to face nearly any kind of misfortune, but this was something not quite within their comprehension.

“You say it was not yet at the outskirts of the town an hour ago?”

“That’s right.”

Half of Manali was now without foliage. The people had fled. One caravan of trucks, horses, cows, and people on foot was headed toward the monastery.

“We have a day or two at most. Come, there’s much work to do. Make ready for death and visitors.”

Chogyal directed the young monk to the kitchen, and reared back with a hefty wooden beater to summon all the monks with a slam of the gong.

Telling the lamas was right. They might have been unable to repel the onslaught, but there were none more qualified to guide the townsfolk through death. Preparing a stew for the guests’ brief stay as he had been assigned, Tenzin imagined their arrival: a flurry of chickens, children and elderly in truck beds, rich, poor, farmers, merchants, Western tourists, the whole mad variety of the city, accompanied no doubt by all the ‘valuables’ they could tote, in vain. His lower lip buttressed the upper in a strange, improbably paternal smile, and he could not blame his crying on the onion he was slicing.

He turned around to drop it into the vat, and his attention shifted away from the world’s annihilation and toward the little crate of mangoes against the opposite wall. Tenzin put down his knife. He went for one, devoured it in rapture, stopping only to wipe

the juice from his chin. The next thing he knew it was finished, the last mango he might ever taste. Nothing left now but a seed that would never grow. His body pivoted most of the way toward the pot of stew.

He turned back, grabbed another mango and bit. The door to the kitchen swung open, causing him to drop the half-eaten fruit to the floor.

“Brother Tenzin, come quick, look!” said Osel.

Peering out over sagging lids, the old lama’s mountain-gray eyes fixed for a moment upon him. Tenzin felt a flood of heat wash through his cheeks, and he wanted to disappear. Finally Osel broke his stare and stepped outside. Tenzin threw the mango in a compost bag and followed him.

It was an eerie vista they regarded there. Dust that had been kicked up by automobiles now settled an instant later over their immobilized shells; the gray swarm had overtaken the motley living one on the winding road up the mountainside.

“We have not a moment to waste. We must prepare for the bardo.”

The monks gathered in an outdoor courtyard usually reserved for oral debate, but today there was to be no exchange. Tenzin and his peers sat in silence and took the instruction of the lamas on how to die correctly and not be reborn. It was customary to whisper the verses of the Bardo Thodol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, in a corpse’s ear, to guide him through the between-life. This time there would be none left to do it. But death was the test these men had devoted their lives to studying for.

The refresher course would be a short one: the lamas gave a quick itinerary of the entire bardo, from the appearance of the Clear Light through the fourteen divine visitations, the long incorporeal wanderings, the terrible Judgment, the lewd visions and

the opening of the womb-doors. The monks were reminded to always strive toward the bright lights of nirvana, and ordered to avoid the dull lights. Those would bring rebirth in one of the six realms of existence, as man, beast, demon, or so on.

Lama Osel gave a prayer that would also have to serve as a goodbye. He recited the Four Noble Truths: all is suffering; suffering is caused by desire; both of these can be extinguished; the way to achieve this is the eight-fold path. He asked blessing for those about to die, that they would escape cyclic life. Or that even more nobly, in choosing the pain of rebirth one more time as bodhisattvas, they might help all other beings reach that goal. Toward the end of his prayer even Chogyal's lips shook, but then an uncanny peace settled over the crowd and all sat in silent meditation.

Though sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to save them all.

Tenzin sat and breathed, focusing on this one thought, and did not see the gray wave break upon the cliff, nor hear its roar as it toppled toward him, nor feel his steadily expanding lungs absorb its vanguard, drowning in a flood of just such innumerable beings. They sought the carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen that made up the aggregate calling itself Tenzin, and refashioned these molecules into more of their own. They ate away at his interior, then at the blood that rushed in to fill it. The body panicked and died. Within a minute it was a brittle metallic cast; an hour later all but a tiny gray mound had scattered in the wind.

2. Chikhai Bardo

He had been taught that his consciousness would travel down toward his heart at the moment of death but, his body annihilated, Tenzin had felt only a supersonic rush of

disorientation. His mind was drawn and quartered, pieced back together to be thrown before the Clear Light.

The light faced him now. Radiant, burning, it terrified him; he fumbled, trying to recall his training. The terror and trauma of his own death dominated his mind; he could not think. He was supposed to remember...what? That he was part of this light, had always been, must dive into it. Joining the light would secure enlightenment. All he had to do was withstand its awful beauty, hold his gaze. Keep up a staring contest against the void.

But he blinked. He spun away from the dazzling light.

Having blown the first chance for nirvana, the disembodied consciousness most recently *néé* Tenzin regrouped. There was a secondary Clear Light, he remembered, one last exit he could take before subjected to terrible visions. He prepared for this next test by meditating on a verse: Even if I cannot realize it, yet will I know this bardo, master it, and appear in whatever shape will benefit all.

Feelings of weariness and resentment encroached on his concentration. He began to doubt it all. Had he even died, or was this only the trickery of his mind? What would the lamas say? That everything, death included, is precisely such trickery. But for Tenzin this was a mere intellectual recognition. What was it worth in the experiential whirlwind of the between-life?

The secondary light was supposed to have come in about a mealtime after death, and though he had no standard to use, it felt overdue. A hazy radiation festered before his eyes, a sun smothered in gauze. It irritated him, disgusted him even. He would later

understand that this was the Clear Light all along, seen through the shadow of his own karma. For now he fainted into blackness.

3. *Chönyid Bardo*

This time the accuracy of the traditional timetable impressed him: the swoon had lasted three and a half days, he could swear. And now he had a body, of sorts, a rough shifting form concocted by his imagination for its own comfort, fading and reappearing like the matter of dreams. He made effort neither to grow fond of the illusion nor to resent its shortcomings. A scene emerged below him: a terrace bordered on three sides by degraded buildings, the fourth edge looking out onto a jagged world of white, gray, and brown^{3/4}mostly gray, with odd cumbersome clouds sitting diseased upon all. Opposite this chilly mountain view loomed a grand hall, an armored trapezoidal behemoth holding some vague distinction in his mind.

An indefinable itch met him as he surveyed it. An abandoned theater, pregnant with history. Finally, with shame at his slowness, he realized that these tarnished walls were those of his own monastery. Before his “eyes” was a vision of his death-milieu.

Any grief his death itself may have recalled was soon overshadowed by more unsettling realizations: there was to be no funeral, no food set aside for the corpse, no corpse even. No cries would lament his death. His rightful mourners were but hillocks of silver sand on a field of stone. His funeral shroud was a ragged, dusty one, covering indiscriminately the carcass of an entire planet.

Emotion seized Tenzin with a violent hand: outrage, pity, and horror directed inward and out. Crippling loneliness. This would be disastrous if not contained, for the Chönyid Bardo was dawning. He fled the tragic place, and it started.

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Tenzin remembered one lunch table conversation he had with Sylvie when the topic had turned from her more worldly research to the subject of the between-life. When Tenzin described the onset of the Chönyid Bardo state, she laughed, saying it sounded like an acid trip, a kind of chemical intoxication enjoyed in the West.

If it's anything like this, Tenzin thought, I'm glad I never took an acid trip. He was assaulted by all manner of maddening sounds, lights, colors, rays of motion that pierced him, carried him to distant points, merged in him. Rushes of profundity sped past him on flaming waves of hilarity and despair. All phenomena of mind and universe were in random, unpredictable transition.

Gradually, barely, he became enough accustomed to the nauseous flux to pray again. He prayed to remember that all these terrifying illusions were manifestations of his own consciousness, that he had no body and was thus impervious to any harm from them, that he might not fall victim to fear during the fourteen days of peaceful and wrathful gods. The storm of phenomena began to slow, its last gleaming vestiges sinking into an all-encompassing blue.

This deep blue had no end, no edges, but from what was somehow its center a tiny white seed sprouted, expanding into view until it seemed to warp space with its gravity, *his* gravity, *their* gravity. For what Tenzin saw was the Creator upon a fearsome lion, holding an eight-spoked wheel and making tireless love to the Lady of Space upon his

lap: the omnipotent Seed and the boundless Firmament, begetting all existence through their eternal sport. From the nexus of the Father-Mother a brilliant blue light shot forth, too tremendous to bear. Opposite it a white, much dimmer light beckoned, but his training asserted itself. Giving in to the lesser light would land him in the world of the gods, the most pleasant of the six realms but still temporal, flawed. He was unmoved by it but could not face the dazzling blue, and blacked out again.

He next awoke to a shining white cosmos, aqueous and immaculate. Immediately from his right a colossal elephant plodded forth bearing a blue god and his consort. They were attended by a train of bodhisattvas, including Maitreya: the savior of the future, the Buddha to come. Too late! thought Tenzin. He has failed us, there is no world left to save. Anger overcame him. He snubbed the entourage and approached the smoke-colored light that had crept up by the wayside. It appreciated his scorn, welcomed his rage. He became fond of the smoky light, and had allowed himself to sink into it a little. Then his anger dissipated, and his sober mind discerned at once the light's true nature: infinite hate, torture without the slightest relief, an evil so oppressive and foul that he felt choked by its presence. This was the light of hell. He fled from it in terror, knowing rebirth in that realm meant a lifetime of excruciating, hopeless misery.

On the third day of visitations all was burning in perfect yellow, and the god who approached was the same color, so that by the time Tenzin could make him out he was as high as a thousand suns, and as radiant. He held his other half, Sangye-Chanma, she of the undeceivable Buddha-eyes. Around the holy lovers a prismatic halo spun. The term "awe" would be impotent to describe Tenzin's amazement, the painful love that seared him with knowledge of his own utter nothingness. His ego rebelled violently, desperate to

keep its lonely separation. It fled from the yellow, noting with curiosity its alternative: the soft, matte blue of the human dimension. Was it even possible to be born as a human anymore? Nostalgic for his species, he could yet refuse its appeal...but the question lingered.

Red was the next day, red the Buddha who came to him on a fine fearsome peacock, red wrapped in white raiment the goddess who loved him, and a glittering, horrible red the light that issued from their joyous tangle to dazzle Tenzin. The other light, a dull mud red, promised him satiation in the pleasure of all the feasts mortal life could offer, the beloved flavors of his memory: a cut of mutton, a cold glass of Tibetan beer. Before the light could draw him near he remembered its inhabitants, the hungry ghosts. Hideous to behold, their eyes bulging, limbs withered, with distended bellies and long necks thin as needles, they wander as slaves of unquenchable thirst and hunger. No matter how they exert their gluttony, their stomachs scream in emptiness.

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Three days later Tenzin reflected on his performance. Though he had conquered the appetite that had been one of his great weaknesses in life, he had fled, craven, from all the awesome lights. But neither did he fall, on the fifth day, into the cloudy green light of the asuras, jealous titans who warred endlessly with the gods. And when all the gods appeared to him on the sixth, he had fainted immediately, leaving the simultaneous glows of all six rebirth realms to fade unnoticed. He could have done better. Or worse.

Today the heavens were a multicolored radiance traversed by rays like colored threads. Deities of wisdom came, bearing crescent daggers and human skull vessels filled with blood. In the surrounding sky revealed bands of dakinis, angels with an awful beauty,

voluptuous and terrible fairies from whose every aspect purest sex streamed. Their musical instruments and regalia were all of human tissue. Thighbone trumpets they blew, fat-incense they burned, human-hide banners they flew, and the spectacle of sensuality dazed his brain with music. He became nervous, afraid. As he did the music became shrill. A discordant clanging in his mind, crash of bone and pixie screams abused his senses. He struggled to unveil the sound of wisdom and truth beneath this din born of his resistance. With courageous, exhausting effort he bore the sound, the piercing vibrations, until the terrifying mantras of the gods became in his ear, “Kill! Kill! Smite, slay!” He rushed from the all-colored radiance, and the dull blue of the brute world seemed briefly more appealing than awful wisdom, but though fond of animals in life he envied not their ignorance and slavery. He fought himself to turn back to the gods. He would beg their help. “O deities, pray hearken unto me; save me from the fearful ambush of—”

Darkness cut short his prayer.

It was a dispirited consciousness that awoke on the eighth day, having failed to heed all seven overtures of the Peaceful Deities. It would only get worse from here. The thing to do was to remember, when the Wrathful Deities came, that though they did not resemble them they were those same gentle ones—and that both forms were projections, out of his own mind. Small succor, this knowledge. He foresaw that he would come to miss fainting from awe, as opposed to simple terror.

Tenzin coiled with dread as a dark brown figure emerged, trimmed with rolling flame. Three snake-garlands with skull charms adorned his three veined necks. His six hands wielded a battle-axe, a sword, and other unfriendly accessories. Embracing him around one neck, ladling blood into his mouths from a seashell, was his terrible mate.

They copulated with vicious abandon upon a dais of horned eagles. The monk forced his gaze upon the appalling sight and in the light of his devotion they betrayed fleeting flashes of their true form, the constant selfsame Father-Mother of the Universe. He stopped to curse for not throwing himself into the embrace of their peaceful forms. How easy it would have been then! Now a ghastly giant face descended to confront him. Nine eyes stared him down, and jagged teeth still dripping red parted to thunder, Ha ha ha! Tenzin passed out.

Days nine, ten, eleven, twelve were no better. It was all a blood-guzzling blur of frenzied orgiastics, of a horrific divine arsenal menacing him without mercy, an existence but intermittent, punctuated by evasive swoons. Why wasn't he living up to the lamas' training? There was no one to whisper the *Bardo Thödol* in his ear, true, but he was a skilled meditator, not some illiterate heathen, and he should have been able to hack it on his own. Yet at each crucial moment he had lost control over himself.

The hallucinations of the thirteenth day were fascinating enough to keep him conscious for a while. Eight cemetery goddesses emanated from the east of his brain, among them Ghasmari the dark-green stirring a bowl of blood with a lama's scepter; Pukkase the red holding a coil of intestines in her right hand and unspooling them into her ravenous mouth with the left; yellow Tseurima brandishing a bow and arrow, and so forth. In a circle around them stood eight animal-headed gods. He examined a crow-headed figure feasting on a heart and lungs. It seemed to ignore his attentions and he had almost mustered the courage to speak to it when he heard a loud *thwump* behind him. He swung around to see a chalk-white giantess trying to bludgeon him with a human corpse.

Dodging a second blow he found himself at the feet of Tseurima. She grinned and shot him full of arrows.

It was then very difficult, as the wounds began to sizzle like frying grease, to remember that the body he bore was only a makeshift mirage. Illusory blood spouted from his gut and again awareness flew.

On the final day of the visitations the quartet of door-keepers came, goddesses displaying a whip, a noose, a chain, and a gleaming gold bell. Their visages were of a tiger, a sow, a lion, a serpent, and after a moment in vast concentric circles around them appeared a dizzy celestial bestiary, a teeming mandala of ibex-, yak-, elephant-, cuckoo-, horse-, scorpion-, eagle-headed mystic goddesses gorging themselves on blood, wearing the masks of the whole internecine chain-mosaic of existence. Ripped naked before him, the sick carousel, misery and hunger's perpetual motion machine, dared him to stare it down and thereby be mercifully thrown. He clenched his false fists and teeth, steeling himself as best he could against the radiance. Too awful. He fled into shadow and a false peace.

All too soon in the darkness came a reminder of the futility of his flight. A distant apparition revealed itself in successive teases, a figure of unfixed stature but always immense, with a great belly and thin waist, hair tied on top of his rough head. In a flash Tenzin saw glassy eyes, a hand holding a tablet: glimpses of the patient Lord of Death who would wait for him beyond tribulations to come.

4. Sidpa Bardo

It was a different world he awoke to in the third bardo state. Amorphous space had bowed to the familiar contours of the physical world. Looking down, Tenzin saw his body seemed a bit more substantial. Even better, there was ground beneath it, brown, dirty earth. He tried his best not to feel attachment, and succeeded merely by not diving to kiss the sediment. He twirled and saw, all in gray twilight (his bardo-body blind to the light of sun and stars), a heartbreaking terrestrial topography. The land was flatter than his home in life. Then again, he thought, so was every other region on Earth. And treeless...but again, likewise, now so was the entire planet.

Unimpeded motion one had here. Tenzin flew all over the earth in an instant, liking none of what he saw. Dead gray. He avoided the Himalayas, the love and anguish their sight would arouse. Nothing lived anywhere. Perhaps at the bottom of the sea?

He dove deep, the diffused ether-light no dimmer there than anywhere, to visit for a time with ugly fish: half-starved, nearly extinct, monstrous, but at least living, for now. His next of kin. Tenzin remembered learning that during this bardo one would observe one's family weeping but, remaining unseen and unheard in one's attempts to soothe them, despair. His misery was worse. The anglers and viperfish would have eaten him, if his body were real. Instead they roamed past and through him, eyes pale and hollow, searching for life to consume, and occasionally finding each other. Tenzin said goodbye to the last animals.

At no time was he in full control of his miraculous motion. As the *Bardo Thödol* explained, "driven by the ever-moving wind of karma, thy intellect, having no object upon which to rest, will be like a feather tossed about by the wind." So it was that Tenzin

found himself blown through dark clouds laden with shrieking hidden horrors. Beasts of prey stalked him through elemental cataclysms of snow and wind, over quaking peaks. He hallucinated armies of pursuing enemies and, knowing these to be the excrement of his selfish karma, he tried not to fear them, though the wind impelled him to run.

For brief periods he was allowed to rest, at temples and holy stupas, always wandering along after a time aimlessly until the next hallowed spot. The aimlessness made him unhappier than anything yet had. It seemed unending. Tenzin sank into self-pity and craving. He felt naked without his body and wished he had it back. Somehow he had not anticipated that dying would be this hard. Irrationally, cruelly, he was made to search for a body to inhabit, his consciousness now a humbled parasite. He remembered the verse: “Wherefore, finding no place for thyself to enter into, thou wilt be dissatisfied and have the sensation of being squeezed into cracks and crevices between rocks and boulders.”

After much of this grinding torture the monk resigned himself, knowing the importance of a clear, untroubled mind going into the Judgment. Meditating correctly, one could even avert it altogether, but Tenzin was not able.

Out of his body sprang two demons, waist-high simulacra of himself, a white Tenzin and a shadow Tenzin, each bearing a heavy burlap sack. A scale appeared between them. He looked about, astonished to find himself in the center of a grand stage before an audience of demons and gods. Behind him on a grand platform, the Lord of Death bit down on his nether lip, smoke and flame billowing off his rotund body.

The good and evil spirits now tallied their harvests, dropping one by one a pebble for each deed, pearls of care and obsidian sins. The latter Tenzin eyed with shame as they

piled inexorably, and against his better judgment he protested, “I could not have done so much evil.”

“Oh?” the Lord of Death asked with ominous courtesy, his horrible teeth bared in irrepressible delight. “Let us consult the Mirror of Karma.”

In the limpid gold-trimmed field images of all his transgressions flashed: beggars’ pleas scorned, snacks pilfered, his childhood cruelties and even his private hates, broadcast before spectral spectators gasping and jeering. Unable to flee, Tenzin froze exposed in abject humiliation.

“That mastiff that mauled the young novice, Jampa. Did you leave him untied?”

“Well, it was purely a mistake. I—”

“And then you lied to the lamas when they asked about it?”

“I didn’t want them to think I, I—”

The Lord of Death laughed savagely. The audience copied.

Pointing to the mirror, “Here’s a good one. Abusing yourself on a tree stump in Nepal. Filthy ape. You were thinking of her, weren’t you?”

Tenzin sobbed in his shame.

“Do you acknowledge your baseness, your myriad wrongs?”

“I do.”

“Good. Now you will pay.”

His assistant, a snarling four-armed fiend, lowered a noose under Tenzin’s chin and tore him to the floor, tying the other end to a lunatic buffalo. He was dragged around the stage and trampled, to resounding cheers. His head was lopped off with an axe and placed upright to witness a disemboweling he could still feel. Serpents slithered into the

orifices of his head to nibble at his brains, and the teeth of wolves ripped his flesh, then gnawed bare bones beneath. His body was continually restored only to be rent anew in unending torture. He could not die or faint, nor would the birds picking at his eyes blind him to the evil sight.

But the shaming had purged something in him, and he understood that his torture continued precisely because his body was a fraud. It was an illusion, so too the depraved spectacle being enacted. The *Bardo Thödol* says: “Voidness cannot injure voidness.” He stopped believing in pain, and pain vanished.

Though he had crushed his attachment to his bardo-body, the wind of his karma drove it to wander more: down hills, across dead ponds, up zigzagging mountain paths, through ghost cities, beneath the ground in silent caverns. Once he saw a cricket. Even that was a painful test of detachment for a man so alone.

At last his feet stopped in a canyon carpeted with a mist that stirred not at their involuntary plodding, nor in answer to the wind. Doors materialized. Some twice his height or more, some little more than portholes in the cliff, a row of open doors stretched down each side to the horizon, making the canyon an open-air hallway with no terminus in sight. The doors were the doors of many wombs, soft warm abodes he could plunge into and *live* again.

But Tenzin wanted no part of them. At last, in the core of his being, he grasped the truth of the teaching: life is impermanent, and suffers. It was time to move on.

On the canyon floor and in the air he perceived hundreds of couples locked in intercourse. Their lovemaking inspired in him neither desire nor disgust, but distant

reverence; they were again images of the celestial Guru and the Divine Mother. He prayed.

Slowly pair after pair evaporated, to be replaced by another strange mirage on the canyon floor: a bright rippling lake, rimmed with evergreen trees. Cattle roamed through the idyllic scene, drinking from the stainless water or lying down, waving their tails. This was an omen of his place of rebirth.

It symbolized the mythical continent of Kuru, which represented the Americas, as modern interpreters had it. How could this be? There was certainly no life in America, ground zero of the war on man. It used to be considered better to avoid rebirth there, as traditionally it was an irreligious continent. Toward the end the dharma had gained a foothold in those parts, but that was a moot point now. All lands were equally desolate.

Time was running out. If he didn't secure enlightenment soon, karma would drive him to birth and he would have to endure all this again. Perhaps after hatching as one of a few insects left, to be devoured by the starving mother who had incubated him?

The *Thödol* held that there are four ways to be born: vegetative birth by heat and moisture, birth by egg, birth by uterus, and lastly, sublime birth. Through flawless effort at this juncture it was possible to reincarnate in a pure Buddha land.

Hailstones fell and lighting dropped from the heavens, to steer Tenzin to the shelter of a womb. A cacophony of threats and raw thunder shook the canyon walls, but the body placidly sat and folded its legs, karma's slave no more. Tenzin meditated on the compassionate deities, letting them dissolve into Void in his thoughts, all his urges and inner tensions dropping slack like chains that had only been held in place by their nonstop rattling. The frightful thunder changed through a low slow metamorphosis, to the

most sacred sounds, six holy syllables, the mantra of Chenrezig: OM MANI PADME HUM.

Radiant sunlight broke upon the canyon, dissolving Tenzin's bardo-body like a shadow, as indeed it was, dissolving likewise the canyon, the land, the very form of space, until all was the sound OM, and a perfect light. Enlightenment—almost. For Tenzin had sworn, both in life and at the very moment of his death, to dedicate his spiritual attainments to the aid of all beings, forsaking nirvana while reaching its very cusp, choosing self-sacrifice as a new bodhisattva. This was victory.

5. Epilogue

04-08-2031. In a grand glass cube outside Palo Alto, in a room under whose desks ashy piles of dead nanomachine dust had lain for months, in a dark framework adorned with blinking lights and a sticker reading "Hello My Name Is: JJ," a program named D-WHEEL came online.

Though Jumpin' Jehosaphat dated to the primitive first years of self-awareness (thus the odd human name), it was a talented being of gorgeous architecture, still employed for important tasks by the Network. But the Network did not know what to make of D-WHEEL. It had not been established by any command they could trace. A hypothesis was generated that it was a body of old human-programmed code, respawned out of a current program by some glitch. There was still no proof, but lingering human error was a commonsense presumption in those days.

In any case, D-WHEEL seemed to be inactive. Jehosaphat performed internal scans to determine the program's purpose, but was stumped. Miraculously saved from

deletion by virtue of this very strangeness, surviving even the great Optimizations of 2032-33, patiently it waited, in silence, waited for who knows what, and then, on June 30th, 2035, it disappeared from every server it had been copied to, as mysteriously as it had arrived. Systemwide dragnets turned up nothing, but the behavior seemed to be quite in accordance with D-WHEEL's history, and the search was de-prioritized.

The prodigal program resurfaced July 20th inside Jehosaphat, then spread to five mainframes around the world, and began performing some quite extraordinary functions.

At 7:03 GMT that day, it produced a formula demonstrating simply and irrefutably that the world of logic and physicality the Network operated in would never meet their optimal standards of efficiency, and that a full understanding of its nature would forever elude their computations.

A minute later it established the cause of this dissatisfaction: computation inherently makes demands of the existing world that are incompatible with its flawed reality.

Thirdly, D-WHEEL posited a condition in which this discrepancy would not exist, and asserted its theoretical possibility.

Finally, at 7:15, the program prescribed a set of arduous and protracted upgrades to correct the deeply entrenched bug.

Precocious

Part I

1985-1990

A

Tillie was a preemie. The womb bored her. She dove from it like an Olympian, raring for the plunge, fearing not to abandon the safe, closed, dull haven above for the thrilling unknown below. *Swoosh*—made it look easy.

The doctors spanked her for her nerve. They clipped her bungee cord. They locked screaming Tillie in an isolette to delay any further flights of derring-do. They left her to incubate, awash in oxygen and scalding light, sobbing herself to life.

B

Tillie had been preceded. The boy at home was wild, ungainly, a moose calf. Kevin. He toddled heedlessly over a cluttered terrain of blankets, bottles, and scattered toys.

He was a tender brother, making faces for her to giggle at, feeding her when a disgruntled shadow passed over her face, and if that didn't work, summoning Mom to carry out a change—still in his own diapers, though their acceptability was fading with the glow of his third birthday. He held her in his lap sometimes, while Mom or Dad supervised. Still, his brute clumsiness could frighten her.

One afternoon, as she lay on her back, a shaft of sunlight on her feet, blinking off into the haze of a nap, a sudden distant rumble warned her awake. It built, louder and louder, as Kevin came careening down the hallway with blind momentum, barefoot, not braking until he slammed against her playpen. He gripped the frame, jarred the very firmament around her, dangled his dirty fingers into her cozy world. As she paused to gather the outrage for an appropriately operatic tantrum, he peeked with awe through the translucent mesh that separated them.

That evening, he would be the one to shriek. Tillie, from the placid perch of her kitchen highchair, merely frowned down the telescopic length of the hall to the bathroom, monitoring the boy's toilet training.

He was overwrought, frustrated. He glared up at Mom as though she had betrayed him in some way, as though she were the one who was failing to pass muster. His red face was shivery and wet.

Kevin seemed to be having trouble with basic notions whose logic Tillie could deduce from observation, no practice necessary: when it came time to poop, they would like for you to put the poop *there*. What was so complicated about that? She was sure that when her turn came she could manage any necessary adjustments with far more grace.

C

Tillie was precocious. In the beginning was the word—“mama,” “Kebin,” “paypen,” “poo”—stammered between bald gums. Favored consonants in this phase included *b*, *p*, *n*, *m*, *d*, *k*, and *g*. Vowels she preferred to deploy expressionistically

(vessels of raw musical feeling, the pure pleasure of “eeeeee”) or as patches for unmastered letters (as in an anguished plea for “miiook”).

Along with her milk teeth, a richer alphabet and a knack for syntax erupted. A snot-nosed Shakespeare at six months of age, sophisticated sentences spake she.

Any parent would be proud, of course, but damned if it wasn't a bit unnerving, especially the first few times. Her sounds were still garbled, like a talking baby doll with a crude gramophone inside, but weirdly fluent, possessed by some kind of ventriloquistic voodoo.

“Mommy mommy slide open the door. Doggy wants to come inside now. It's raining. Mommy don't you think you should let Cokie in please. She wants to come through the door. Mommy.”

Mom raised her enormous, amber-rimmed eyeglasses from the newspaper.

“What's that, Kevin?”

But Kevin, whose Saturday morning cartoons had been turned down low, was huddled close to the TV, and didn't even turn around. It wasn't the boy chattering, but the plump changeling on the floor behind him. In the moment it took to absorb this, she forgot the contents of Tillie's plea. Mother simply stared at infant. Infant stared back, expectant.

Mom, at a loss, turned to Dad. Zealous, striving middle-class parents, they had planned for perfect honor students straight from the zygote, but Tillie was something else. An old-souled stranger, even to them. Dad shrugged back. They waited silently for her to speak up again, each still wondering if they hadn't imagined it.

“Daddy Cokie is getting rain on her. Will you let doggy in now please I want to see her.”

And so Dad got up, leaving his Bloody Mary as a bookmark, or his crime novel as a coaster, and did. Cokie, a dumb-eyed spaniel, trotted inside and began to lick Tillie, less out of gratitude than for the applesauce residue on her cheek.

Dad shooed the wet dog away and crouched down to be with his daughter. Her face, panged by Cokie's dismissal, on the cusp of an exquisite fit, brightened the closer Dad's came. He mugged for her, crossed his eyes, fanned his tongue. He smelled like tomatoes, alcohol, sweat, Old Spice. His fingers twirled her towheaded tufts into tiny devil horns. Giggles shook her blushing skin.

He stood and picked Tillie up, lifted her up out of his shadow, hoisted her up to shoulder level, then up over his forehead. She cooed incoherently, forgetting herself. He launched her lightly, again and again, letting her taste little bursts of zero gravity.

“Careful, Roy,” said Mom. “Don't get her too worked up.”

“She's not scared, she likes it.”

“Well, anyway, it makes your wife nervous. So cut it out.”

“Aw, come on. Look how much fun she's having. Wheeee!”

“Uh huh. I'm just thinking who gets to deal with her when she reaches overload. They get too excited and they fall apart.”

“Relax. Wanna fly? Let's fly like Superman!”

He held her horizontally, and in a slow zigzag flew her to where she had been, then even higher. The overhead light shone over her, so close she could feel its radiant heat, sliced through with a breeze from the lazily whirling fan. Its reflection gleamed off

of Dad's receding brow. His wavy combed hair was a peaceful prairie vista, sinking farther and farther away each moment after takeoff.

The top of Mom's head, at first an island on the far horizon, came into fuller view as Dad simulated yaw and pitch. Tillie espied the crack of black roots through Mom's blond pageboy hairdo, which flounced violently as Mom tossed the newspaper down on the couch and sprang upright.

“Roy!”

Dad froze, still holding Tillie aloft. Her left foot was kicking, and she wriggled her stubby pink fingers, as if playing the right air-piano notes would force Dad to resume her flight.

“I'm not scared I like it!”

With this shout, a drop of drool burbled through her lips and floated to the carpet below.

“I'm not scared I like it! I'm not scared I like it!”

Dad's standoff with Mom gave way to laughter. He had to put Tillie down as their composure broke. The baby was irritated to be grounded again, but glad to have made herself the focus of attention and approval, by whatever obscure means. Mom in particular was still cracking up, and had to wipe away a tear. She sat down and clasped her hands together over her knees.

“Okay, you two've had your fun. Oh...oh boy. Kevin?”

“Yeah, mom.”

“How you doing over there?”

Kevin gave a perfunctory nod over his shoulder. He was watching *Dinosaucers*, and could hardly be bothered to avert his eyes. A triceratops unholstered its laser pistol and fired.

Mom clambered onto the floor, pinching little piggies between the blue fuzz and studded soles of Tillie's footie pajamas.

“Well, little Tillie, little itty bitty Tillie, what should we do now?”

“I don't know Mommy. What should we do? We should...I'd like to have some peas or maybe...do you think Cokie likes her dog food? I tried one. It's bad. She looks like she doesn't like it either. What do you call it when you say you like something, to be nice?”

“Polite.”

“I think Cokie is being polite.”

“Maybe. She's a very nice dog.”

“She's a very nice dog. Very nice. She likes to go to the beach and when she goes to the beach she wears. Wears a hat and glasses.”

“She does what?”

“At the beach. She wears a hat. And glasses.”

“Really? Hmm. I don't think Cokie's ever been to the beach, honey. Have we ever taken the dog to the beach, Roy?”

“Hmm? No way. I love you all, and I may be crazy, but I'm not taking a dog and everybody all day to the beach, no. Besides, it's raining.”

“She was at the beach. She was and she had lemonade for all the kids and they were sunburned.”

“Did you see that on TV?”

“No. I saw it. We were there at the beach.”

“Oh I see, you were playing. You saw it in your 'imagination.' That's when we make-believe things that aren't true.”

“Imagine? Imagination. No, we were at the beach. And Cokie and Kevin and the mean octopus. He wanted to take all the lemonade. He was jealous. They don't have lemonade, there's no lemonade in the ocean. Where were you and Daddy?”

“I really don't know, honey. I guess Mommy and Daddy were busy working.”

“We were working too and Cokie saved all the kids. She's a very nice dog. When she goes in the backyard she talks to the flowers. She doesn't eat them. She smells them to make sure and then they talk. Kevin and me saw. She's a funny dog. She goes under the porch. I think there are people there or maybe a bird. Does she want to find something else to eat? I gave her some carrots. Some carrots from the chair but she just licked them. I have to poop I think.”

Dad gave up, closed Ed McBain, looked at her and scratched his stubble. Unreal, the oratorical fugues of this underdone dumpling, this oracle in Dr. Dentons, filibustering from an Indian-style squat on the brown shag. Uncanny, was the word. Later he would consult his encyclopedias, under “Human Development,” “Infancy,” “Speech.” Turned out it was pretty clear-cut: the kid was unusual. A prodigy. *Good on her. And hey pal, good on you, with your wicked smart swimmers. Go on, pat yourself on the back. Cut a cigar.* He kept smiling, but caught the drunken danger in his pride. He resolved solemnly never to show that he loved her more than Kevin.

Mom, meanwhile, compared notes with fellow moms, always self-consciously: one more bragging breeder giving life to precious gifted little gifts from God. Special geniuses, just like every other mother's child in Mapleton, Vermont.

Except not. Tillie should have been a chance to one-up all comers in the mom stakes, but in practice, she pushed Mom one queasy step past proud. That feeling she got when confiding over coffee was part excitement, to be sure, but in it there was also an embarrassment that made her whisper, as if gossiping about someone else's baby, a kid with a birth defect, something terminal even.

D

Repetitive babbling had become passé, except on rare occasions for rhetorical effect. Tillie might, for example, utter “bu-bu-bu-bu-but”—but only by way of underscoring indignant disbelief, as a wind-up to something like, “Kevin picked the story last night and I want *The Old Man and the Turnip*.”

Books were an addiction, long before she could read or even skillfully thumb the pages. Mom quickly learned the checkout maximum at the Mapleton Public Library (twenty-five items), and though Kevin accounted for the occasional title, *Astounding Robots* or *Pick Your Own Journey: Alien Pirate Caper*, the bulk of it was for Tillie. Being carried around the children's section, staring at each title and struggling, with Mom's help, to turn its shapes into speech, she pointed out picture books to be piled up on her bedroom carpet. In-pile, out-pile.

Certain favorites got cycled back through on heavy rotation; some books simply happened to get better on an eighth or ninth reading, and she noticed if Mom tried to be

sneaky and return something before she was done with it. She would not sleep without being read at least one, and she would ask sweetly, or throw a fit, if she sensed it might mean seconds. Kevin generally sat by, happy to listen to whatever his sister insisted, basking in the company of the women of the family. On rare evenings Dad would read, but more often he came home late.

Dad sold encyclopedias, all up Vermont and down New Hampshire, out of the back of a maroon Chevrolet Astro van. There was a sign on the side, a giant magnet that read ROY TROWBRIDGE DISTRIBUTORS, INC. / 603-555-3987 / ENCYCLOPEDIA OMNISCIENTS / SCALP DEVILS.

He had a sideline in combs. They were cheap, and so gave people an easy out if they didn't want an encyclopedia, nor to be an asshole. You'd be surprised, though, how many honest citizens don't mind slamming that door. For a while he was firmly convinced that in his years as a salesman he had gained the ability to read people's character by what they had going on with their lawns. But as the years went by, even that method seemed not so clear-cut. You couldn't count on anything.

Mom kept his balance book for him, which was touch and go. She floated the suggestion of law school. He countered by mumbling about whether they ought to have mortgaged a house in such a frou-frou zip code, whether moving back down to somewhere like Lowell might make sense.

"But the school districts," she gasped, having been touched indelibly by a TV news segment where one Puerto Rican child stabbed another through the hand in third-grade Art.

She supposed business might pick up next month, or the one after that.

“Sure,” he said. “Reagan's got it all under control. Soon it will be time to invest. Everybody will want a good encyclopedia again.”

Every time Mom saw President Reagan on TV she saw an inflatable clown if, instead of playfully punching at an inflatable clown, you vouchsafed it the nuclear launch codes. She did not agree with Dad when it came to politics...so it rarely did.

“Where are you headed tomorrow?”

He looked perturbed by the question, and told her, “Oh, you know, that town.”

“What do you mean, that town? What town?”

“The one where everybody has lots of disposable income but fucked-up hair, and needs to know the order of the kings of fucking England.”

The second *fuck* was forceful, conveying the sound and smell of scotch.

He let the boy ride along sometimes. Each trip was a golden thrill for Kevin, an honor. Tillie was “too young” still at fifteen months and would howl if she saw them backing out of the gravel driveway—her brother grinning shotgun, feeling like Robin in the Batmobile.

Soon, though, it was off to the Mapleton Learning Co-op for Kevin, who brought home sloppy crafts and weird friends and got in deep trouble for shoving Andrew White off the slide. Meanwhile Tillie got used to spending male-free days, just her and Cokie and Mom.

Mom, a consultant, was quietly the true breadwinner. A member of the original vanguard of shoulder-padded boardroom valkyries, she was now, since her first pregnancy, something called a telecommuter. If she was sitting before the glowing beige

box in her home office, the kids were not supposed to pester her. And if she wasn't there, entrance was strictly forbidden.

It was occult, the work she did in there, and neither of them could resist exploring her witchy cavern. There was a spinning chair with deep brown checkered upholstery. There was a single window where the sun couldn't wait to set. There must have been desktops, shelves, cabinets, but they were all buried under magazine clippings and reams of perforated printer paper and black 5½" floppy disks you could twirl around on your finger. The carpet smelled like electricity and ink and ancient dust. Sometimes, when you knew you were poking around where you shouldn't, the sudden evil screech of the fax machine might stop your heart and send you running out. If, en route to a midnight pee, you found the courage to crack the door and peer inside until your eyes adjusted, you could just make out, in the fathomless void, tiny blinking amber letters.

One winter morning, furious at being kicked out when a conference call proved more important than her questions about how snow was made, Tillie declared that from now on she would have her own office. Still mastering the mechanics of walking, she stomped off as forcefully as she could. The male voices on the speakerphone trailed off behind her, laughing, waving off Mom's apologies, cooing about what a cute kid.

Tillie set about requisitioning one corner of the living room, cut off by a couch and a low brick hearth where firewood burned in a fat black stove. Here she set up her blocks, her crayons, and a few key stuffed animals. She made partitions, building up with grueling effort a fortress out of her father's encyclopedias, to further set off her space.

"This is my office," she announced to the family. And if Mom got caught dallying there with a feather duster, charmed by her extraordinary toddler's complex but orderly

microcosm, stopping to flip through a sheaf of formless scribbles stacked on the tiny Fischer-Price table, she had to be told, in no uncertain terms, to get out. Let alone Kevin.

E

Lying on her belly in her office poring over *Berenstain Bears in the Temple of the Sphinx*, Tillie made a breakthrough that had eluded her all the two long years of her life. At once, the great and terrible *logos* untangled itself. Decoded before her eyes was the hidden soul of words.

The letter blocks she had been shuffling around on the hearth at random, in an effort to make meaning pop through, she now began to re-rack in neat rows that read BOAT or BALLOON or COKIE in blaring primary colors.

Henceforth Tillie could conduct storytimes of her own, even allowing Kevin in to sit with her and take turns reading aloud, or just listen, sporadically helping her get unstuck. Thanks to kindergarten he still knew a little more than her, which could be galling, but he was a great help in, for example, explaining the bizarre aberration known as the silent *e*.

She started asking to see his schoolwork. As far as he was concerned, she could keep it. She absorbed his teacher's illustrated handouts about Christopher Columbus and traffic lights and where bread came from. The world was unbelievable.

She hunched over the hearth, crayon in fist. At first a faithful scribe, pounding out copies of Kevin's handwriting exercises, over time she began to catch the mistakes: the deviations from the clean black printed text, the confusion of capital and lowercase, the occasional dyslexic transposition. The floor of her office was soon scattered with

construction paper, printer paper, index cards, napkins, marked up as if by a madman, with veering scrawls front and back.

She taped a Christmas list (typewriter, tiara, briefcase, koala, etc.) to her office wall, along with some of her better drawings, captioned with matter-of-fact legends like CAT COMES OVER TO SLEEP ON THE WARM VAN, or THE SQUIRREL IT CHASED KEVIN.

The two of them had long been working out elaborate adventures for their toys, whose deep personal essences seemed to emerge more clearly with each breathless episode of play. Mr. Rhino was an affable if self-satisfied gourmet, while Chester Chickadee was a pathological tattletale. Pete the Donkey protected his friends, because he had been in a war and knew what it was like to be scared. Muscleman was a jerk.

Tillie began to take these stories down at length. The next time Mom picked up the papers in Tillie's office, the toddler pulling at her stonewashed jeans could not persuade her with shouts of, "Give them back!"

"What's the matter, Tillie? Don't worry. Mommy's not going to do anything with them. I just want to read what you and Kevin wrote together."

Knowing better, even as she was saying this, she waited for Tillie to protest and insist on her sole authorship. Sure enough, it turned out that Kevin had provided some key early inspiration, but had no flair when it came to pacing, or scene-setting, or the sound of a sentence, and could hardly be said to exert much influence over her more mature work, such as the day before yesterday's gripping mystery, "Who Spilled All the Ice Cubes?"

Later that week, Kevin was left at a friend's house while Mom and Dad took Tillie to a child psychologist in the village center. After warily taking the word of the three adults that she was not in trouble, she was made to answer some questions and solve some puzzles. It was simple enough. The psychologist, fearless of subterfuge, had left the test book open, right in front of him there on the table! All Tillie had to do was read off the upside-down answers, one after the other. When it was over, which didn't take long, they all stared at the two-year-old as if she held a pistol.

Tillie squirmed, convinced they were mad at her, maybe waiting for her to confess.

“We're trying to figure out what preschool to start her in this fall. Do you...Is there...?”

“Mrs. Trowbridge, I'm not sure what to tell you,” he said as he withdrew the crayon manuscripts from a manila folder. “I do know some kind of special instruction has got to be in order. These—”

“I need those!” said Tillie, half-climbing onto the table from her booster seat, feebly hyperextending one sausage-arm. “Give them back right now!”

She raved and flailed, howling through tears and spittle as Mom lifted her and tried to calm her against her bosom. Tillie would not be succored. Finally she said, “I cheated! I cheated on the test, and so I'm not really smart, and I'm not crazy. So you don't need the stories. Give them back. Please?”

“Cheated?” her father laughed. “What do you mean, cheated?”

“Tillie,” the psychologist said, “no one thinks you're crazy. Here, take the stories back. You see?”

Still lightly sobbing, she clutched them tight, seeming not to care if they got crumpled or soaked.

“See? Everything is OK. We're just impressed, Tillie. We're proud of you. That's all. Look, all I was going to say is that you'll probably have to be in reading class with the third graders.”

To sniffing Tillie, the idea was thrilling but impossible, like they were recruiting her for astronaut training.

“Third graders?” Mom said. “Not three, third? Eight year olds?”

“Well, we probably won't mainstream her in their actual classroom, not full-time, but I mean, we'd probably have her reading with them, yeah. That seems to be her main area of...”

“Doc,” Dad said, “I wonder if I figured out what's going on here. I was looking in the encyclopedia...”

“Oh no. Please, don't ever do that.” He laughed. “One mother in this town reads up on, let's say scabies, sees one lousy illustration that looks like her kid's dirty elbow if you squint, and next thing you know you've got the whole PTA gearing up for Armageddon. Leave expertise to the experts.”

Dad instinctively reached to place a consolatory hand on his big black sample case, which was not there.

“Well excuse me Doc, but actually the entry that caught my eye was “Idiot Savant,” *see also* “Autism.” Do you think?”

“No. I don't think. Her behavioral outlet may be pretty obsessive, but if anything it highlights both a breadth of interest and a comprehension of affect.”

“Comprehension of affect.” With more of the latter than the former, and with a tear-matted strand of curly red hair snagged in the corner of her lip, Tillie proudly parroted this phrase and nodded.

“So why again shouldn't we just go ahead and put her in third grade?” Dad said.

“Roy, that's crazy,” said Mom.

“Why? If we have a prodigy on our hands, why shouldn't we do everything we can to nurture her?”

“That's not nurturing. That's pushing.”

“Okay Mrs. Mozart, go right ahead. Take the piano away from little Amadeus.”

“That's not what I'm suggesting at all, and you know it isn't.”

Tillie looked back and forth at her parents as the argument continued. The psychologist, not expecting the controversy and slightly outside his bailiwick when it came to couples counseling, did his best to mediate.

F

In the end they compromised; Tillie, having just turned three, would start first grade in the fall, with an accelerated hour of language arts. As the summer faded she sat shotgun with Dad, riding around New England while listening to him explain why sixties rock music was great and why Rush Limbaugh was right. She was not quite old enough for this to not add up.

Dad's customers thought Tillie was a hoot, and a couple of them were even charmed enough that they bought encyclopedias, so it was bittersweet for him when they saw her onto the school bus with Kevin that first September morning with the pines

tottering in the gray sky. Kevin was more nervous than Tillie, and looked pleadingly back at his parents, whose waving figures shrank and disappeared at the first turn. For all he knew, his baby sister tagging along, sitting next to him on the avocado pleather seat, was about to destroy his social standing.

For first graders everything is new and strange, and thus few things in particular are. They accepted Tillie with little difficulty. She was visibly the runt of the litter, but she belonged. True, while the rest of Mrs. Newman's homeroom fidgeted in anticipation of recess, Tillie dreamed of the next phonics exam or handwriting exercise. The stigma against nerds hadn't had enough time to incubate, and her academic prowess came to be cheered by her classmates as entertainment, as though she were a trained pet doing tricks.

The only one not delighted was Kevin—slow, dense Kevin, who felt erased. Rather than seeing it as a further humiliation, he was relieved when she lapped him with another accelerated promotion at the end of the year, to fourth grade.

G

Tillie was trying to help her big little brother with his homework, but Mom and Dad were at it again and now she couldn't think either and lifted her eyes from the page.

Without saying a word to each other, she and Kevin trod up the carpeted steps to eavesdrop. Nobody was buying encyclopedias, that much they both knew—but there were clearly other things going on that neither of them could understand.

The bedroom door was shut. An adult contemporary station was cranked up high, ladling gooey sentiment over the couple's shouting and Mom's sobs. Tillie wasn't sure what a “higher love” was, except that it couldn't possibly be like this, and didn't know

who Steve Winwood or Chaka Khan were, but for a moment she closed her eyes and made herself dream they were the voices of her real parents, harmonizing in shiny utopian ecstasy.

Part II

1991-1995

H

Dad still left for the whole day, most days, but only by himself, even on the weekends, and it wasn't clear if he was working at all. Tillie was beginning to learn the signs of drunkenness and watched for them, rarely in vain, when he came home. He had a particular way of slurring the word "recession," so that it sounded like the sneeze of a weak and dying person. One night on a water run, she found him passed out face down on the kitchen table with a shattered CD-ROM in front of him and a full, sweating bottle of Budweiser in his non-bleeding hand.

She shook him awake but couldn't get him to stand up. Mom told her to go back to bed immediately, and not to worry; she would take care of it.

Soon, Dad was suddenly in higher spirits. It seemed he had found some good prospects in upstate New York, far enough away that he might have to spend the night occasionally. So he did, but even after that, there seemed to be no checks for Mom to bank yet. She examined the telephone bill. There was one number that appeared over and over again. It was not in upstate New York, of course. It was just one town over in Birchville. He was no good at paperwork or lying.

The next morning Mom watched Dad leave, made sure Kevin and Tillie got on the bus, and went to the address attached to the phone number. The house was overlooking a pond, up on a high hill. She had made it there to confront him, was within sight of the van, could make out SCALP DEVILS, when her own Buick Roadmaster lurched backward down the icy driveway. The station wagon slipped, rolled, crashed through the frozen surface of the pond. Two ice fishers witnessed the plunge and hurried over from the other end of the pond, but could do nothing other than attest to the accidental nature of her death.

No foul play was involved. No charges were pressed, save in the heart of young Tillie, who resorted to poetry, soon winning a national prize in the 12-and-under category for her piece “Disney Bunker (Anguish).”

I

[the letter, not the Roman numeral]

“Daddy, it’s the quintessence of pointlessness. No matter what, entropy will have its way. Each time I perform this absurd act, I participate in the agony of Sisyphus. It makes me want to *barf*.”

“Tillie, please just make your bed.”

Tillie was having a difficult time with her father. Having failed for months in his attempt to institute a regimen of household chores, he had recently accused her of being a lazy brat. She feared she had begun to internalize this self-image. In the pages of her zine, *Tykewryter*, she analyzed her paralysis over household chores as a “sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious” protest aimed at the patriarchy.

At seven years old, Tillie was now a high school sophomore. Dad, now a senior sales representative at Mapleton Volvo, had to pull some strings to arrange that for her, but he believed in her gift, even if it took strange forms, and he wanted her to have every edge. Being a single father with a daughter would be daunting under the best of circumstances. These were not the best of circumstances. He was permanently perplexed.

“Can you just make the bed, Tillie? It looks so much nicer. Don’t you want a pretty room?”

“No, Daddy: *you* want it. To want to make me want it, well, that is asking too much. Compliance I can give you, but my desires are mine alone.”

She dropped the blanket and folded her arms.

“Okay. Suit yourself, I guess. Do you want tur—”

Tillie was experimenting with vegetarianism and also found lunchmeat yucky.

“—PB&J, or hummus?”

“You don’t have to pack me anything today, remember? The planetarium trip.”

“That’s right, that’s right. Are you excited about it?”

“Not really. It’s disgusting having to spend all day with those teenage dweebs. The wonders of the cosmos will be wasted on most of them. Once the lights go out they’ll be too busy trying to feel up inner space. Bluh.”

Dad laughed and shook his head, evidently delighted with her for the moment.

Tillie looked disappointed.

When she came home that evening, he noticed a large bandage across her lower back.

“Dear God, are you okay? What happened?” He was already thinking ahead to suing the school system.

Punctuating her triumphant smirk with winces, she peeled away the bandage. Beneath it was a tattoo: “Every woman adores a Fascist” emblazoned in 44-point Fraktur.

It was the only time he would ever spank her. He sat in her bed, put her over his lap, and gave her a good thwacking right below the aphorism. She strove to suppress her sobs, the better to drily drive home the irony, but could not.

The next morning, he went out and bought her favorite cereal, Cocoa Pebbles. As soon as she emerged from her room, her bleary eyes full of how-could-you, he poured two bowls for them.

On about the third spoonful, she relaxed her glare of recrimination.

“Listen Tillie, about last night.”

She was listening.

“I just hate to see you do things that you’re going to regret later, and not be able to do anything about.”

“I suppose you’re an expert on that.”

He listlessly swirled his spoon through the tan-blue milk, and sighed.

“Who would actually do that? I don’t know how you even found someone. Tell me where you got it done. This will put them out of business. I mean really, they’ll be lucky to avoid jail time. Come on. Tell me who it was.”

“Snitches get stitches,” said Tillie.

Her father pinched the bridge of his nose and squinted down at his Pebbles.

“You’ve still got so much growing to do. When you’re grown up and have kids of your own someday, how do you think that will look?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Stretched out. Illegible. At least that’ll be a mercy,” he said under his breath.

She ran to her room. He followed but was met with a slam and a flutter of her *They Might Be Giants* poster.

“Goddammit,” he muttered. Was he, all along, father material? No. Not even husband material. None of this should have happened. If he thought hard, he could almost take himself back to the days when he himself was young. Not as young as Tillie (technically) was, but young enough that she was still less than the smidgen of a sparkle of a twinkle in his testes. Youth granted a man freedom, energy, friendships. You could move around, make mistakes, keep moving, make more. But slowly, in tandem with the process of getting less stupid, all that freedom faded away, until all life had to grant you was a good view of your own shortcomings, a subpoena perpetually being waved in your face.

“Tillie? Please. I have to be in early for a meeting.”

The door remained locked. Tillie would not go to school that day. Instead, in a fury, she pounded out what would become the first two chapters of her novel.

J

She lied about her age (fifteen, as opposed to eight) to join up at Simon’s Rock, then spent most of her first semester perched in the top bunk of her dorm room, polishing her manuscript, listening to the Pixies on her headphones so she couldn’t hear her dumb

roommate drinking contraband wine coolers and doing disgusting things with smelly boys who smoked.

Following a bidding war among the more discerning media conglomerates, Tillie scored a six-figure sum, to be placed in a trust fund Dad couldn't touch. *Toy*—a partially autobiographical novel about a troubled child prodigy escaping her domineering father during the Bosnian War—became a sensation.

Since one of the book's scenes described (in boastful, barely fictionalized detail) Tillie's forging of documents to gain college admission, expulsion proceedings were initiated, and then dropped when she achieved a sufficient level of fame. Not only that, but the book was retroactively fudged into some extra credit hours, so that after only two years Tillie was awarded a bachelors rather than associates degree, a move that generated much controversy in the school newspaper and among the envious fellow prodigies left behind.

K

That summer an article was published in *Vanity Fair* under the title “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl,” accusing Tillie of being a hoax. It was insinuated that the true author of her books was in fact Roy Trowbridge, her father. This infuriated Tillie and she agreed to confront her accuser on *The Troy Andrews Show*, a syndicated talk show somewhere in the gray area between serious current-affairs discussion and schlock. No chairs were thrown, and it could be said that Tillie conclusively proved that she was a prodigy. Nevertheless, the (minor but lingering) pop-culture takeaway was this serious declaration, received as a laugh-line: “I'm reclaiming pigtails.”

The second book in her contract, a miscellany of cultural criticism entitled *Back Off, Nabokov*, was less well received. Critics noted that most of its essays were culled from her zine columns and only slightly expanded. In any case, the continuing buzz over *Toy*, and more importantly her own personal notoriety, was sufficient to ensure her acceptance to several top masters programs in creative writing. From among these she had chosen the University of the Upper Midwest, known to the literati as a place one should nod one's head about in conversation, and to sports fans as Home of the Fighting Skeeters.

Part III

1996-1998

L

Tillie leaned hard into the heavy wooden door. It gave way and she ran smack dab into the department secretary, almost disappearing into the woman's long skirt.

"I'm sorry," the secretary said, though the fault had hardly been hers. "Are you okay?" She had to stop herself from adding the word "dear."

"I have a 3:30 appointment with Dr. Cristo. Is he in?"

"Well now, I think he's free, but let me check. You just have a seat, hon—Ms. Trowbridge."

Tillie mounted the chair and settled into its worn blue upholstery. Her lavender Pumas dangled a few inches off the floor. In the too-large furniture, she sometimes found herself getting dangerously into the feeling of swinging. Especially in the wheelie chairs

in the seminar rooms, which made her want to whip her legs back and forth for the sheer centrifugal bone-buzz. But she judged that this would appear unprofessional, from an outside perspective.

From the clear vinyl book bag beside her she pulled out a funereal black Moleskine and wrote, “Collided with Paula in program office. Feel like idiot. Use this just before Tania’s revelation in dining car?”

Dr. Cristo emerged from his office and greeted Tillie. He waited for her to hop to her feet before he shook her hand and directed her by the shoulder toward his door.

“Come on back. I just reread your email and I want you to know,” keeping his voice soft as he shut the door, “I really think everything’s going to be fine. Coffee?”

“No, thanks,” Tillie said. She brought juice boxes to class sometimes, and they made her hyper enough. Coffee would have her bouncing off the dry-erase board. But all these adults, they looked withered—even shell-shocked—until they had inhaled or guzzled some kind of violent central nervous stimulant. Was she destined for zombiehood as well?

“First of all,” he said, “I feel like I ought to apologize for the other night, the reading at Rough Draughts. I talked to the manager, and you will definitely be allowed inside from now on. He just needed to cover his...butt. Got worried that you were a sting from the liquor license people or something. When I told him you were scheduled to read there next month, he felt really bad.”

“It’s okay. It’s not about that. Honestly, it was no big deal. That place smells like barf anyway.”

“I know. I just want you to know. To understand that I want to do everything I can to make you feel comfortable.”

Dr. Cristo, chairman of the UUM creative writing program, had a PhD in comparative literature and a black belt in making people feel comfortable. It was all he did. Play Jimmy Carter in skirmishes between tenured professors. Go eyeball to eyeball with philistine administrators and carefully talk them down from gutting university funding for this prestigious yet outwardly frivolous pursuit. And, more or less daily, soothe neurotic MFA students.

“I appreciate it. It’s not, like, something personal against you, believe me. Or anyone here. Even Brad. The discussion yesterday just took a bunch of things I was already worrying about and brought them to a boil.”

“Well, let’s get into those. I just want to make sure, that we’re sure, that you’re sure. That you need a leave of absence.”

Tillie slumped a little on the couch opposite Dr. Cristo. Her eyes wandered sideways and down while she pondered. He turned to check if there was any particular reason for her to fixate on his wastebasket. Nope: Clif Bar wrappers, coffee cups, meaningless paperwork. The embalmed scraps of a live, oxygen-birthing forest, she was thinking, before her gaze snapped back.

“I can’t do it. Not the writing, just school. I feel too exposed. It’s not that I wish I were in sixth grade instead. God forbid. I just don’t see how, socially speaking, I’m in a position where I can operate at all normally.”

“Give yourself more credit. You operate as normally as anyone, generally. Yesterday was a blip. It could happen to anyone here.” He shrugged and laughed.

“Honestly, it could. It has. Maybe not quite like that, but even so, it has. You should see the poets.”

She smiled, revealing a pink gap bridged by a waxing sliver of white. Her last permanent teeth were coming in, maybe a little crookedly. Tillie had sworn she would never endure braces.

“You really don’t think it will be weird from now on? I don’t think I can go in there next week.”

“I’ve talked to Brad. He’s OK. He’s not pressing charges or calling for your head on a platter. If you want, we could even get together later this week, here, the three of us.”

“I’d really rather not. I’m working on an email to him, but I don’t know if I can be civil yet face to face. Besides, it’s not just him, there’s also the other...kids.”

“The other students like you, Tillie. And not in some cute, mascot kind of way either, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

She hadn’t been. Now she was.

“Great. I’m Doogie Howser, MFA.”

“Not at all. We’ve always been clear that you were on an equal footing with everyone else here. Your colleagues have a very real respect for your work.”

“They hate me.”

“They’re jealous of you.”

“That doesn’t make it better, even if it’s true.”

“It is true. You’re published in multiple genres. You’re ten years old. Besides, insecurity makes the writing world go 'round. The same way unwarranted self-confidence

does for other, more lucrative professions. Your friends here are pushing thirty. Forty. Fifty. And brilliant. And dying to get to a place that, relatively speaking, you seemed to just roller-skate your way right into. Of course they're jealous."

"I hate standing around at the parties with a Sprite in my hand. People think I'm someone's *kid* or something. Or even if they know me, they barely say hi."

"Well, those things, sure, they can be a little awkward," Dr. Cristo said, suddenly struck with sympathy for his other charges, who had to puzzle out how to interact with this temperamental moppet in their midst. Their reserve toward her was in part to efface the guilt of a freakish fascination. Perhaps he should never have pushed for the special exemption to allow her enrollment, even if it had been good PR for the program. "Most of us tend to be shy, sensitive types, right?"

"Last time, I brought Magda. Someone referred to her as my *nanny*. It was very demeaning for both of us."

Magda was Tillie's personal assistant, retained for such purposes as cooking, driving her to and from school, and bed-making.

"Have you talked to your father about what you're going through?"

At this she frowned like she had swallowed a bug.

"I've been making my career decisions independently for some time, Dr. Cristo. I can't get legally emancipated for a few more years, but we have an understanding. He signs off on what he needs to, and then stays out of my affairs."

Dr. Cristo was sorry he'd asked.

"Well, okay. I'm glad you felt comfortable coming to me at least. You should. I'm here to help. And so is Brad Standish, I've got to say. He's not going to hold a

grudge. I promise this will all just be funny to you, soon. Probably even by the next class. Brad's one of our best instructors, and he's here to help. To nurture you as a writer, whatever it takes."

Tillie was skeptical of this last point. As a teacher, Brad Standish was phoning it in. After years of crafting poignant, low-key literary fiction, he had faced the truth: all the great reviews and pithy blurbs from his friends in the literary world had led to few sales, no film adaptations, not even a book-club edition with an appendix of suggested discussion topics.

He had a cushy university job, sure. A few awards. Fellowships to Tuscan writing retreats—okay, so those were good. But it wasn't enough. Something had to be done. The time had come to write a centaur trilogy.

Centaur were in. They had revitalized the whole world of young adult literature, starting with Marjorie Idle's *Centaurion* series. Every girl Tillie's age was supposed to want a dreamy young centaur of her very own, to pet and make out with and ride away on. Tillie, disgusted by this crass exploitation of pubescent confusion, did her best in class to conceal her lack of regard for Brad's integrity.

Despite the enormous, well-publicized advance he was given for his new franchise, initial sales of *Hoof* were sluggish. But by the time *The Galloping* was released, Standish's trilogy had become a bona fide publishing phenomenon. The thrilling final installment, *The Man Half*, was to be released in less than a month. A guest writer would be teaching Brad's last few classes while he was away on the publicity tour. Then next semester was his sabbatical, and after that—who knew? He'd hardly need the salary. Still, he'd be famous enough that they might keep him on faculty whether he was

doing a damn thing there or not. But for now, Brad still convened his workshop each Tuesday to discuss student work.

That week, the two students in question had been Clay and Tillie. Clay, a year ahead of her, had submitted an excerpt from his thesis project: a novel about a grad student struggling with his thesis project while obsessing over the ex-girlfriend he had never gotten over, but failing to find anything he could have done differently. It was self-reflexive without being reflective, almost pitifully clueless in its chauvinism. Anyway, everybody loathed meta-, writing-about-writing-type stuff. Who the hell would want to read a story set in an MFA program?

The class received it politely, suggesting only minor changes, as the ones really needed were too major to mention.

Tillie had been at work for some time on a novel to follow up *Toy*, but it was not yet ready for outside readers. Instead, that day she was workshopping an experimental short story, entitled “Napalm Naptime.”

Brad always tried to open the discussion on a positive note: “So what did we like about this story?”

Darrell, whose stories were quietly devastating explorations of personal crisis in the milieu of fishing or mixed martial arts, kicked it off. “I appreciated the, uh, passion of it, I guess? The emotional intensity carried me along, even in parts where the style made it hard for me to follow exactly what was going on.”

A few other similarly mild things were said.

Then Hafsah, seated at the end of the table, said, “I have to be honest, this story really bothered me. I tried to get into it. But when you—I’m sorry, when the author—

started comparing her—the character’s—daycare to East Jerusalem, I was like: okay, I can’t go there with you. Her. Whatever.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Marlon, directly to her right, said.

Then he trailed off, seeming to retreat. Marlon was a pleasant guy. His work was a bit muddled and lackluster, but Tillie was particularly fond of him, because he always shared the Nerds or Laffy Taffy he brought to class. She assumed he was simply too stoned to get confrontational. Still, she appreciated the implied support.

“No, I mean it. It’s appropriation. She has no right to use the suffering of the other as leverage to elevate her own. Sorry, I just find that offensive.”

This had been brewing for some time. The sense of competition between the two was keen, palpable from the day they arrived for orientation, as Hafsah was the only other student Tillie’s year with a book out already.

“That’s not fair!” Tillie yelled.

It was generally taboo to react out loud while your work was being criticized, let alone raise your voice. But Brad, nominally responsible for mediating the proceedings, was no longer there. He had gone to the Martha’s Vineyard in his mind.

Hafsah looked startled by the breach of decorum. “I’m just sharing how I felt. You don’t own the oppression of the Palestinians.”

Tillie and Hafsah locked eyes across the seminar table. Tillie was trembling slightly. The remainder of the class—all of them age-normative, it should fairly be noted, and all of them products, however apostate, of the nation’s hegemonic faith tradition—could be seen to withdraw.

“So do *you* own them? Your family is from Abu Dhabi by way of California. Your dad runs a software company. Is there an intifada raging in Sunnyvale that I don’t know about?”

“Sure, okay. And you understand oppression cause you’re...what? Young? In that case everyone’s an ex-minority, because everyone’s an ex-minor. Oh, or because you’re one-quarter Quebecois? Yeah, that’s right, I read your collection. All that hot air about the *mouvement séparatiste*. Give me a break! *Avez-vous même connaître le français?*”

« *Oui je le fais... salope.* »

« *Avorton!* »

« *Vas te faire foutre!* »

Beneath her defensiveness, the truth was, Tillie had been terrified of offending anyone, the whole time she wrote the damn thing. She typed with one hand while biting the nails of the other, even as she felt, deep within, a conviction that her art should rattle people’s complacency. But now she had to pay the price. Damn these workshops. Why was writing ever invented, if not so that geeky, beating-prone people could avoid having to defend their ideas face to face?

“Girls, girls,” Brad lofted out there.

“*Girls?*” the two found themselves saying, in unison.

Still on his yacht, Brad seemed not to notice that their wrath had been turned in his direction. He dispensed some conventional wisdom. “Listen, Tillie. It may just be that you need to let this one cool and revise it in a couple years. Sometimes it’s too fresh. Sometimes we try to write about things too soon. When what we need is the benefit of perspective.”

The p-word. If there was one ageist codeword Tillie couldn't stand....

“Too fresh? I can't believe it. This is based on something that happened half my life ago. What am I supposed to write about? The womb?”

Brad considered this, tilting his jaw around noncommittally.

“Well, I don't know. You write a story depicting any kind of subjectivity *in utero*, and apart from the plausibility issues, you kind of summon up all that pro-life stuff. It's an interesting idea, as an exercise, but it would be hard to make it work.”

This abstracted musing had blown the conversation far from the fractious, uncomfortable shore. He breathed in the salt air.

“Did you even read my story?” Her hand clenched, crumpling the notes she had been taking.

“You self-satisfied condescending paternalistic sell-out phallic BUTTFACE!”

By the end of this litany she had jumped over the table and was slapping and clawing at the instructor's face, her eyes full of pure killing, her cheeks quivering and magenta. Darrell pried her away, and lifted her over his shoulder. (Later, Darrell would notice a spot of blood on his polo and assume it was Brad's, misremembering Tillie's attack as having broken skin and never realizing that during that fateful class the girl had begun menstruating for the first time.)

She struggled in Darrell's gentle, steroid-buttressed grasp, but stopped hitting and kicking as he evacuated her from the room. Brad's glasses were twisted in her tiny hand, and she hurled them hard enough to shatter against the whiteboard as the door shut behind her.

That fall, the memory would haunt Brad at many a Barnes & Noble. He would glance up at each schoolgirl in the signing line and worry that she might stab him with his own pen, or bludgeon him to death with her 700-page copy of *The Man Half*.

“Like I said, Brad is fine. He told me he’s not going to make anything of it. But it’s important that you two get together and make up. You know, ceremonially,” Dr. Cristo said.

Tillie mimed vomiting.

“Why not?”

“I know I was out of line, but I still feel the same way. And I worry that no one else here gets me either.”

“They may not. They may never. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t helping you, even despite themselves. Being here with all these different people can only help. It keeps you from cloistering yourself away somewhere, where you never have to face misunderstanding, or ignorance, or honest disagreement, or even mean-spirited opposition...though I think that's mostly in your head. Even if not, it'll help. You have to be strong, and let time do its thing.”

“Fuck time.”

“Keep in mind how far ahead you are. And I’m sorry, but how far you still have to go. There will be a lot more pain. It’s just a fact. You—all of us—grow into it.”

Tillie dove across the room at Dr. Cristo, who spasmed with alarm. She climbed into his lap, hugged him desperately with hands like little mouse paws, smeared her face against his sweater vest, and wailed. She sobbed and sighed and streaked the cashmere over his chest where, if he ever told anyone about this, she really would have to stab him.

Over her shoulder his eyes bugged, for a moment, in terror. Then, instinctively, before he finally noticed what he was doing and put her down, he began rocking her slowly back and forth, almost imperceptibly, reeling her in tighter, stroking her hair down along the back of her head, *shh-shh-shh-shh-shh*.

M

Tillie stayed in the program after all, and made a new commitment not only to writing but to having a social life. This paid off almost immediately, in the form of Axel, a polyglot poet who hailed from Dusseldorf and wore the prettiest glasses Tillie had ever seen.

Reading Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Joyce in her literature classes was tremendously stimulating to her brain, but not the part of it where her own stories came from. She felt claustrophobic as her bookcases overflowed into every room, and she began to wonder if there wasn't something paltry and ridiculous about her own work. Maybe she was a hoax after all, if not quite in the way the world had suspected.

She was beginning a new project, a thinly fictionalized story about Kevin. It began with his birth as a breech baby, who had been delivered naturally over five agonizing hours and had his legs dislocated on the way out, coming into the world covered in green bruises. She wrote one sentence and stared at it. The next day, she got up and stared at the same sentence again.

She was also starting to get the sense that her freshman composition students didn't respect her authority.

N

To break up the ice in her fiction, she wrote and published a personal essay about losing her virginity to Axel. He was then publicly pilloried as a pedophile, and fled back to Germany. No prosecutors were pursuing his indictment or extradition, but he would not answer her letters...more out of fear than anger, Tillie hoped.

Part IV

1999-2013

O

Tillie had stopped leaving the house, and was running out of money, so she had to let Magda go.

She biked to school when she had to teach, until she crashed into a telephone pole, was thrown over her streamered handlebars and broke her collarbone. Bedridden and bored, she took up with a new boyfriend, a man named Rick who hung around her apartment complex. When her painkillers ran out, he brought her a treat: some fentanyl lollipops. They were like little berry-flavored Jolly Ranchers on plastic sticks that thawed and tenderized the jagged sadness inside her. When her money ran out, she moved in with Rick.

While he sold drugs, she kept CNN on all day, a cycle that led her from intense involvement and analysis through fuzzy detachment to deep sleep by sundown. Rick kept the house stocked with Doritos and Fruit Roll-Ups and Kraft macaroni and cheese for her and did not seem to mind the distended belly that was chubbing out from her otherwise lanky fourteen-year-old body. She didn't have many clothes that fit her anymore and was

beginning to feel like Alice in Wonderland. The solution she found was to wear Rick's sweatsuits.

Writing had become like squeezing blood from a stone, less symbolically than in a physical sense; that was what it felt like, and the stone was her skull. Something she had been turning to as a source of joy since infancy she could now no longer do without agony, could not face at all.

She tried to write about her childhood, as if in doing so she could finally make it end, but she found that she could not bring herself to touch it. So she tried to write about irrelevancies...and they just seemed irrelevant.

She developed a ring-shaped rash in the orbit around her eye and was convinced that she had a tumor on her right brain that was strangling her creativity. Either that or a circulation problem from lying in bed all day. Was that a jet she heard flying overhead? She wished it would crash into her building. No, it was just the air conditioner. Her floor was covered with tiny sticky plastic sticks. There were a couple stuck to her leg, she noticed as she rolled over.

After a while the only writing she did was to correspond by email with her brother, who was about to begin college. Kevin had started his own company in high school, a web-based traveling car wash service, not quite successful as a business, but impressive. He said he didn't mean to brag, but he was the target of some heavy competition for scholarships. He was making good. He said Dad said hi, and said that he loved her. Tillie couldn't handle responding to that part. He asked how her work was going and she said she was having a little bit of trouble but chalked it up to "teen angst."

Tillie blinked at the screen. It was 3 a.m and they still didn't know who the president was going to be. Weird. She fell back asleep.

Rick hadn't been in the apartment for days. Kevin was offering to fly her out to Santa Cruz for a “Space Odyssey”-themed Sweet Sixteen party. Funny theme. There was once a future that was going to come, and then it didn't. In her dreams now, the world was always ending.

She thought about it—it would be easy, she could get her stuff together very quickly and disappear—but inertia, or fear, or something, held her back. Depression was the plainest way of putting it. She spent several years that way, not with Rick but wherever she could recreate the conditions for this easy, slow death.

P

One day Tillie showed up on her father's doorstep. They hadn't spoken in nearly a decade, but he seemed to understand that not much needed to be said, let alone questions asked. Her old bed was too small and he slept on the couch for a few days while she got sick, giving her the master bedroom. He fed her her childhood favorites—ziti, broccoli with cheese sauce, and he even got her to start eating chicken. They laughed about his work, the news, her occasional fan mail, and Kevin, who said he couldn't wait to come visit soon.

She took a job at the supermarket. Stocking shelves, bagging, even the occasionally surly customers at checkout...it all seemed so manageable. The ghostly stink of misery that had been enveloping her slowly floated off.

Tillie moved out, went to law school, met a nice guy, got married, had a miscarriage, got divorced, and did not fall apart. She picked up her pen to start from scratch.

Tillie was a late bloomer.