Man Without a Blueprint

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Man Without a Blueprint

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Brendan Frost

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The Actuary

If I pulled my contact lenses out too roughly I could pull my corneas right off of my eyeballs. I’ve read that in a news item about a guy who got jalapeno juice in his eyes and scraped himself blind. Even though I go to the dentist every three months, I am always afraid that if I have a tooth problem that gets serious without my knowing it, I’ll floss and split the tooth down the middle, straight to the nerve root. And then comes unimaginable pain and one less tooth. If I rolled the wrong direction in bed and fell off the side and I was still in a dream-state, still spatially unaware, I might land on the edge of my knee and the patella would be dislodged from the tenuous sac of oily cartilage keeping it gently glued to the joint of my tibia and my femur.

Every action I take could lead to brutality. This is life for an animal on earth. So I try to stay very still—all the time. I try to think deeply before making any difficult choice. Like whether to start with one square of toilet paper or two; will this BM be messy enough that there’s a risk of soaking through to my erstwhile protected finger or even tearing the sheet in half and having more than just liquid contact? I think deeply before any difficult choices, like whether to wake up in the morning.

My name is Timothy Lavelle. I’m an actuary. An actuary, as you may know, is someone who analyzes the risk of a given situation. I should clarify that I’m not a career actuary but one in more of a metaphorical sense. I see everything. And I’m sorry to say, it’s all bad. See, I was supposed to have been an actuary. My father was an actuary for New York Life and his father was before him. But I’m too nervous to be one. It’s like I’m an actuary gone rogue, the actuary all other actuaries wish they could be but are too afraid to become.
When I was a kid, I always remember listening to Doris Day and then going to my mom and saying: “Mom, will I be handsome one day? Will I be rich?” and she said “No.”

To explain myself, let me tell you a little story. I was home from undergraduate visiting my parents and I still smoked cigarettes back then. I used to hide my fears deep, deep inside of myself, and cover it up with alcohol and nicotine. My parents were still pretending my smoking wasn’t obvious and I went along with it, I stayed sneaky. I woke up from a nap around 3 o’clock in the afternoon. The car was gone and I didn’t hear any movement upstairs. I went out the back door that exited the kitchen. I was giddy to light that joe, so I scurried like a pubescent teenager and when I turned around the corner of the house my foot swung right into one leg of a ladder propped up against the two-story house. I heard the ladder racket and then a sound like the rattle of pool balls cracking off of each other, and then the rapid snap of a branch. You may well be clever enough to know what the sound was, and that I’ll never forget it. What I do forget is the image: my father’s head craning like a hinged door underneath his torso, his spine snapping and pushing through his flesh and a few of the discs tumbling out like Rolaids out of a sleeve. I am able to describe it to you because I know, intellectually, that that’s what happened. But, and this is important: I don’t remember it.

I spent every single morning for five years memorizing the image of Power Rangers morphing into Zords to associate with that whole afternoon, to replace the image. But listen, the good thing is that this act of nature, or of my own stupidity, really, taught me who I am. I have an immune system and I choose not to use it— I choose to become my own immune system. That is not normal. But obviously, something happened to me. My left foot went a little too far to the left. The father dies that the son may truly live.
And by this point I wear my terror on my sleeve. I know who I am. I am a man who is afraid of life. Do you know who you are? If you said yes; are you sure? Can you prove it? I can prove it. Just spend a couple of minutes with me.

The only real risks I take are for love. I remember love from when I was a kid, and I’m pretty sure love is the only thing that would give me powerful enough blinders to actually live a real kind of life. I’m not naïve: I don’t mean it’s a cure-all. But there is a malformed tumor, a fistula between the universe—which is deaf, blind, dumb, anosmic, somatosensorily defected—and our sunny, melodious, smelly, delicious hoax of a planet. Our minds were built able to see death coming, an indifferent giant waiting to eat us when we’re cooked. So, fuck him, I’m going to pretend like that will never happen and I’m going to love someone.

So I met this woman from OKCupid. You’ve probably heard of it, it’s a very popular dating website. Her profile said stuff like “I have no typical Friday night and I don’t want to meet the man who does” and “I love X and I love Y but what I really love is traveling and helping people.”

She struck me as someone who would be a real adventure. Or, at least, a fake adventure, an acceptable way of forgetting my terror. I went out that night to the coffee shop with elaborate plans on how to escape if necessary. Because people are completely fucked, there was plenty of potential for disaster, needless to say. I’ll still say it, though:

1. Even though we talked on the phone, she could be a man with a really convincing high voice or a voice changer. This would be a problem, because I myself am heterosexual. And perhaps more importantly, it would mean she lied to me. Which is to say of course, it would mean he lied to me.

2. She could be mentally ill, which may manifest in ways including, but not limited to:
2a. she tricks me into reproducing with her and blackmails me into fatherhood.
2b. she drugs me and robs me.
2c. she is a sociopathic genius, and she convinces me so thoroughly of her worldview that soon, together we are scamming the elderly out of their life savings and draining CEO bank accounts.

3. I could fall in love with her. If she’s not the absolute best person for me, or maybe not even close, I would be blinded by this love, and would live out the rest of my days ignorant of the beautiful fulfilling life I could be living.

These are just a tiny fraction of the things that could’ve happened, but I don’t want to bore you. I’ll tell you what actually happened.

It went alright. She was prettier than her pictures showed and she said I was more handsome. She seemed interesting and then she never responded to my text two days later. So it didn’t really go alright, I guess.

Another day I was meeting a woman for the first time. It didn’t take long before she said to me “I find you more disturbing than anyone I’ve ever met. You’re not waving a gun around or threatening me or anything like that, but I think you’re just infectious, I think that if we continued this, you would infect me with your gloom.”

She was a therapist and it was my first office visit. She was trained to deal with defectives like myself, and she was afraid. I haven’t gone to one since.

What I’m trying to say is that this is how everything goes for me. Either like that or worse. I’m outside of all inner circles. And it’s lonely out here. I only have my own inner circle to live inside of and you’re getting an idea of what that is like.

I’m not blaming anyone. I’m not blaming myself, either.
I was at my office five weeks ago, preparing a reamsworth of regional demographical surveys to be entered into our database, when my phone vibrated that I had a new message on OK Cupid. I hadn’t been on a date in months.

We got coffee. I said I enjoyed foreign films and she said she did too, although the captions sometimes hurt her eyes to read. I thought that sounded weird because it never happened to me. I thought maybe she was a little stupid. But I guess we all have different eyes.

I told her about my life and I held nothing back—well, none of the plot. But I held back all the themes.

She told me about hers: from the east coast, moved to the Midwest for her job as a designer of medical prosthetics. Jesus Christ. I know, right? Not so stupid after all. I could be dating a genius, I thought.

“You know,” I said at one point, “coffee has 2-ethylphenol in it, which is a cockroach pheromone.”

She chuckled and gave me a look like she had just discovered a new species. “Ah…oh. I did not know that. What… what does that mean exactly?”

“Well, I consider it an acceptable risk,” I said.

“What’s the risk?” she asked. “If I drink too much I’ll start hitting on cockroaches?”

I laughed because I was supposed to. “Exactly. No, actually…they’ll start falling in love with you.”

She looked deep into me. “You’re… you’re like a little tender puppy, aren’t you? You are acting funny but I think you mean most of what you say. I think you just want someone to take care of you. Maybe you even need that. And I think if you had that, you would want to take care of someone too.”
I think she was right. I think I was feeling the prickly first moments of love all over my skin.

I suggested we do something that Friday and she said let’s go to a Bronze Radio Return concert. I will do anything for a woman I could love, so I went.

She was undulating like an Irish warrior demigod. We all know how they undulate. I was trying to dance like a human who knows how to dance and I think I looked more like a seal that forgot how to swim. I had to pee pretty badly.

But she stopped all of a sudden and turned and with her green eyes and her red firehair she said “Let’s go” and pulled me by the arm to the back areas of the crowd near the port-o-lets.

When we were in a place no-one could see us she put me up against a brick wall and got on her knees and started to go down on me. I tried to just let it happen and love it but I had to pee and I knew I couldn’t take it all the way.

I said, “I have to pee. Do you think I could… maybe…go and…?” But I guess it was loud out there, and she misheard.

“What in the actual fuck?” she said. “Jesus Christ, I knew you were weird, but fuck this.”

She sped away, yelling, “This guy wanted to pee on me! Stay away from him!”

I put myself away and started walking. A woman approached, biting her lip. She said, “Is that… something you’re…? Do you maybe want to…?” and I said no thanks. Then a super drunk guy came up and said “I can help you out bro” and started pissing on my leg.

I went home. But the next day I got a message from OKCupid user RocksSocksWithAbandon that said “Hey, this user put you on Nightmares of OKCupid. Here’s the link. I just don’t think it’s fair, so I thought you should know.”
Beginning of last week I deleted my account. I had no more veins leading into the world of humans. I went to the office by 8 every morning, worked until 4, went home, watched TV or read, ate, masturbated, went to bed, did it all over again.

Last Friday I was standing on my fourth floor office barricaded behind twelve foot bookshelves on two sides, staring out the window.

So there I am. Four floors up. The fall could certainly kill me, and there’s no telling how, although I could aim at a certain angle and make it more likely that my legs will both break in multiple places before my pelvis is shoved up into my guts, or that it’ll be quick and merciless and my brain will be crushed by the imploding skull and my neck will snap well before the humeral heads of my shoulders are dislodged from their carriages and my scapula pierces my lungs. But I could also just as easily survive. The ground of the parking lot could be a layer of blinding concrete poured over earth, or it could be structural and make the impact much stronger. There could be pockets of warm air to slow me down. Four floors seemed the perfect height for a nearly 50-50 gamble. And I needed to make a choice that was exactly unpredictable. I wasn’t trying to die, I was trying to lose control.

And you know, I understand why people don’t want to spend time with me. If I were someone else, I wouldn’t want to either.

I jumped. I don’t remember any of the fall.

I do remember the fever dream in the hospital before I came to. Sure, there were hunter golems made of sheet metal and frog-beaver hybrids trying to gnaw at my bare skinless toes. But also, you were there, and you were there, and you… that is, people just like you whom I’ve met, whom we’ve all met. And all of you wanted to talk to me, all of you desperately wanted to know how I was doing.
I’ve already started making plans for what I’m gonna do when I get out of here. The first weekend I’m gonna call a bunch of my old friends and try to salvage their friendships. I’ll take them out to a bar in my wheelchair, buy the first three or four rounds, wear a t-shirt that says “Once you go gimp, the rest seem limp,” and try to meet as many new people as possible. But I won’t be desperate. I won’t count on anything. If no one answers my calls or agrees to come with me, I’ll go alone. I don’t care.

I’m the biggest son of a bitch I know. But when that old voice comes back telling me ‘watch your step—anything could happen,’ I will still be afraid, but I will let anything happen. I won’t let that voice get a word in.

You can’t teach an old dog new tricks, that’s true. But see, we can tag out and switch dogs. I’m a new dog, filtered through death, and I have new teeth to bare.

So if any of you ever have a serious problem with gloom, like a “this goose-down comforter might as well be my gravedirt ‘cause I’m never getting back up” kind of problem, just almost kill yourself. The descent into the end of the world will feel like falling asleep after 20 hours of hard labor. Then when you wake up, if you wake up, everything will taste better, everything will be easier, it’ll feel like you can’t wait to do things that used to really hurt. You’ll want to go be really, insanely nice to someone because you understand now how good it feels. The only problem is that to almost kill yourself you also have to maybe possibly actually kill yourself.
She knits so much our house is filling up with sweaters and winter hats, but we live in the South. She makes me wish I wore knitted things. She reads romance novels and nonfiction. She cooks a beans, bacon and biscuits breakfast that puts you flat for the day. Nothing but my Eternal Parasite can stop me from jumping her bones when she comes home at midnight in that tight cocktail waitress t-shirt and short skirt. Her name’s Tracey, like an old pulp fiction character.

Mostly we eat, have sex and drink with our friends. Sometimes we canoe on the river out back of the house, sometimes we sit and fish and drink, mostly drink and then go buy fish from the corner market to pretend we accomplished something together. It didn’t take but a month before she moved in to my place. I wanted it more than I can remember wanting anything. I’m unemployed, and I had an interview for a job last week.

“What’s your eternal parasite?” she asked me once, a few months back. We were on the back porch, drink and smoke in hand, the heat imposing, so we were both flopped and inert on the soft plastic adirondaks.

“Since dad left, I’ve heard this voice every night when the lights are out and everyone else in the house is asleep. Whatever house I’m in. It sounds faraway. But really deep, really loud at the same time. That’s why I always need white noise, you know. Sometimes I still hear it through the hum of the fan, but when I go and switch it off I don’t hear anything.”

“That’s fucking creepy.”

“Well, yeah.”

“What does it sound like?”
“I can’t really describe it. I always have imagined it’s like some tall, thin, unmoving person in the head office of some other planet. But that doesn’t really help you understand it, does it.”

She looked at me a little afraid. It almost broke my heart, to know that I scared her. Now that I mention it I think it was the first time I realized how much I like her.

“Oh, no, no. It’s not like… a real voice. It’s probably sleep paralysis, for all I know, a voice in my dreams that I only think I’m hearing in real life.”

***

The interviewer had the stature of a heron. He had wire-rimmed glasses and he was wearing a navy blue half-zip sweater with its collar up, underneath it a white collared shirt and a quarter of a tie visible, and grey chinos. He stood in front of me with a notepad, a Parker Jotter, and a merciless indifference.

“Okay, Jerry. This is the most important part of the interview. It’s become clear to you now, if it wasn’t already, how important this job is. You are a broken man with no more options, and this job will single-handedly turn your life around. You will become a very well-moneyed and well-respected man. Anything you have ever dreamed of will become an option for you. If, as a child, you wanted to be a firefighter, a policeman, a biologist, this company will provide you the opportunity to become those things either within the company, as a supplementary part of your position, or in the large volumes of free time which this job offers. Your salary will only continue to increase, in large increments, from the base salary of five-hundred thousand, a sum we have been clear about from the beginning.”
I nodded.

“But such an opportunity is not free. If we are going to give you the world, you need to prove that you will do anything for it.”

I nodded again.

“Please stand, turn around, bend over, lean on that handrail and pull down your pants.”

For the first time during the whole interview, I didn’t move, I was unsure what to do.

“This is completely voluntary. Just like coming in here to interview with us, this is completely voluntary. But if you want to work here, it’s necessary.”

I finally did what the interviewer requested. I asked, “Are those people watching us? Can they see us?”

“That glass is one-way. They can’t see anything.”

“Are—are you sure? That one guy looks like he’s staring straight in here.”

“Which guy?”

“The guy in the grey suit. The black guy.”

“Now, hold on. Listen. Race is unimportant at Endings Operating Solutions. Let’s not make this personal,” said the interviewer, and penetrated me from behind.

***

My dad left me with my mom and my sister when I was fifteen. He created a shipping company and made his fortune from the ground up, but never gave us any more than was absolutely necessary. He always said we had to learn to earn our keep. When he left, mom took a job as a grocery clerk.
I had a wife and a good job like you’re supposed to if you’re a person. They paid me over two-hundred thousand before I lost it. I was the fall guy for a major company that you know the name of if you follow business news. They needed someone to fall on the sword when they fucked up big time and a little over half of the board of directors hated me, so they chose to put me out of a job and out of the running for any other company. When I apply at any big name firm anymore, they see my name and put me immediately in the “Do Not Hire” folder. I carry my name like a scar across my cheek.

It’s been three years since then and it took two for my wife to leave me. I was drinking all the time and taking amphetamines with my morning coffee just so I could keep going, keep applying to jobs and getting out there and being proactive. But my name was blacklisted. I had no recourse.

But now I’ve got Tracey, who’s okay with a man nearing forty with a terrible reputation and no job. She loves my heart, she always says, not how many bills I can pay. The place she cocktails at is this great little joint in the hipster district. She’s my red hair-dyed raison d’etre in an apron. She’s a Wiccan.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said to her when she first told me. “That’s even worse than being a Christian.”

That was the first time I saw her angry. It was our third date. “Who the fuck are you to judge how I cope with life?”

“A rational human being,” is what I wanted to say. But I didn’t want her to never have sex with me, so I didn’t. Instead I said, “You’re right, I’m sorry. We all have our ways.”
We’ve been together seven months now and I have a secret I haven’t told her yet. I don’t think I will. My secret is that all I want is one company to throw money and praise at me and I’ll feel like I woke up from a three-year-long night.

Sixteen years of hard work proved nothing. I had achieved nothing and I had become nothing. Like mud dried on your front steps, all my alleged Skills were washed away with one hosing. I no longer believed I was a team player, or that I had great communication skills, or that I ever go above and beyond. There is no creative mind between my ears; I am most certainly not a rockstar. I had been always pretending.

Some people claim they don’t need a foundation. Either they’re deluded, or they should be on a mountain somewhere preaching. And they should stay away from me. I don’t want to know anyone who doesn’t need the validation of other people. Tracey needs another kind, which is love. And I admire that, but for me it’s not enough. Maybe I’ll never tell her that.

People who have never had real money can’t understand how people with a lot of money always want more money. Well, they’ve never had money. They don’t know what power is really like. I think I’ll never tell Tracey any of this.

***

Endings Operating Solutions is a behemoth of a corporation. They have free comprehensive benefits, their employees spend as much time in the recreational elements of their offices as they do working, upon retirement you get a lifetime pension equal to your salary and your spouse does too in the event of your death. I could go on. They say you need to be an
absolute rockstar to even catch a glance from their hiring department, though. Apparently I caught a glance.

For the interview they flew me out to their headquarters in a helicopter, even though it’s just twenty miles outside the city. I was ushered along with seven other applicants into a steel-walled room lined with obscure paintings and with ten ergonomically-designed steel chairs. The man who ushered us in, wearing a black turtleneck, raw denim, and an earpiece, smiled and exited the room. We all sat around trying to smile at each other professionally and exude confidence. For the most part, every candidate was a pretty good actor. But it was clearly impossible to remain perfectly confident in this interview situation, where most of us were desperate and we knew success would only be achieved at the expense of those around us.

One man surprised me—he wasn’t smiling, wasn’t nervous, one leg wasn’t over another. He was just sitting with his hands on his knees and staring. I couldn’t discern if he was a confederate for the company or just a completely jaded jobseeker who no longer cared about anything.

A massive door in the upper corner of the room near the ceiling shifted open and a lady in a power-suit emerged on a chair. The chair was on a kind of hoisting metal framework that lowered onto the floor of the room via railings. She wore an unflappable smile the entire time. She stood quickly like a thing of nature, a deer that just happened to be roused.

“Hello, everyone. Welcome to the greatest opportunity you will ever have. It’s an honor to have this much talent in one room. There will be no forms to fill out for the duration of your interview, as we have all of your information already. Please, come with me.”

We shuffled like awkward chattel through the door.
“Please listen to me as I announce each person’s room number. Alice Peters, Room Z1. David Lug, Room Z2. Jerome Wilson, Room Z3.” She read the rest, and then gestured to the hallway. I strolled off to find Z3. As I entered the room, I looked back and noticed that there were exactly eight rooms in this hallway and each would be entered by exactly one candidate.

Inside the room, five people were sitting at a table and a single rigid empty chair waited for me. One of them stood and said “Thank you for coming, Mr. Wilson. Your first interviewers will be with you momentarily.” All five of them stood and bee-lined out of the room. In the twenty minutes that I waited, I tried to subtly look around for a hidden camera that might be observing my reactions, but I saw none.

Five people entered in casual clothing, with digital tablets clutched closely like babies.

They sat. One of them spoke. “You’re in a park. It’s a sunny day. A homeless man comes up to you and asks you for change to buy a cheeseburger. You see drug track marks on his exposed arm. What do you do?”

“What’s the context, here? Like, am I myself?”

“Please answer the question as it was asked.”

“I would give him money.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a small gesture that can go a long way, and because it would get rid of him.”

“How do you know he won’t spend it on drugs, or alcohol?”

“I don’t. I don’t care.”

The person who asked the question wrote something in her tablet with a stylus.
A different person spoke. “You’re on a bridge. An old lady is starting to get up on the railing, obviously with plans to commit suicide. On the other side of the bridge, a middle-aged man has careened through the railing, and it’s standing on the exact weighted-middle of its axis, and all it would take to stop it from tumbling over is the force of a human pushing down on the rear bumper. There is no one else on the bridge. What do you do?”

“Hold the man’s car down until he can get out.”

“Why?”

“Suicide is an option we all have. She’s an old lady, she’s had a lot of time to think about what she wants.”

“Thank you,” said the man, writing in his tablet.

“What is your favorite color?” asked another.

“I can’t choose one. Haven’t been able to choose one since I was a kid.”

“If you had to choose one.”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t? Why not?”

“They are all so beautiful. There’s no color that doesn’t have some context where it’s incredible.”

They all exchanged looks and I couldn’t tell if they were angry, confused or impressed.

“Please just choose one color. Here,” said the man, pulling something up on his tablet, “is a color wheel with all of the colors of the spectrum to assist you.”

“No.”

The man asking the question sat especially upright and looked at me. He snatched his tablet up and walked out of the room.
“It’s April 1890 in Austria,” said another. “You are a locksmith and a palm-reading prophet. One day, a mother walks into your shop holding her small infant named Adolph. You realize who this baby will be one day. What do you do?”

“Nothing. Tell her fortune or fix her lock.”

“Why?”

“Why should I trust my own prophesies? I’m just doing it to make money. And even if I believed they were always right, it’s a baby. It hasn’t done anything.”

“But it will do something, and you know it. Let’s assume you trust your prophesies and you know that they always come true.”

“There’s no such thing. You can’t be certain.”

“Let’s say there were such a thing.”

“I still wouldn’t do anything.”

“But you know that he will cause the deaths of around sixty-million people.”

“He hasn’t yet. He’s just a baby. Do you blame me for my future mistakes?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. They don’t exist yet.”

“Okay, Mr. Wilson. Final question,” said the last of the group. “We understand you have a significant other. You’ve been together for over six months now. If you had a choice between this job and staying with her, which would you choose?”

“This job,” I said without hesitating. I was pretty sure it was a lie, but my uncertainty made me feel terrible. I thought it was the answer they wanted, but also considered that maybe they are a deeply compassionate company and they act heartless to see what kind of person you really are.
“Why?”

“Honestly, because I don’t believe that there is only one ‘love’ for each person. I think that this job would afford thousands of opportunities for me to find someone else just as good for me, but with thousands of additional opportunities as well.”

“Are you alright, Mr. Wilson?”

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Okay, our part of the interview is done. Please wait here for Mr. Prent.”

Another twenty minutes later, Mr. Prent walked in the room. He had wire-rimmed glasses which he kept pushing back up the bridge of his nose. But all meagerness disappeared when he looked at me like a piece of meat he was examining before consumption.

“Mr. Wilson. Wonderful to meet you,” extending a hand.

I took his hand. “Likewise. Great to meet you.”

“Great? Ah, alright. Yes. Please, have a seat.”

I was already sitting. “Okay,” I said.

“So. Where do you see yourself in five years?”

I thought to myself, oh gee, this question. He must have noticed.

“I don’t mean in your career. I don’t mean your life plans. Literally, where do you see yourself in five years?”

“What?”

“Well, five years from today will be April seventh, 2019. Where do you think you will be?”

“Ah, well. I will be here in the city.”

“Okay. What will you be doing?”
“Let’s say… using the toilet.”

“Why?”

“I spend a remarkable amount of time on the toilet.”

“You have got to be kidding me. What kind of a thing is that to say to someone considering hiring you?”

“What kind of a question is that to ask in an interview?”

“I am trying to ask unique questions to get a different take on a candidate.”

“Well, I’m trying to give unique answers to seem likeable and down to earth.”

Mr. Prent chuckled. “I admire that level of honesty.”

“Thanks.”

“What makes you want to work at Endings Operating Solutions?”

“I do good work. I systematized a cluster fuck of clients for my firm, brought it into the 21st century. I almost singlehandedly moved my company from off-the-radar to a Fortune 500. But I was never made Chairman. My crash came too early. I was blamed for something I didn’t do. I hear that this is a perfect place for someone who does good work, cares about their work, cares about people.”

“I see. What else?”

“The salary is huge and the benefits are extremely generous.”

“Right. Indeed. What else?”

“I love this town. I love the chance to work where I love.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

He wanted something more than what I was giving him. It seemed like he already knew everything about me. “No, I suppose that’s it.”
“Excellent. Alright. Please come with me.”

Prent and I left the room at the exact same time as the nine other candidates also emerged with their paired up Endings employee.

We all exited the building together. The employees were trying to encourage conversation between everyone. But it was hard to take anything anyone said seriously in that type of environment. They talked about where they were from, how many kids they had, if they had pets, where they worked or had worked. They didn’t say anything about what sort of person they hated, whether they were really in love or just complacent, what they loved to do on weekends.

Then they assembled us all for a game of four-on-four basketball. We were to wear our interview suits. Of course, none of us hesitated to go along with it for even a second. Only when they split us up did I notice that there were exactly four male and four female candidates, and they made the teams equally gendered. Most of them sucked, but I played a little hoops when I was a kid and my team won.

I realized after it was over that forty-five people from Endings stood watching us the whole time, silently. This was exactly enough to comprise the five people that interviewed each candidate, plus one each for the one-on-one post interview.

It was not what I expected from an interview.

They gave us all bottles of Gatorade and we lapped it up like it was nectar; declining would undoubtedly disprove your team spirit as a candidate.

“Okay, that was wonderful. Thanks everyone. Meet up with your one-on-one interviewer for the rest of the interview process.”
“Mr. Prent,” I nodded. This is when things started to get a little hazy. When I nodded, it felt like all my vision shut down for a moment, my eyes became hot and I saw all white, and I felt like I was nodding forward into a canyon of raging ponies. I recovered myself. Prent greeted me back.

There might have been something in between, but I think this is when all the candidates and their Endings counterparts marched into a subterranean basement which, someone said, was where all the really hard work gets done at the company.

Prent led me into a room with one large window and shut the door, and kept asking me if I was okay, and I wasn’t. But I kept saying I was fine. I wasn’t ready to give up on the job yet.

Then he asked me to bend over and lean on the handrail, and said a bunch of other things, and I did and he entered me from behind. After a few minutes of it, he started asking me questions.

“Why do you want this job?”

“Because it’s an…extremely exciting company.”

Prent thrusted. “Why do you want this job?”

“Because I would become respected.”

“Respected?” Prent pulled back a little and then pushed back in hard.

“Powerful.”

“Okay, powerful. Keep going. What would you have?”

“Yachts. Restaurants, cars, strip clubs, clothes, watches, houses, pools.”

“Powerful how?”
“People to do things for me. Lawyers to get me exonerated for anything. Thousands of women to have. Travel to anywhere. Access to any important organization or event. Meeting famous people, meeting the president.

“Keep going!”

“I…I can’t…”

“Keep fucking going! What else will you have!”

“No fear. No feelings of inferiority to anyone. Escape from every problem life could have.”

“More.”

“Please, that’s…”

“I said more.”

“I want your company…to tell me that I’m as good as I think I am. I want your company to need me, to give me everything so I can feel good about giving the company everything. I want you to tell me that I’m as good as I think I am.”

“Oh god.”

“Can…” I chirped my words like a sick songbird, “can we be done now?”

Prent pushed away from me and deflated back into his chair like a stork, full after eating all of its own children.

***

A therapist told me once that my Eternal Parasite is my depression. I stopped going to her after that. It seems now even more like she was right.
Even Tracey’s beans and bacon and biscuits haven’t gotten me out of bed in the morning. I tell her I’m too tired and I want to sleep a little more and then she goes off to work.

Tonight some of her friends come over, though, and I join them drinking. I get too drunk and when her friend Jessica starts complaining about some angry guests at the restaurant I say “Well, you could try getting a real job that wouldn’t be as shitty.”

Tracey is stunned. Tracey has not seen my real side.

Maybe because I’m drunk I feel like showing it to her. When her friends leave and she’s putting the dishes in the washer, I grab her and bring her into bed.

At first she goes along with it.

“What are you doing?” she asks, now trying to push me away. She likes it rough, but not like this, not when it’s actually rough.

“I’m having sex with my girlfriend.”

She struggles a little, but I can’t get anything going.

“I’m ineffectual. Ineffectual,” I say, looking down.

“You’re not ineffectual. You’re an asshole.”

“I’m sorry,” I try to say, before passing out.

I don’t know if I did say it, I hope I did. It wouldn’t have made any difference, the damage was done. I have already done the damage. But I hope I did.

I wake up and she’s knitting. She doesn’t offer breakfast and I won’t eat her food for a while anyway as self-punishment, unless she starts wanting me to again. I don’t know how she lives the way she does. I don’t know how she’s happy with what she has. Somehow she’s okay with knitting and working at a restaurant and just loving and being loved. I wish I could be too.

The phone rings. “Hello, Mr. Wilson.”
“Yes?”

“This is Mr. Prent.”

“Ah.”

“We’d love for you to come back for a sort of... informal second interview. Bring your girlfriend. It’s more of a party.”

That night I beg forgiveness of Tracey, promise her I won’t drink for a month, and that I will never (never) do anything like that again. That we should go to this party. That I love her. I do.

“This job is going to let us do anything we want. I promise, baby.”

“Okay, okay. We can go. I will forgive you. I just need a little time. Last night was very scary. Why are you shaking?”

“I don’t know. Am I?”

I’m shaking because I can still feel him inside of me. Because I never knew how far I would go to get what I want.

***

The go-getters and experienced Endings Operating Solutions Consumer-Fuckers (CFs) are intermingling with us, the meek and vernix-clad candidates. All the other candidates are here too. Maybe they have more than one job opening. Or maybe they’re pitting us against each other socially.

“What do you do?” CF3 asked Tracey.

“I’m a cocktail server.”
“Ah. Okay.”

“Oh, my,” says Tracey, “That painting is absolutely stunning.”

“Yes, that’s a Peter Richárd. We commissioned him to do twenty paintings for our headquarters. One of his sold for almost half a million,” CF3 says with smirk, as though this was somehow to her own credit.

“It’s amazing,” Tracey continues, “how that waterfall bleeds into the dead horse, and that scary face in the fog, how the heck did he blend that in so well? It almost isn’t there.”

“What? Oh, yes,” agrees CF3. “Richárd’s work is very subtly treacherous. Without ever being maudlin, of course.”

“Without being maudlin. Yes, yes definitely,” CF5 says.

“It’s so strange,” says Tracey, barely paying attention to them, “It almost makes me want to die. Like, not in a bad way. I’ve never felt that from a painting. Like death is a comforting blanket I just want to curl up with.”

“Oh, indeed? Very interesting take,” says CF3, hoisting her drink to indicate it needs refilling, and sidling away.

I’m not certain, but I believe I hear CF say to a crowd of other CFs, “If I were a cocktail waitress, I’d want to die too.”

I approach them. “Excuse me. Was that about Tracey? Please don’t speak of Tracey like that.”

“Excuse me? Who is Tracey?” says CF3.

“My girlfriend. You met her about thirty seconds ago.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t talking about anyone.” All the CFs in the circle are looking at me awkwardly and sadly, like I’ve just been chosen as the next pig for the slaughter.
“Jerome, I’m sure they weren’t talking about Tracey. It’s okay.” It’s Mr. Prent, behind me, and he’s put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I turn very slowly and face him. I feel a grumbling in my core, that feeling like you’re starving. Like I’m beginning to erupt. “Please don’t touch me,” I say. I don’t know how I thought I could go on with this, after what happened.

“Oh, that’s no problem. My apologies.”

“I took my anger out on the woman I love. My anger at what you did to me. You’ve turned me into a monster just like yourself.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me. What is it you think I did?”

“You’re very convincing. I see you’ve all got your method down perfectly.” I turn and face the crowd of CFs behind me. “Do all of you do this? Rape your candidate? I wish there was such a thing as a soul, so yours would all be damned.” They are all staring at me, silent and indifferent, barely even trying to feign surprise. One of them sips his champagne.

“Jerome, I don’t know what the problem here is, but I think you’d better leave.”

“I don’t want your fucking job,” I say.

“Good,” says Mr. Prent.

“It’s not business, it’s personal. Am I right?” I say, and then I can’t stop laughing while I go find Tracey so we can leave.

***

I get an email the next day from an address that is simply a jumble of numbers @encryptme.net. It says, “I don’t know how you thought you’d get away with this. You would
have had everything. Now you will have absolutely nothing. I will make sure of it. Your future no longer exists. You knew it was all or nothing. You have chosen nothing.”

I just go outside and start walking. After a few hours of walking I’m at the skating rink where a bunch of punks hang out. They’ve built a bonfire. Some of them are skating, some drinking, all smoking.

I sit down on one of the benches among them.

“The fuck are you?”

“Jerry.”

“Hi, Jerry. I’m Shitface. The fuck are you doing here?”

“You keep talking like that, then I’m here to kill you.”

Perhaps because of how I say it, they leave me alone and I just watch them.

These aren’t kids. Most seem to be in their thirties or older. They’ve given up on life, they care only about having temporary fun, and I’d bet a lot of them plan to kill themselves once the drugs and drinking turn them into an immobile sack of bones in old age, if the lifestyle hasn’t already killed them.

Suicide is an option for me. Just jump ship. I have reached a point where I can’t live without something I don’t even really want. Or there’s also metaphorical suicide, becoming one of these wastes around me.

Eventually I ask them for a puff from a spliff.

“Ah, Jerry speaks. What makes you entitled to our merry-hwanna?”

“Just asking.”

The guy starts to swing at me but I catch his hand, but then his other hand lands on my stomach. I start coughing and collapse to the ground.
“Fuck it, dude. Give him a toke. Not worth the trouble.”

They let me smoke. Then we talk and smoke some more, and at some point they let me snort some ground-up ecstasy.

I told Tracey I wouldn’t drink. I’m not drinking.

“So what the fuck are you doing here anyway, for real?” one of them asks me.

I leave without saying anything and walk up to the top of the bridge overhanging nearby.

What am I doing here, anyway? A minstrel’s dance in a bubonic court. It’s all gorgeous, this ground someone cared enough to build for me to walk on, this shirt, my lungs breathing dewed air. I see every speck of concrete in this bridge. I see every molecule of water below me, every drift of current.

I don’t mind leaving it. I’ve enjoyed it.

I wake up soaked on the rocks of the river’s edge. My vision is like a blinding bright cloud and I can’t think for the pain filling my head. My phone, still working, shows twenty-three text messages and ten missed calls.

A voicemail from Tracey says “Listen, Jerry, my brother died. It was a motorcycle accident. He just… I don’t know. Fuck. I don’t know what happened, I don’t care, I won’t be mad at you for what’s happened between us. I just need you right now.”

I come home to her. I’ve told you about what she does, what she looks like. That’s because I’m vain and sexist. I haven’t told you about who she is, how she thinks.

It’s brilliant. She knows what really matters. That’s all I can say about it, because I don’t know what really matters. When I learn it from her, I’ll tell you.

We’re drinking out back. She insisted that I drink too, she wants someone to drink with.

She said she trusts me not to act horrible again. She said that.
“I.” The thought was too terrible to finish, so I didn’t.

“What? Tell me.”

“I’m worried that he killed your brother.”

“Who?”

“This guy at Endings. The guy who interviewed me. You met him briefly.”

I see a figure in the woods. I run inside and retrieve my Marlin 336 and go back outside and start firing at it. A flutter of once-sleeping ducks flies away. The figure is gone, could have been a deer or a pelican.

Tracey doesn’t seem bothered.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I saw something out there.”

“No, what happened at the interview.”

I sit down and lean the rifle on our storage shed. “Well. He drugged me. I think they drugged all of us. They gave us Gatorade and then I got woozy. He did what he wanted. He had his way with me.”

“Jesus Christ. Why?”

“I don’t know. Some test of submission. Some enforced genuflection. Some sick joke. Some test of character,” I say, and start laughing maniacally.

“What the fuck is funny?”

I run out of breath to laugh and whistle a quick one. “Nothing. Nothing is funny. Nothing at all is funny. Nothing will be funny for a while yet.”

“Why would he kill my brother too?”
“Because of what happened the night of the party. I got an anonymous email—they’re doing everything they can to make my life hell now. To ruin me. Or at least he is.”

“Are you sure?”

“Tracey. Why would I make this up?”

“You talk a lot about an Eternal Parasite. I’m just not always sure you don’t worry too much. About things that aren’t really there.”

“Holy shit. Tracey. If I lied about something like that, I would have to be full-on insane. Honestly, that hurts that you could think it.”

She immediately turns serious. “Okay. I’m sorry, you’re right. What are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna kill him.”

“You should do what you have to do. I can tell you, you’re not the person you were before that interview. I want you back.”

I am amazed she doesn’t try to convince me out of it. Maybe it’s happened to her too. Maybe that’s why she got serious all of a sudden. Hell, it’s happened to any woman I’ve asked about it. Maybe killing him will be some kind of indirect justice for her. Perhaps too she is more saintly than I am for dealing with the consequences when nothing can be done, and perhaps in my situation also nothing can be done. I will find out.

It’s possible that I am too much of a man. Not in a good way, in the worst way. That I can’t let something go. Where does the cycle of violence end? It doesn’t, it’s a cycle. This will not be a cycle, it’ll be a one way train and in the last caboose I’ll find that everything’s taken care of. News of the death of my Eternal Parasite will cover Page One, and I’ll read it and toast. It won’t be Eternal, of course, any more, it’ll be Former.
“Do you really think he killed my brother?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem likely. But I imagine he is capable of anything.”

***

I haven’t mentioned yet that my dad beat me with his elbows and knees every Friday, his mom-designated allowable drinking night. He would just do it, then lean in to bloody-old-me, gently clutch my nape, and say “You’ll understand why one day.”

I do my research as quickly as possible, since I know time is not on my side. I find that the least traceable poison is Polonium, and I happen to know a nuclear engineer whom I trust with my life. I still have some tricks up my sleeve—those sixteen years of unnatural and excessive human power didn’t mean nothing. And I’ve still got a decent amount of money from that job too.

When I finally manage to find a way online to break through the fairly sophisticated security system Prent has on his house, I take another two days to make sure I’ve covered every aspect that could go wrong.

Through my research I found he has no family. I wish he did. It is very rare that someone gets a real view of the Worst Kind of Person and has a chance to really hurt them. When I get there at a time that I know he’s at work, wearing a balaclava, it’s not hard to get inside. All this stuff’s online, breaking in to any type of house, tips to remain unnoticed, etcetera. I put the polonium in the one place I know he will utilize: his coffee machine. Throughout the entire interview he was never farther than five feet from a mug of coffee.
I am sick over the next two weeks with terrible flu-like symptoms, plus vomiting and diarrhea. From what I read, this is because Polonium is very difficult to carry and dispense without tiny remnants attaching to you as well. But I recover.

I visit Prent at the hospital after another week. He doesn’t see me as I peer in through the square glass window, since he’s too caught up in dying. He has no hair and his glasses are off, he’s asleep. He is shrunken, massively wrinkled, thin, a pale wafer of his former self.

Is that enough? Is it too much?

I still don’t understand why he used his elbows and his knees.

***

“Killing is easy. It’s living that’s hard,” I say, and laugh into the wind as we coast along the bayou in our party pontoon.

“The fuck does that mean?” asks Jessica.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Tracey gives me a scolding glance and sips her PBR.

“And listen, Jessica. I never properly apologized for how I acted that night a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, it’s okay. You did apologize.”

“Not properly.”

“Well okay. Whatever that means.”

“I am truly, truly sorry. I want to take us all on a cruise to the Mediterranean. I still have a good bit of money leftover from my past job. I want us to all just have a fun time.”
“Are you serious? What the fuck?”

“You always mention how you’d like to see Europe.”

“That’s wonderful, honey,” says Tracey.

I’m still using Money Power to get what I want, to proffer an apology. Or maybe I’m really doing what I say in my head, giving up a bunch of my leftover money and living how a person should, among those who know you. Really know you.

Say what you will about me, I got something done.

Don’t say what you will about Tracey. I know her, I’ll say it.

She’s my infinite teacher, my softest blanket, my strongest house. I need no credentials to prove my worth to her, but I’ll spend the rest of my life building them. I will not allow anything bad to happen to her, if I have anything to say about it—which I do. I’ll get a job soon enough, some greasy job that, try as it might, will never break me down. I’ll play my role. I’ll learn to cook better and get up before her and surprise her. I’ll tiptoe around her like a divine rabbit and give her the kind of family that makes you forget death.

Our pontoon is consuming the water beneath us steadily. I realize I am basically saying a prayer for the future in my head. I don’t have a problem with this. I mean all of it and I need no other but her to provide lifelong verification.

Since I killed Prent the voice at night is gone. I haven’t told Tracey yet because I don’t want to jinx it.

I am still entrapped in rat-race ethics and I know it. I can feel it inside me. I will chip away at it with time. I will try to learn from her. “Say, teach me something about that Wicca, Tracey?”
“Come here,” she says, and pulls me to her, wrapping my arms around her from behind, the engine humming underneath us. She points to the wall of cypress to the northeast, then points to a kettle of hawks circling above, and then to the water below. “All of this earth is our playground. Everyone’s playground. Everything is set in direct opposition, which simultaneously means that everything is together all the time. Inseparable.”

“Okay. What if there’s a bully on the playground?”

“The Wiccan Rede says *An it harm none, do what ye will.*”

She smiles and I smile back. Jessica turns the direction of the boat slowly and Tracey blends with the sun and I can’t tell the difference.
Lessons From Lawncare: a Fever Dream

You started in this job because it paid better than minimum wage and it wasn’t McDonald’s. You have a bachelor’s degree with a bad GPA from a shitty college, which is the same as dropping out of high school fifty years ago. Older folks say that’s not true. They say look at the 70s, we had it bad. You say look at the Great Depression. We’re almost there.

So you work in ‘Landscaping.’ This is a fancy word for a job that mostly involves bodily fluids, machines, plant sperm and submission.

You blast engines and leaf blowers and nobody looks at you. You enter strangers’ backyards, palisades and pools like a spy in your own city. You travel to towns whose only draw seems to be meth-jacked whores and wholesale squirrel salesman. You find yourself pointing out every woman to the guy working next to you, and you never thought you’d be like that. You suddenly see the women everywhere that you can’t have, which is all of them.

Even the poor in this country guard their manicured property with their shotgun like they built nature itself. The machines slowly kill your hearing and there’s nothing you can do about it, earplugs only block out so much. Nobody wears earplugs anyway. You brag and talk shit about each other. You’ve seen things in this job that you didn’t know were possible. You’re still not sure they really are.

You’re in another world, you’re a different person. Or maybe you’re finally the person you were becoming all these years. You can’t tell the difference.

You imagine other guys in landscaping who have degrees or certifications and come to an office with a good boss and free coffee every morning, consultants at Lowe’s or something, jobs
you’ve never even seen posted. Real Lawn Artists. There’s probably a good version of every job. You’ve never had one.

Now you work the Debaucher Plantation’s Garden Beautification Team, which might actually sound pleasant if you didn’t know what was involved.

You’ve got no problem with an honest job. They’re usually the best kind. But this one is filled with adrenaline and testosterone boiling hotter everyday without spilling. Every day feels like you’re all heading into some kind of hell.

Abel Debaucher has had this plantation in his family for five generations. There’s the main house, six outer buildings for guests, each with its own pool, two buildings for servants, and a strip of highway they own that’s a good twenty miles, at the end of which is a line of twenty small apartments managed by Abel Debaucher’s wife Andrea. You often see her enter the apartments at strange times, but none of you knows why. You have your guesses. The plantation is no longer producing anything. Abel makes his gratuitous fortune other ways now. But there’s still plenty of ground to tend.

It’s you and three other guys on the team: Winston, Carl and Armine. You’ve been told that Pedro, the guy whose job you have now, switched to another landscaping company for better pay so Abel called Immigration and Customs Enforcement and got him sent home.

Two Birds Fly Away; Lesson One: not everything will eventually make sense.

One time in the backyard of a guest house on the property, two hilariously tall birds were standing on the other side of the pool from you, flitting their giant wings around one another, but not touching, as if each was shaping the other into a ball of clay. You forgot your work and
started filming the birds with your phone, and as you crept closer you looked back and saw through the window Abel’s mother clutching her grandson by the waist, pointing at the birds too. She was in town for the weekend. At first you thought you’d be fired over this but the grandma smiled and waved and you felt reassured.

The male bird cocked its head at you and started pointing to the other one. It cooed in a way that sounded like words. You swear it said you believe this action I’m getting? You weren’t high. Sometimes on the job you smoke up with the other guys, but not that day.

The male clutched the ladybird’s wing into his own, put his other wing on her waist, and they started a slow dance like two awkward teenagers at a junior prom, but they quickly got the hang of it. The male dipped his partner down and swung her back up, spinning and gracefully avoiding the pool.

When you looked at the grandma she had this thousand-yard stare, like she’d seen a ghost, and her grandkid was cheering and clapping. The birds flew off, wing in wing.

**You Get Sick; Lesson Two: sanitation matters.**

The dream/story/truth starts when you and Armine have to clear all the Poison Ivy and Stinging Nettle out from the side walkway of an apartment, between the building and the wooden fence. The vines are draped across the pathway, hung and spread everywhere like the webbing of a mutated spider. If you cut a vine, some is always left over stuck between planks or clutching the other side of the fence, so you have to pull them with gloved hands to get rid of all of it. Every time you pull, the vines drag along brick or wood and recoil into your face, your wrists, and let loose huge clouds of plant dust that enters your lungs. When you go into the backyard to
start stashing the removed vines all into one pile, you sink into a quicksand of fecal matter caused by a broken septic tank.

Even after showering that night, by the next morning all the skin on your limbs is red, raised, itchy, painful, seeping, and you’re choking instead of breathing. Your eyes are swollen and crusty. Your nose is totally plugged up one minute and flowing freely the next.

Your boss Abel hears that you’re sick and visits you personally in the lawn staff’s quarters on the edge of the estate at 6am. You sit slumped at the shared kitchen table, choking down coffee.

Abel is a lean, tall man, with an orderly white cloud of hair brushed back over his head, a strong, cartoonishly round nose and a look on his face that always knows everything.

“Son,” he says. “I used to work too. I know what it’s like. This is part of the pride of landscaping. Men throughout history have had tough jobs and you are built to handle it. You are men. You have a job to do, and you don’t let these things keep you from it. Of course, it’s up to you if you want to forgo your pay for the day. But I suggest, for your soul, that you man-up and work.”

Abel underpays the Hondurans, never gives them raises, and when one of them is injured, like when Armine lost a finger to the mower blade and got the gnarled thing reattached, Abel gets the prescription for them since they don’t have papers. He decides how often to dole it out, and it’s always much less than prescribed. He says he is protecting them from their own drug abuse. He turned to you when he first said this and confided, “Sometimes they’re like dogs, you know. They pretend they don’t understand you, so you need to be harsh. Make sure they know you know they understand.”
You Have a Bad Boss; Lesson Three: life is about control.

Today the Debaucher family is having a pool party. You’re still sick, swollen, working from behind a cloud of mucus. Your battle is to stop yourself from looking at the barely clad women, some of them human-silicone hybrids, and the men whose faces are permanently chiseled with superiority. Sometimes in this job a client is afraid of you, or afraid of how to talk to you. In their world, there are no problems, there are only new reasons to spend money. Right now the only thing any of these ungodly rich people are afraid of is looking at you and being reminded of a world that isn’t theirs. The little kids running around, play-fighting, crying, stealing toys, they are the only semblance of nature at this pool party. Some of them aren’t afraid of you yet.

One woman has this rainbow sarong on and a bikini that holds up her tits like each is a chalice of god’s promise.

As a kid you imagined that you were just another Person, like the People you read about in comics or saw on the news, with all the opportunities a Person has. The women lounging by the pool or clutching their cocktails and making smart jokes are a living reminder of the impossible. Hell, any woman who’s too good to look at you, which is all of them. You still don’t hoot at women from the truck like the other guys. But you see by now that they are desperate men howling at lost futures. They’re also assholes, but so are you.

You just can’t help it: you start to emit sounds like a cow coughing up cud. There’s something serious in your throat. Finally you achieve a sort of victorious hack like you’re ejecting your guts, but nothing comes out, and now your throat feels scraped raw. Most of the
eminent partygoers are looking at you with disgust. You wave and mouth ‘sorry.’ At least the thing seems to be gone from your throat.

Abel is meeting with two other businessmen at a table on a veranda, away from the rest of the party. All three of them are in suits, holding drinks. He gestures at Winston to come over. He says something and Winston grabs the weedeater and brings it over.

You move slowly closer, head hunched, pruning the garden and pretending not to listen. Abel tells Winston to rev the weedeater with its cord spinning next to the face of one of the men. Winston doesn’t do it. Abel tells him that he will lose his job if he does not. So Winston does.

The businessman victim is leaning back with a strained face, and Winston is terrified. Abel gestures to stop.

“You see now, boys, how much power I hold. I myself have done nothing to you. My friend here, in a rage, came and lunged at you with a weed whacker. Our lawyers would eventually agree on that, if it came to that. But it won’t. You won’t hold this against poor Winston, right? He’s not from here, he doesn’t know how we do things. Can I count on you agreeing to my deal, at this juncture?"

They are both aggressively nodding in agreement, and the threatened one, balding and gaunt, sips his mint julep with a shaky hand.


You see Winston slink back to the garden to work, but he doesn’t appear too upset by what happened. He takes Abel’s abuse as if he’s just finished a day at the DMV.

There’s another woman with this beautiful sweater that somehow drapes but also reveals her body. It looks like it was made specifically for her. It’s probably designed by experts and costs as much as a cheap car but is designed to look thrown on.
When you see women you feel like a wolf scoping out prey. You don’t think it’s right but you also know it’s not wrong. Instincts exist for a reason. The urges to fuck and to fight may not be noble in civilization but they’re the reason civilization exists. These are thoughts you have formulated while working lawncare.

Lawncare is easier when you have a woman to go home to. The only problem is that when you go home, there’s a woman there.

Plus, just try to tell a woman that you live in servant’s quarters and get her to come back home with you.

**Weird Day With Winston; Lesson Four: You’re not in control.**

You pull up to the apartments at 7:15am. The sweating starts the moment you step from the truck. Thirty seconds ago you were clean, full of food, buzzed on nicotine. Now, in your work-issued navy blue collared shirt and cargo pants, you’re a hot air balloon inflated with acid gas, and your sickness flares up. Your phone says it’s already 87 real temperature and 94 with humidity. You grab the weedeater because Winston is Honduran and they always prefer to mow.

First thing at your job every morning two assholes greet you. The first, the sun, rubs his hot, sweaty, gravelly belly on your face, its pungent warmth seeps into your ears and around the lenses of your sport sunglasses to enter you through your eyes. As soon as you breathe in the putrid wave of sunshit for long enough, so that you start to reacclimatize like a garbage man learns to breathe feces, you meet the next asshole. This one you reluctantly bring upon yourself—you pull the cord of the weedeater and it starts asking you fucking questions, but it screams them at you.
Hey there. Hey buddy. Time to do what you do best: eat shit, it coughs, beginning to awake.

Fuck you, you say. But you still have to bring it to life. You pull the cord again.

Hey… hey there. Remember when you were a kid and you said you’d really do something with your life? A new plan every month, astronaut, policeman, and you knew all these things were ahead of you. They were. They were ahead of you. They still are, far far ahead. Always will be. How did shit-shovelling fall into your plans?

You reassure yourself by remembering something you learned in philosophy 101, pretty much the only thing you remember from college: free will is an illusion. Everything in your life has led to who you are and each decision is preempted by the billions before it. It’s so simple and yet you had never thought about it. This job is just an admission of that: nothing makes any difference, and everyone is under someone else’s control.

That’s all you’ve got, every day. It doesn’t help. The weedeater doesn’t shut up and your only recourse is to start smashing its face against plant matter and ground. There’s a garden bed stretching the length of the apartments unmulched, so you can take the weedeater straight to the weeds in the bed of dirt surrounding the bushes and plants, no call for crouching and straining to hand-pull weeds. You press the priming bulb for the engine and switch to a cold start to get the stubborn fuck going, in the end it takes maybe ten pulls, and then you wake all the tenants up. You run the whirring disc of orange cord over goosegrass, dollarweed, dandelion, spurge and thistle, chewing them up. Their roots survive underneath the dirt but you can’t see them so it’s good enough. Even if you broke your back and pulled them all up by their subterranean brains, they’d be waiting for you next week.
Your last girlfriend had everything a guy could want. She cooked for you because she loved doing it, she did the dishes and cleaned up the place because she “swore she was OCD” and sometimes you were too lazy to do it. She had a chest you could see from space. Some days she would curl into a fetal position and ask morosely what the point of life is if it’s all going to be flooded soon. She would describe the glacier that she dreamed about most nights, obese and careless and sweating ice, moving monolithically slow toward human cities, the threat not in its coming but in its degeneration into all-consuming water. You held her and reassured: how did we come this far? We changed, we evolved. We’ll do it again, we’re already doing it. We’ll innovate and figure it out. It’s what we do.

But soon the voice in your head reminded you that you would have to choose. Three and a half billion females, maybe half of them single, another third of them within a viable age-range, another two-thirds of them straight, which leaves four-hundred-thousand women in the world, and you have to choose. Not to mention that you have to convince each one you meet you’re worth something before they’ll give you the time of day. Deciding to marry someone is like deciding on a movie to watch for the rest of your life. You better choose the right fucking movie. It’s a thirty-year decision most people make in two years. But who are you kidding: it’s not a real decision. It’s all based on who you happen to bump into, and who’s willing to talk to you.

Nothing in life is guaranteed except that weeds will grow back. Winston calls them the yerbas malas, Spanish for bad herbs. He has three fingers on his right hand and whenever he changes shirts you see a webbing of scars along his chest. When you finally asked him one day what happened, he said that back in Honduras his wife constantly hounded him about cheating
on her, but he swore to you he never did. Finally she was so outraged that she took their child away and burned their house down and he was caught in the fire.

You edge the front yard and top off where the edges need topping and you move to the backyard, open the small wooden gate into the dedicated back patio of one of the apartments.

You fall into a rhythm. You are one of tens of thousands of people who fight a never-ending battle against natural matter that intends to keep growing until the final dissolution of the earth itself. Your muscle memory keeps your movements extremely precise, when you top the St. Augustine, you float the cord two-thirds of the way up the grass’s length and it’s virtuosic how accurate you are, though bystanders would never know it.

A huge black lab erupts from inside the apartment. The dog is charging and barking angrily and you swing the weedeater towards him, you have no choice. You rev the engine to keep the dog at bay, and then the dog just stops and grins at you. It’s a bigger, more self-assured grin than you’ve ever seen on a human. He says to you: what a pathetic creature, three times my size and fifty times my brains and quivering in fear from a little barking. You let go of the trigger but the lab launches at you again and the idly spinning weedeater cord nicks him in the eye. The lab curls back into itself and blinks madly. When the dog does struggle to open the eye it’s blood red. The thing is whimpering. The owner runs out and yells “No! No!” and the dog slinks away back into the house.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, it caught me off guard,” you say.

“Shit, sorry about that man, didn’t hear y’all out here, I was listening to music.”

He’s still got his earbuds in, shirtless and holding an iPad.

“Whoa. Sorry. Caught me off guard.”
You wonder if he knows that you might have blinded his dog. If you should tell him, if you wait and hope to fuck that he doesn’t notice his dog bumping into walls.

It was not your fault. You’ve seen a dog ready to bite, and this one was. Still you sit on a stone garden wall to recover from this dog attack, catching your breath. But you can’t catch it—you cough, and then cough harder but it only makes it worse, pushes the snarl deeper in your throat—you take as deep a breath as you can in this condition, and open wide like you’re vomiting and force a titanic cough and something ejects from your throat. In the mucus you’ve just planted in the garden you see something struggling. It starts to clean itself off. It’s a giant black locust-like insect, and when it’s done cleaning it spreads its arms and shows a pristine pink and veined underwing.

You are terrified. You pull out your phone and look up what this thing was and it turns out it’s a Horse Lubber. You Google medical condition horse lubber in throat and then you put your phone away and sigh because you’re an idiot.

The bug crouches down and hisses at you. It then tilts its head back and a frothy goop seeps out of its chest. A horrible stench surrounds you and you snap back into life.

An hour later you and Winston finish up the apartments and drive over to the main property.

“Cigaro, amigo?” You offer a cigarette to Winston.

“Yea, thank you man,” he accepts.

“Porque no fuman los otros Hondureños?”

Winston is the only Honduran who smokes, and he only smokes when you offer them. You thought maybe it was because they’re saving up money to send back to their families, but they spend money on beer and some of them on prostitutes.
“Amigo, vistes tu la mamacita negra allí?” you say.

“Yea, man. Clean pussy.”

You pull up at the far front of the main property to a garden length which buffers the estate from a two-lane highway with a shopping center on the other side. The two of you unload the mower.

A woman in her twenties walks past holding her boyfriend’s hand. He’s tall, thin, blond-haired, wearing a simple v-neck and friendly lightwash jeans and coke bottle glasses. She’s short, thin, with amarillo hair. You look over to see if Winston sees her, and he gives a nod before rolling the mower over to his first block of grass. Their looks change when they see you. They are not too dangerously close for you to begin weedeating. You return their gaze, look down, pull the cord and the machine coughs, growls, you pull it again and it roars, and the girlfriend looks at you like she doesn’t know what to say. You rev the engine and hit the string cap to the ground to eject more string and it whirs and ratchets against the metal string guard until the tips of cord are cut and they shoot into the air just past, you imagine, the face of the girlfriend, and you’re ready to edge. You hate to admit it—hell, you don’t hate to admit it—but now, just like every time some young thing glimpses you working, you fancy yourself a Ryan Gosling-esque egalitarian feminist philosopher who’s not afraid to do dirty work, a diamond born in the rough of blue collar, and women bite their lips pretending all that dirt and sweat isn’t revving them up. You rev the engine, and then you rev it again. You need to keep pulling or these machines will give up on you in an instant, plus the girlfriend is still looking at you. The boyfriend looks down instinctively, sheepishly, and then looks forward. As they keep walking you roar the weedeater one final time that splits the air and you flip the shaft to cut vertically and sink the spinning string between concrete and grass-edge.
It feels like a victory. It’s not. Tonight that nerdy man will be watching Netflix over Chinese food with his girlfriend. They’ll be sitting there respecting each other, and then he’ll fuck her while you’re still working for your master or asleep in his staff house, dreaming about him. You can’t even control your dreams, and he’s in all of them.

**Lawncare Surgery; Lesson 5: Life is painful.**

Salty sweat burns the dry red skin of your eyelids. You lick your lips and taste a mix of sun lotion, sweat and crust.

You finish with the weedeater, shut it down and start pulling weeds in the property’s outer garden ring. Soon after that Winston finishes mowing and goes to grab the hedger. This little coy mechanical hound dog will not start without a good beating first. Winston will have to grasp the head with a full palm to stop it from moving, pull the cord harnessed to its brain as hard as possible, and before it dies he’ll have to press the safety and pull the trigger to get the sawteeth moving. Once it’s moving, though, once he’s made it obey, it will stay on without revving and will gnash its teeth at Winston’s will.

You gather the tendrils of a spurge together and pull it up by the root. You can make one weed do exactly what you want, one at a time, but there is no convincing them as a group. You can never negotiate a treaty with them to stay where you want them. The gardens of the wealthiest, most demandingly aesthetic one-percenters are not immune from weeds. They just have enough money to keep throwing armies of men at the problem so they never have to see it.

Winston is hedging this Velvet Cloak Smoke Bush a few feet over from you. These men you work with swing the machines around like they’re playing with Nerf bats. The engine fills
your ear like the screams of a village of innocents getting razed. You pull a dandelion by its crotch.

Winston swings his sawtooth blade carelessly in your direction and grinds it into the bone of your right cheek. Before you pass out you think did I do something to offend him?

When you wake up an elderly man is cradling your head by the nape. It’s Abel Debaucher himself. You’ve screamed yourself awake, and Abel has a massive needle halfway through the flesh of your cheek with bright orange weedeater cord fed through the eye.

“There, there, son. You’ll get a coke after this, just shutup and stay still.”

“Mr. Debaucher. My cheek is fucking split.”

“Son, I’m a veteran. You know what that means? I’m a veteran. Quiet yourself down. Moving will make it hurt worse.”

You do your best. You are, after all, in the employ of this man. You do what these people ask and in return you will get a paycheck.

After the next two run-throughs of the needle you can only lie inert and silent, perhaps in shock, and you can see your pain standing in front of you, laughing and immune to mercy. He’s wearing a five gallon funeral hat and a shit-colored duster. You want to kick him in the balls or hedge his balls right off but you can’t. He’s prodding at your exposed and raw nerve endings. Pain is a necessary and frequent part of life. So are people like Abel, and so was your asshole father. Together they form a trinity of the unchangeable.

Abel takes a cattle brand shaped into the letter D out of the nearby fireplace and uses one edge of it to burn the wound shut. It melts the weedeater cord so that all of his stitching is undone and you see that all the plastic cording was just a placeholder to hold the skin while allowing the brand to seal the wound shut. You hold up a mirror and the wound is a lumpy mass
of orangey flesh, smoothed out except where the bone splits into a canyon, bone which Abel
couldn’t repair with mere weedeater cord.

“Alright, son. Sit, and let me go get that coke.”

“Hey, mayn,” says Winston. “I got a pictures of it on my phone. Look at you face mayn.”

He holds up his smartphone and you see a picture of your cheek before it was stitched,
when it looked like the pulp of shredded fleshy baseball stitching hanging from your face.

Abel Debaucher walks out of the house onto the porch holding two sodas.

“All I’ve got is Diet Dr. Thunder. I’m sorry.”

“Es bien.”

“Fuck me. You got anything else at all?”

“Son, watch your language, my children are right inside. It’s generous of me to offer this
at all. Now, y’all two go ahead and finish my lawn so you can get on with your work and I can
return to my files.”

“Alright. Thanks for mending me up, Mr. Debaucher.”

“Alrighty then, boy. You be good, now.”

The small pleasures in life, like a Coke instead of a Diet Dr. Thunder, are sometimes all
that moves you along. You are without even those.

A Tiff With Carl; Lesson 5: Shit runs downhill.

Today you and Carl are assigned to do The Stretch.

The way it works is a two man team mows the entire median of the highway stretching
twenty miles out from their house, with two zero-turn mowers, one guy on each side of the steel
barrier at the center of the grassy median, and you have to line up perfectly or else on your return trip you’ll miss a piece of grass and Abel will absolutely make you go back and get it. You go towards the house inside-first, and on the way back you do the outside, and you use one hand to drive the zero-turn and the other to blow the leftover grass back onto the median. Since you yourself are on the median, you have to sort of take an above-and-to-the-outside angle to get most of the grass back up there.

Afterwards, every week, Abel Debaucher drives his golf cart down the whole highway, each side, checking to see how well you cleaned up the grass.

You and Carl make sure the zero-turn mowers are prepped, and you have your three ten-gallon gas tanks each stored in the makeshift carrying basket lashed to the back of the mowers. This will last you the whole trip.

After a few hours of mowing the highway towards the house, Carl looks at you from his side of the barrier and says “Break?”

“Yeah, man.”

The two of you are sitting on the noses of your mowers, smoking your cigarettes.

“Man you know,” he say, “I’ve been doing this seventeen years next June. You know what the key to really doing a property real well is?”

“What’s that?”

“Blowing the property down at the end. Whatever else you might do wrong or whatever, that shit can make it look right.”

“So you’re saying a good blowjob can solve anything?”

His bright white teeth flash from his dark black bearded face, his round wire-rimmed glasses reflect the sun’s glare, and he laughs like he’s vomiting gravel. You see that he is Father
Humor himself, ground through the mill of suffering to come out grinning. He is telling you with his eyes that laughing is the best tool to help you forget pain.

Carl is an unceasingly funny guy. This in spite of his dad dying when he was fourteen and leaving him to take care of his family, with his handicapped diabetic mother and three siblings. He told you that one time he was on a front porch with five of his best friends and his girlfriend and some guys came by shooting, and he was the only one who survived by playing dead. He quit dealing drugs after that, but didn’t quit doing them.

You pull out the food ordered from a gas station back at the shopping center and start eating. He grabs a French fry from your to-go container.

“The fuck? It’s twenty-five cents per fry, asshole.”

“Damn, this boy’s got some balls.”

“You got some balls taking my fry.”

He unleashes his laughter again. He snatches another fry.

“Come on,” you say, moving to sit a little farther away from him.

“Say, you real emotional about your fries. Watch I get my ass beat by a skinny motherfucker like you. Fuck around and get my hood pass revoked. Look like you already got taken care of pretty good by Winston with that hedger. I heard about that shit. What you do to earn that, anyway?”

“You should see the other guy,” you say. You stand up and go to grab the leaf blower from your zero-turn mower.

“Oooh. Not fucking around, are you?”

You can still barely see from your swollen, itchy eyes, and breathing is still a chore. You pull the cord until it revs on and you hoist it up, wrapping the straps around your shoulders.
There’s no one else around to blame right now but him. You might as well take it out on somebody.

“I know you don’t think you’re gonna really do that.”

You blow at him. He tumbles off the back of the mower, and his fried chicken rolls into the already shorn grass. Still on the ground he tries to swing his steel-toed foot at you. “Now the shit’s serious,” he yells over the noise.

You blow some more at him. You’re hurting this man, your sometime-friend, and you’re not sure exactly why. It isn’t about the French fries. The leaf blower’s blast in your ears is like an ogre of industry barking orders you follow without reason.

You roll him along through the traffic of cars unharmed and now he’s on the other side, the edge of the highway. You walk across and keep blowing.

For a moment you stop to give him a breather.

He stands and wipes off his shirt with his hands. “Hey B, let me tell you something. You ever find me sitting next to you in that truck again, you ever find me hedging just down a bush from you, you watch out for yourself. Ya heard?”

You smile and nod. You realize that it’s not just happening robotically: somewhere between him taking your French fries and you grabbing the blower, a deep anger emerged. You pull the trigger again and he throws out his arms as he is lifted and thrown backwards down the massive hill leading up to the highway. You watch him roll for what is probably at least a quarter mile until his right leg snaps and reverses itself at the knee. You can only hear him laughing at the bottom of the highway-side hill.

The highway stretch is up to you now, but you earned it by sending Carl down a hill. You line the mowers up perfectly abreast and arrange yourself to use your right arm and right foot to
steer the one, and left hand and left foot to steer the other. If you mess it up at all it will split you right down the center. You heard firsthand that this happened to Raul, another guy who used to work here, he was torn literally from the center of the tip of his penis to the center of his head.

With such high risk mowing you choose to speed it up and make it end sooner. And no one is here to report you for it. You run the mowers way faster than anyone is supposed to, but you aim them flawlessly and arrive at the Debaucher’s plantation in record time.

You jump off the mowers like they’re on fire and lay flat on the ground, wheezing and swallowing rivers of mucus. The labor has re-swollen your arms still covered in thick, multi-layered rash and you feel it on your legs underneath your pants. Either Abel and this job is turning you into a terrible person or you’ll get out of this somehow. You’ll have a story to tell your grandkids. But you’re not the type of person to ever have grandkids, at least not ones you’ll know about and spend time with.

A Little Payment For a Lot of Debt; Lesson 6: you’re a bad person too.

A couple days later you and Armine are tending the gardens around the servants’ quarters. He was abandoned by his parents as a kid and left to live on alcohol with the local homeless. When civil war broke out the army came and scooped him up and trained him to be on a death squad, executing hundreds of people. He told you once about a priest he made to kneel and shot in the head and Winston said “Porque mataste al padre?” and he said “For wan-handerd dollars ah-ha-ha.” He barked out laughter from his chest and affirmed something with “ah-hah,” his thick moustache perched over his big open mouth.
But just because he won’t apologize doesn’t make him evil. He’s always saying how all that killing stuff fucked him up. He has been here more than twenty years now and his two sons live across the country and no longer speak to him because “I treated them like the same way I was treated, I don’t blame them.”

You two are doing Dogshit Duty, scooping up the hundreds of piles, and the three dogs in progressively smaller sizes are constantly biting your ankles as if removing their feces is an affront. If Abel sees you kicking them off he’ll yell and dock your pay, so you sneak kicks in when you can.

You are nearing the edge of the possibility that your life will go well. It can turn on a dime, and suddenly your life is a wreck, you owe child support for eighteen years, you’re paralyzed or killed by an oncoming truck, you’re arrested for something you did or didn’t do and you’re in jail for life. You veer six inches too far to the right in the truck or drive a little too fast and kill some kid that ran into the street and you get manslaughter. You wonder why you do this job but then you wonder what else you would do.

In a fifteen-minute break time in the shared kitchen of your servant house you all decide that it’s time to take action. None of you knows exactly what this means but you all seem to wordlessly agree that it will become clear when it happens.

The Debauchers are all inside the main house, and you all head there to do your duties.

“They’re all home,” you say to the others.

“Alright, son,” says Carl. He still hasn’t avenged himself upon you, yet. He limps everywhere now.

When Abel brought him to the hospital, they gave him the option of surgery so that Carl would heal back to relatively normal, or to just rearrange all his leg muscles and bones back into
place, which would leave him with pain for the rest of his life. Abel asked how much they cost, and decided on the latter.

Carl continues, “We got to check it out. You go and see, I’ll start the mowing and Armine gon’ weed-eat.”

“Okay.”

You try to sneak from tree to bush so that they will not see you. When you arrive at the massive picture window you can clearly see everything. The whole family is there. They are watching House of Cards. Abel Debaucher is in the middle, his wife Andrea, and his three kids, the daughter who is rumored to be borne of an affair Abel had with Paris Hilton, and his two sons wearing identical clothing but in different pastel colors: flat-front chino shorts, Sperry boat shoes, polo shirts with the collars popped, and hair done up like JFK. All of the kids are in their twenties, but they look like perfect, grown toddlers. The Debauchers treat them that way too.

Whatever happens today, your goal has now become clear to you. This is a family stuck two centuries ago, a family of children, from the Patriarch down to the youngest son. It’s not as easy as it used to be to own people. You’re here to remind them.

You go back and find Carl.

“What’s the word son?”

“They’re all in there. Watching TV.”

“We’ll have to see how we do this.”

You grab another mower. You mow from the outside of the property inward, slowly getting closer to the house. When you look up, Armine is standing at the window, staring in, with his shirt lifted halfway, scratching his belly. You can tell from where you stand that Abel is
trying to ignore Armine like nothing’s happening, but his kids are having more trouble doing this. They are looking up nervously every so often.

When you all have crept closer to the house Carl whistles over the engines. You look up to see him limping toward the lawn, covered in the earthshit he’s gathered today. He doesn’t even look at you as he passes. You don’t flinch. It appears that comeuppances are coming today for everyone, so you fully expect today to be your end. Maybe you’ll get lucky and he’ll take it all out on the Debauchers.

“Gimme that fuckin’ weedeater,” he says to Armine. He starts to edge some of the garden beds, of which there are over an acre. Someone needs to break the barrier between you and the Debauchers. It’s been built and reinforced for years. But it looks like Carl will be the man to do it.

Everyone follows him around, observing closely, like he’s playing croquet. You lean down to get a better angle, and then you see it—the rock, the lucky rock. It’s right at the garden’s edge, he won’t even need to make an excuse for why it happened, if excuses still matter after this. He lines up the cord perfectly and the rock launches at the picture window and cracks it, but it’s shatter-resistant so it has hundreds of thousands of veins now, and a quiet crackling emits from the pane.

Armine takes a sandwich from a bag hanging from his belt loop and leans back against the glass, munching nonchalantly, until the shatter of falling glass echoes over the Debaucher’s lawn and the window is gone.

The daughter screams.

“We’re. We’re so sorry about that, ma’am!” says Carl, limping up to Andrea Debaucher.
“It’s…it’s okay. We’ll just have to call, you know. Call someone about this. We’ll…we’ll have to reduce your pay for a while.”

“Right, sure thing,” says Carl as he pulls the phone’s cord out of the wall. Abel’s eyes, as he watches us all nervously, are resigned, almost crestfallen. “But anyway,” Carl continued. “It’s about time you paid, you know? Paid what you owe.”

“This is the twenty-first century, Carl,” says Abel, but when he reaches for his cell phone Carl snatches it from him. Winston goes to collect the cell phones from the others.

“Armine, go cut the phone lines.”

“Listen,” says Abel. “Is there any way we can make this… less…”

“Sure, sure. I know what you mean. Listen, you go ahead and finish mowing your yard for us, okay Abe? We’ll take care of things here. Winston there will get you set up.”

Winston escorts Abel to a shed, where he pulls out a manual push mower and then lashes several gallons of gas to Abel’s back before sending him out to begin mowing his lawn.

“Why do I need the gas? It’s a manual—” Winston grabs the back of Abel’s head and tugs him backwards, the gas containers tumbling down with him, tilts Abel’s head back, and pours gasoline into the man’s mouth until he coughs and chokes.

“It’s for you. Not for the mower.”

Carl goes back into the house. “Excuse me, sir?” says one of Abel’s sons, tugging Carl’s shirt.

“Which one are you?”

“I’m Arthur.”

“Okay, Arthur, what’s up?”
“What’s happening?” asked the kid. “What should we do? I understand why this is happening, I think. But what are you going to do?”

“It’s alright. We’re all going to watch TV while your dad finishes mowing the lawn. It’s our turn to live a little bit. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Arminea and Winston return, and everyone except Abel is in the house. Andrea, the kids, and all four of you are watching Kevin Spacey’s brilliant acting.

Andrea stands cautiously. “I’m going to make us all some lemonade. Sound good? Hey, what’d you say your name was?”

“Oh, ma’am, I’m Carl.”

“Carl, right. Why don’t you come help me make some lemonade?”

They make lemonade. But they take as long as it takes to make lemonade and then have sex. When they come back Andrea is bedraggled and sweaty and looks relieved.

“How about a nice meal for everyone?”

All the men nod anxiously, like grateful guests. Andrea bakes crabmeat-stuffed pheasant roulades, asparagus she says is genetically infused with tarragon, caviar-mashed new potatoes, and for dessert, trinity-seasoned scones with clotted cream. You are surprised by the amazing balance of savory, spice and creaminess. You feel for a while like a guest at an admirable dinner party.

Several hours later when old Abe returns half-dead, everyone shakes hands and parts ways.

“We’ll be calling Roger’s Glassworks right away, ma’am,” says Carl, “to get them to fix that window as soon as possible!”
“Sure. Sure, okay,” says Abel Debaucher. He chokes his words out through ashen cheeks and his skin, once pale and creamy, is valleyed and burnt.

Armine’s Fun Story; Lesson 7: Revenge is its own reward.

When the four of you return to your quarters Carl tells you everything.

“Andrea’s just a cog in that wheel, like us, yo. I don’t think none of ‘em is happy. She wanted sex bad. You know how she go out to them apartments sometimes? We was right, man. She makin’ them beds shake. She was crazy son, I took her right there in the kitchen…”

You listen like hounds waiting for your bowls to be filled.

Everyone’s silent for a bit, taking it all in. You are sprawled backwards on the couch, as good as dead, each breath is a wheeze. But you feel a little closer to healing.

“What are we gonna do now?”

“No te preocupes. We won.”

“We didn’t win. They’re calling the police right now, bet your life.”

“No they’re not. Abel might get revenge, but not like that. I know him too well. He’s not that kind of guy.”

“So’s that better? Is it better if we just wait for him to get revenge, the way he does things?”

“He won’t get revenge,” declares Armine, on his bed, leaning back in the corner. “We taught him something he never learned. In my village when I was an alcoholic, when I was homeless. This man ruled us all. He had the police in his pocket, the army. He would come in and take people’s wives and use them whenever he felt like it, fock them and send them back. He
took kids and put them to work, shot anyone who refused. To get more powerful people to do what he wanted, he would lash them down to chairs and start by tickling them on their feet, in their armpits, which sounds focking silly, I know that, but, believe me, man, you don’t want that to happen to you. Then if they still wouldn’t, he’d move on to the next step, he’d fuse the parts of animals to the people, you know, like surgical. He’d remove testicles and put bullhorns there instead. He’d remove one eyeball and replace it with the hoof of a vaca. One day everyone was lost, they had no more lives left, so most of them gathered outside of his estate and just started stabbing themselves in the throat, suiciding. He came out and stood and watched and he got sadder and sadder, you could see it on his face. One older woman was a paraplege, you know, and she dragged herself from her hut to his house while the people were killing themselves. He just watched when she came up and stabbed him in the foot and reached up and unzipped his pants and reached in and tore his balls off. He didn’t even flinch, man. He just started crying, but it wasn’t from real pain, you know. It was because he only ever caused the pain before that, he never seen other people doing it to themselves, he never felt it himself. He was the village recluse after that and never touched anyone else or talked to them.”

You don’t believe this story. But you’ve personally seen things happen that are even less explainable.

You’re not cut out for lawncare. The motors scream in your ears and the stories of these forgotten men linger in your brain. They would keep you awake at night if your body had anything left at the end of the day. The dregs of the job pile up in your head. The adrenaline, the dogshit, the guts of slugs, the crack of launched rocks and broken glass and bent backs, and the gas vapors floating in through your nostrils. The person whose pocket you sweat inside of. It is a job of self-abuse. It costs you your life, and your reward is to keep on working. You are not
saintly enough to do it. All you can do is vomit this buildup of gore out onto other people. These other men and women, they are masters of swallowing vomit. They swallow it so long that it never comes up any more. They kneel and lift, climb and wobble on the top steps of ladders, they work unfazed. They tell stories. They are people whose lives are forever-reprieved explosions, and when they die the gunpowder drifts into the air, unignited. There are only more such people being made every day in this year on earth, doing jobs robots can’t do yet.

You decide that it’s really time now to get a different job. The next day you give Abel your two weeks’ notice. He shakes your hand and bows a little towards you, says not to worry about it, you can go ahead and leave today, and that it’s been a pleasure working with you. You’ve never seen him so nervous.

“But listen. I’m inviting all of you to a pool party tomorrow. All of the garden workers and the maids too. Please, join us. We’d like to start treating you all better, and we’re raising all your pay by five an hour. You’re—you’re free to go, of course. But I’d love it if I could make this a place you want to work.”

The next day Abel makes good on it. Everyone is at the pool. Armine, Carl and one of the maids are playing volleyball with the Debaucher kids. It’s like you’re all long lost uncles and aunts. Andrea is making cocktails by request and they are superb and strong.

You’re not sick anymore but this feels more like a dream than anything else that happened to you here.

“I’m sorry. This is wonderful, Mr. Debaucher, but…”

“Call me Abel, please.”

“Abel. But I really do have to go. You all have a nice life.”
You walk back to your servants’ quarters and start to pack your stuff up. You’re fully ready to leave this world but you’re still afraid of what you’ll find in another one. If anything will be the way you used to think it was. While you’re thinking about this, you lie back in bed, link your hands together behind your head, and fall asleep.

Another Morning; 8th and Final Lesson: Nothing is too good to be true.

You wake up. It’s 6am, the sun is just beginning to rise and you’re full of healthy energy. You’re still here, you’re still a Lawnman. The guys are in full gear eating patatas bravas and sunny-side-up eggs made by Armine, preparing for the day. No one’s talking, only eating or drinking their coffee. Everyone is eager and lively, like you’ve all got some exciting project on the docket for the day. Is this a different world where opportunities are actually visible and only need to be grasped?

You move out to one of the trucks, Winston gets in the passenger seat, and you turn the engine. You’re in the same world. You’ll always be in the same world. If something is true it’s always true, no matter what. But you’re not gonna carry a notepad around, take it out every hour and recite the list of Truths, are you?

You’re going to light a cigarette, and then you're going to tell Winston that joke you keep forgetting to tell him which you're dying to see his reaction to. You light a cigarette.
Loren sips his coffee timidly, testing its temperature. He does this every morning and still has not memorized the length of time after which he can safely sip a fresh cup. It is adorable. One of those little silly habits that is even cuter because he is extremely intelligent. He is so intelligent that he was top-of-his-class, graduated from undergraduate this year, at twenty years old, and understands nuances that are usually only perceptible to those with decades of wisdom under their belt.

“You know—I’ve noticed that the temperature at which you consider coffee acceptable for sipping is reached at roughly a minute and a half after you pour a fresh cup.”

He throws me the cutest sarcastic, wide-eyed look. “My oh my. I had no idea you were monitoring my morning coffee habits so closely.”

“Just pointing it out. This way, instead of testing it three or four times and possibly burning your tongue, you can simply wait that amount of time.”

“Baby,” he says, putting a hand on my arm, “I’m perfectly satisfied with my method of coffee drinking. You know, for someone nearing fifty, you aren’t very Zen.”

I smile. “Of course. Ha. I don’t mean to influence your coffee habits. I don’t even quite know why I mentioned it. I love how you test-sip your coffee.”

He smiles, and test-sips it again. “Ah. Perfect temperature.”

The first time I saw him do this was three years ago, when he had just finished a semester in my Hellenic Studies Survey. He had expressed an interest in meeting with me outside of class, and I told him it was wise to wait until he graduated. But he was persistent, and he was the smartest student I’d ever had by far. I couldn’t resist the thought of picking each others’ brains.
In fact, he is smarter than many of my colleagues. A couple of months after he was in
my class, we went on a few dates and immediately got on.

“Peter,” he says, “have you heard back from Dr. Groban?”

I shiver a bit with anticipation. I was not planning to tell him about the scholarship I had
helped get him until later, but I can’t lie to him, so I shall tell him now. “You got it.”

“Oh my god! This is wonderful. Thank you, thank you,” he says, and gets up to hug me.

“No problem. Hey, listen, you would have gotten it even without my saying anything.
You’re amazing.”

“Hush,” he says, “Celebration cigarette.” He lights up a Turkish Gold.

He switched over to Turkish Golds when we started dating. He used to smoke American
Spirits Yellow, and when he tried mine he was blown away by the flavor. I light one up myself
and we cheers our cigarettes together.

“This is so exciting. No fucking worrying about money for another few years.”

“Yes indeed. You’ll have your PhD at twenty-five. Nothing to sneeze at.”

“Psh. I’m shooting towards four years max.”

“You can do it, too.”

“Hm. Up for some morning fun?”

“Always.”

Sometimes I am bottom and sometimes Loren is bottom. I love it both ways. Our mood
determines who shall play the Catamite first, and we can decipher who wants to do so simply by
how the foreplay progresses.
Sometimes sex with Loren is slow and gentle, and it feels like we’re absorbing each others’ intelligence, all the best parts of our minds and bodies. Today we both are feeling rougher than that.

When we’ve finished and we are lounging around, he stretches, arching his back and then laying down like an odalisque. “I wish I could come to the conference.”

“Me too.”

“Do you think we’ll ever be able to act like a totally normal couple? I’m kind of sick of being like a leper. Only hanging out with my friends when we’re together.”

“Loren. You are not like a leper. Those are your friends—you only hung out with them before we met anyway.”

“Maybe I’m being dramatic. But I want to come to your prof lunches. I want you to be on my arm when I get my PhD.”

“Oh, come now. By then it won’t be a problem.”

“I’ve heard that before,” he says with a warm sarcastic smile.

I kiss him. His lips are cherubically soft. His favorite casual outfit is khaki shorts and monotone polo shirts, and with his chubby face and the way he says things with a nasally overtone, he is like some elegant Connecticut blueblood, though he’s from New York City, his father is a fireman and his mother a secretary. Right now, his shorts and shirt are sprawled on the ground near the bed.

There’s this immense respect I have for him, as already outlined, and then there’s this insane carnal magnetism that just swoops down into me at the slightest trigger. Let me be frank: I feel monumentally lucky to be able to witness this young man in the height of his intellectual and physical life.
I scooch closer to him and hug him from behind. “I want us to be able to do normal things too. And I promise, we will. In fact,” I say, and I don’t know what’s come over me, “why don’t you come to the conference with me? You’ve been out of undergraduate for a few months now. Nobody else knows when we started dating. You said yourself that you kind of hate Jeremy, you don’t need to go this weekend.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet. No, well, I was being snarky. I do kind of hate him, but I kind of love him. I couldn’t miss his wedding unless I never want him to speak to me again. Besides, I already RSVP’d. But really, that’s so sweet Peter.” He turns his head and kisses me. “You just have a wonderful time at that conference. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Until him I never dared to have an affair with a student.

The age of consent in Louisiana is seventeen. We used to have sodomy laws but they were rendered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The state legislature refuses to take them off the books, though they cannot enforce them. I started dating Loren when he was seventeen.

I mention these facts because I think about them fairly often.

***

I travel to Houston for a Hellenic Studies conference. There is the usual rigmarole of papers being presented with newly-nuanced interpretations of points that have been made ad infinitum, with a few really standout showings. Dr. Nathan Compton made some excellent points about the cleaning methods of Athenian tableware and its probable effect on the most common diseases of their time. I thoroughly enjoy when historical studies incorporate heavy science.
After the conference is over it’s just us Classics profs at the hotel bar. Jim Arnott brought actual amphorae with black-painted Olympic runners sprinting naked along a rich reddish clay background. Jim buys a few bottles of vino and we’re using the amphoras to distribute into our glasses.

Some of these guys are a little light on the talk with me ever since I published a certain paper, even though it was two decades ago. I said what everyone thinks. Well, everyone who thinks. It was published a few years ago in The Hellenic Journal and it was about pederasty in ancient Greece. It was an accepted thing, then; a young boy, or Eromenos, wanted an older lover as a mentor and a rite of passage, a promotion, in effect. An older man, or Erastês, wanted a young lover, sometimes as young as a child, as a trophy and for the pleasure of it. I argued for a relative approach to morality, within limits, that is, because there is evidence that no trauma was suffered by the Eromenos when the conditioning of such a sexual arrangement was widely societally accepted.

You can imagine how it all unfolded. I publish this paper and it stirs things up even though every Classics professor from New Orleans to the Northern tip of Canada knows it’s true. I become the Archetype of the fear that every parent has when they send their kid off to university, transferring the delicate control they’ve had for eighteen years over to a lineup of professors wringing their hands to fill these students with their idea of how life should be, and, god forbid, to fill them with something else.

Some of them treat me with a tiny bit of honor and celebrity, grateful that I went all-out on something we know and the public doesn’t. Others have a hard time even looking me in the eye. I drink heavily when I’m around them. It doesn’t help with my reputation, I can imagine, but from where I’m standing it doesn’t hurt.
But this old friend of mine Jake Mosby didn’t change a bit. Tonight he actually seems a little more open to me and I haven’t seen him but twice, briefly, since the paper. So by the time everyone is tagged out Jake and I stay at the bar and catch up.

Jim Arnott was so drunk when he shuffled off to his hotel room he didn’t care if we kept one of the amphoras. It sits like a pillar, a testament to our arrogance, signifying to all the other patrons, Brioni-owning businesspeople the lot of them, that we know an unnervingly massive amount of things about a time and place that none of them have likely even thought about since high school.

“No, I mean, don’t tell me that,” says Mosby. “Your work is monumental. I’m a blip on the radar, you’re a behemoth, your papers win conferences every few years. You’re cited in more papers than I can count.”

“You’re making me blush,” I say.

“Can I tell you, seriously, you didn’t just change the way I viewed ancient Greece. You changed my worldview entire.”

“Now you’re just being excessive.”

“No, I’m serious. Listen, remember at the Millsbury conference three months ago, when I published on Spartan divorce?”

“Sure.”

“I could not have written that without your take on Eromenoi.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t believe me?”
“I do. Well. Thank you, that really means a lot.” I want to ask him what he means by this, how Spartan divorce could be significantly linked to Eromenoi. But this would betray that I haven’t read his paper more than a glance. Fuck it, we are both very influenced by the pinot.

“Would you mind, actually, would you explain to me the connection? I can’t quite recall how that link was made…”

“Oh, sure sure. Well, for one, the way a Spartan wife could divorce her husband if, basically if she stopped him from raping her, if she ‘won the fight.’ It must, must be closely linked, psychologically, to the businesslike nature of the Eromenoi. They had a very sophisticated, merciless, but sophisticated view of humans at their peak, optimal conditioning. You remember my conclusion paragraph at all? ‘The Spartans, and with exceptions, the Greeks generally, had a view that was ahead of its time by over two-thousand years. By admitting things frankly which we can’t even utter, by treating their own people harshly to train them for reality, they could never forget the world they lived in—neither could they forget the harshness, the barbarians or warthogs waiting for them in the wilds, nor the love, the one true gift of human existence, at their fingertips if they only seek it.’ So, you see. There’s a close connection between Spartan divorce and the frankness with which they treated a love of which today we must,” he gestures poetically with his hand, “never dare to speak.”

“Yeah okay. Yeah I see that. We’re liberal as hell today but there are certain undercurrents we won’t talk about. Truths we won’t confront.”

“Right. Right. You can carry a weapon around which could murder twelve people in ten seconds but you’re arrested if you’re a woman and you walk around topless. You can’t smoke weed but you can legally take a man’s child away from him even if you fucking mentally abuse the kid because you happen to be the nurturing sex.”
I chortle at this because I’m drunk. He’s not all there on this, nor am I, but I’m drunk. “Well that last analogy isn’t quite there yet. But I get your gist.”

“Yeah. I’m drunk. Sorry. But you get the idea. Listen though. The point is love is so much more flexible than a modern red-blooded US-of-American thinks.”

“I mean let’s be fair. What’s the harm in it? In these regulations? Does it hurt a child to be kept from love by an older man? An older person, that is.”

“It could. It could hurt the child. It’s just like a kid without a good parent. If a younger person will learn things from an older person that they would otherwise learn in twenty years, and learn the hard way, after some major fuck-ups, then it’s for the better. But really it’s not about an individual child. It’s about society’s benchmark of morality. If everything were different, if everyone were freer, there’d be drastically less trauma. And kids would learn sooner. It’s tough love.

“If everyone were more honest about the many forms love can take, there’s nothing fundamentally evil about it. Shit, we’d all be growing up much happier. It’s not just this—think of war, too. You don’t think there was a lower rate of PTSD among the Spartans? ‘Cause they had to fucking defeat a lion before they could even leave their mother’s womb?”

“I mean, you’re partly right, I think. The mind is flexible, it’s powerful. Yeah, there are massive advantages to that honesty. To, for instance, a society confronting the bullshit and just living with it. But, I mean, think about the other side. And I don’t mean the—the children are delicate flowers other side. Think about a smart person’s answer on the other side. Maybe it’s better to sacrifice some of our animalistic urges in order to avoid the great possible torrent of animalistic atrocities, sufferings, oppressions.”

“Oh, come now. Spoken like a true soccer mom. And from Mr. Eromenos himself.”
“I’m not sure that would be me,” I say, and chuckle. “Not quite.”

“I am not an enemy, here. Okay. I’m not one of them. I am not a bullshitter, I don’t need to be cushioned from reality in order to sleep at night.” He sips his wine a little more aggressively than I think is called for, lapping it up. “Listen,” he leans in. “On a personal level too. I really admire how honest you have always been. These people,” he waves dismissively at the rest of the bar like they are plebeians all, “they see the world enmired only in their modern set of tropes, easy tropes.”

“Oh. I’m not sure about that. You can’t breathe air without living by tropes.”

“Oh, sure you’re sure. It’s true. It’s okay, it’s me you’re talking to here. I know how you feel, I have closely read Eros Through the Ages.”

“Yeah, well,” I lean back in my barstool. “I’m not sure I understand. You sound like you’re aiming at something more specific.”

“I am. I want to show you this,” he says, pulling out his iPhone and opening the photos App. “Here… let me just scroll through…” I can’t look for more than a moment at what he shows me. It’s a child, a boy who couldn’t be older than ten or eleven, wincing, reaching out and clutching an erect penis that I can only assume is Jake Mosby’s. “I have known true love.”

I am not moving or acting, just remaining completely still. I am no man.

He’s scrolling through.

I think to perhaps act like I am okay with it and call the police later. I don’t believe I can be that good of an actor.

Penetration from behind. Three boys. Extreme shyness in the eyes. Hesitation. Fear. It is hard to tell if it’s fear. It must be fear. I can’t keep looking at them. Even if I could pretend well enough until I called the police, I can’t sit here any longer.
If I tackle him I might get assault. Doesn’t matter, monsters need to die. Mosby’s eyes are like eyes I’ve seen on dogs waiting for feed.

I snatch his phone and I make to run, but he trips me as I flee the barstool and I plunge, the phone launching and sliding along the bar floor. He jumps onto me and we wrestle. He misses my groin with his knee just barely and gets my inner thigh instead, and I close my legs and try to clutch his neck. I see men beginning to stand peripherally.

I’ve got him by the neck with one arm tightly and he goes for my eyes with his fingers. A nail burns my eyeball before I can close it. He’s scraping my skin on my head and my neck. I won’t let go. He’s flailing his legs to get at me but I don’t let go.

Before I can make him pass out I’m pulled off of him by a big sweaty man in a suit and he secures me from behind by my arms.

Mosby is helped up.

“Listen,” I say, and turn to face my captor, trying my best to look and sound serious. “Do not let him get that phone.”

Mosby looks around and dusts himself off.

“Don’t let him get that phone! Someone grab his phone!”

Mosby spots it and kicks it to pieces with his heel.

“Why’d you do that?” shouted a woman at the bar.

Mosby says nothing. He starts to walk out.

“Please, don’t let him leave.”

The guy has let go of me by now and I run toward Mosby but he notices and starts to run. By now a group of men are jarred into action and they grab and shepherd both of us into a corner and don’t let us leave.
Which is good, except I never want to see this man’s face ever again except behind bars being raped and then murdered. But I have to wait around in this bar until the police arrive.

When they do we are both questioned and then taken into custody because of what I tell them.

The concrete makes the room stale and cold, and I’m drinking coffee. This was the first time I’ve ever been fingerprinted and photographed and I didn’t expect that to happen ever.

“This is FBI agent Stamos. I want you to tell him everything you told me.”

“No problem.”

The light hanging close to our heads is hot.

I tell them everything.

I reacted like a sane human. This is what I tell myself. A sane human would feel sick like I feel sick right now. But it’s not like I feel sick because I saw the devil and it’s making me sick. It’s more like I punched myself in the face. Like Mosby did nothing more than make me eat my words. I believe anyone would tell me that this is ridiculous and he would have done this anyway, whether or not I had published *Eros Through the Ages*. But that’s how it feels and I can’t control it.

They tell me that they already have agents at his house searching and confiscating. They tell me that if they find CP at his house and my story is true then I won’t get any charges.

They let me call Loren, and I wait until 8, when I think he’s probably up.

“Hey, hon. How was the conference?”

“Something happened.”
I tell him and I don’t include any of the photo’s details. Any of the boys hugging themselves like they are cold. Their eyes still not able to believe that this is a part of real life. But I tell him that I feel complicit.

He says nothing. I’ve never caused him to be completely silent before.

“Help me,” I say.

“I’m so sorry.”

So that’s it. He’s not going to play therapist.

“People like that. People like that don’t do it for kicks and keep it on their phone. They’ll find more at his house. He’ll be in prison for a long time. Don’t worry, hon.”

***

A week later I am already a target of accusations. All of the major newspapers got a hold of the story that Jake Mosby, a celebrated professor at a prominent university, was involved in child porn and awaiting trial. The article mentioned my name, and I can only guess that one of the other professors named me as the one who stayed behind at the bar with Jake Mosby. They must have either been an ignoramus with loose lips or simply had it out for me. Then someone in the comments for the online version of the New York Times article apparently researched me and pointed out my article about Eromenoi, and accusations were loosed of my being a part of the child porn ring.

The Dean of the Classics Department called me into his office and now I’m sipping my coffee in his rigidly cushioned chair and hoping it’s nothing serious.

“How are you handling everything, Pete?”
“Oh, you know. It’s rough, but I’m handling it.”

“It must have been terrible.”

“I never expected to see anything like that in my life, to be sure.”

“See?”

“Yes. Oh, well he showed me…on his phone. That’s how I found out.”

“Christ. That is fucked up, Peter. The story didn’t mention that. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. I’ll be okay.”

“Okay. Well listen, you tell me if you need anything. Anything at all.”

“Sure, I will.”

“Now, I hate this, I really do. But I have to ask. Have you done anything that will put you at risk? Anything that could beat tenure and get you fired?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Are…someone suggested to us that they thought you might be in a relationship with a student. Is that true?”

“No.”

“Peter. We just need to know everything so that everybody can cover their asses. I’ve known you long enough to know you wouldn’t do anything stupid. But things can be misinterpreted.”

“Yeah, well. Okay. I am certainly not trying to be evasive here, it’s just exactly that—misinterpretation is a Daemon to those who are watched, you know?” I say, trying to lighten the atmosphere. “So, but, not with a current student. A past student. We started our relationship after they graduated.”

“Okay. Now, how recently was she in your class?”
This is one of the beautiful games humans play. He must know that I am gay but he is not presuming. He knows that I know that he might know but he does not know that I know he’s right.

But I can’t keep Loren in an enclave forever, and I shouldn’t.

“He was in my class about three years ago.”

“All right. He. But he’s graduated?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Now, you know I’m not trying to encroach on your privacy, here. But I need to know these things so I can watch your back. Okay?”

“Sure, Bill, I understand.”

“Stay strong. You’ll be alright,” he says, and slaps my back.

***

It’s Friday and Loren has convinced me to go to Phoenix bar with him and some friends. It didn’t take much convincing, as inebriated oblivion is pretty appealing right now.

It’s Twink Night. There are packs of bears here and there, though many of the regular bears are absent.

Smooth young men are dancing on the mini-stages, not a hair on their body, wearing eyeliner or blush, anything to make them look as young as possible. A few of Loren’s friends greet us, hairless and coy.

“Hey Peter,” one of them says to me, his name Alistair, eying me with playful scrutiny. “Been a while.”
“Yeah. Hello.”

“How’ve you been?”

“Oh, been okay.”

“Whoa. I didn’t ask for your life story.”

I manage a smile and I sip my vodka and soda.

“Listen, I’m so proud of what you did. You’re a hero.”

“Oh, nonsense.”

I am receiving cold glances from a group of bears in the corner and it troubles me. If you are unfamiliar, bears are stereotypically manly gay men, with beards and lots of hair on their chest, bellies, broad shoulders, etc. Bears didn’t used to be the cool thing in the scene, but now everyone wants them or wants to be one of them, and they’re mostly arrogant pricks about it.

My connection to this world is tenuous at best, but I guess if I play any role it’s the older well-enough-to-do gentleman, perceived as elegant; I’m a catch, if you’re into that sort of thing.

Another friend of Loren’s, Terrence, is flirting with him, putting his hand on his shoulder any chance he gets.

I don’t like being in a place like this. I never have. I’ve always preferred quieter establishments where you can have real conversations with friends. But now I feel even more out of place.

Loren and his friends are making too-clever jokes, showing their irreverence for life. I make it harder for Loren to be irreverent. I am a modern male Empousa who has swooped into a den of innocents and targeted the most pristine among them, the Ideal Form that is Loren, sucked his blood, robbed a young, brilliant soul of the best years of his intellectual and physical life.
Some among the crowd are roaring and wooping at the twinks, cat calling them. I see an older man with a nose hooked and Roman as any Caeser, putting dollar bills into twink loincloths and harnesses, eying them like his next meal.

“I need to go have a smoke,” I say, and stand, wavering on my feet.

Alistair nods at me and Loren is wrapped up in conversation with Terrence.

Outside, I puff my cigarette like it’s saving my life, quickly and repeatedly so that I surround myself with smoke. I want to create a cloud of absolute emptiness around me. I don’t want anyone to see me, hear me, believe anything I say.

I want to be his mentor.

But I cannot be a mentor without upsetting the trajectory of his perfection.

I didn’t get into this field to change the world. When I publish a paper it should stand on its ideas, and they are either true or false. It’s not me in that paper. This is not the same as me saying to the world ‘This is how things should be. Change yourselves.’

I want to live without influence.

I feel his hand on my elbow—isn’t it mysterious how you can know someone even by the measure of their grip, when you’re in love—and look back and he nuzzles up to me. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it.

“Peter.”

“Loren?”

“Do you want to go home?”

“I guess I’d rather not lie to you. And I would be lying if I said no.”

“Let’s go,” he says, all business, and starts to walk down Rampart Street so quickly that I can’t even protest.
I catch up and put my arm through his as we walk.

“You know, I told Bill about us,” I say.

“Really?”

“Yeah. He asked about this whole thing, and apparently someone told him they thought I was in a relationship with a student.”

“Well, shit,” he says. “Do you know who it was?”

“No, I—” I hear something and look back. There are two bears walking a distance behind us. “No, I’m not sure.”

We’ve reached the car and as I start to unlock my front door, the Bears speed up.

“I hate fags who like to fuck little kids.”

“Good thing no one here likes to fuck little kids, then. Goodnight, gentlemen.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Go back to your bear friends,” says Loren.

“Not until you confess your sins, asshole,” says one of them, with a bald head and a wiry beard that flows like a thin grey river from his red meaty face. He pulls out a large knife. He pushes me by the shoulder to turn me to face him.

“Peter, get the car open.”

“I am,” I say, but the man grabs me and puts the knife to my throat.

“We’re both armed. Don’t be an idiot. Just do what daddy says, pedophile. You ever been fucked in the ass by a knife? That’s what it feels like to those little kids. Now you’ll know what it feels like,” he says, and shoves me to the ground.

“Stop that, please,” yells Loren.
I start to fight back and he stabs me in the arm, so I stop. He is very strong. I try to block out what’s happening. He turns me around, so I’m facing the ground now. He cuts through the rear of my pants with his knife.

“Brother you better think twice about what you about to do,” says a powerful voice. I look up and an older black man is standing a couple cars away from us, pointing a .38 at the bear on top of me.

“Shit,” says the bear, and he stands and puts his hands up.

“Drop that fucking knife,” says the man, rapidly walking closer. The bear drops the knife and turns quickly to run.

“Stay right where you are,” the man says. He hits the bear over the head with the butt of his pistol and the bear falls to his knees. “Don’t fucking move. If you think I won’t shoot you, you’re dumber than your fat ass looks.” The man leans down, gun pointing at the bear’s temple, and picks up the knife. “Sir, stand up. You alright? Come on now, stand up.”

I stand and he hands me the knife.

“Now cut off this motherfucker’s beard,” he says. So I do. “You. Come over here,” he gestures to the other bear, and when the bear is close he knocks him over the head too. “Same thing,” he says. I cut his beard off too. The man leans over and gathers their beard-hair and stuffs it into their mouths, keeping a hard aim on them with his gun the whole time. He kicks them, hard, again and again, switching back and forth between them until he stops and catches his breath.

“Get the fuck out of here,” he says. “And don’t let me see you spit those nasty beards out until you’re far away from me.”

The bears struggle to stand, and then slowly shuffle away.
“Shit,” the man says, and turns to me and offers his hand. “Percy Fontaine. You two okay?”

“Hello Percy, I’m Peter. This is Loren. I think we’re okay. Thank you very much.”

“Man, my pleasure. People can’t going around doing shit like that. Y’all come in for a beer? You shouldn’t drive home until you’ve calmed down. I live right here. And we gotta get some bactine in that cut there, my friend. Bandage it up. You got blood all over your sleeve.”

“Jesus, yes,” says Loren, shaken. “Let’s do that.”

We sit in Percy’s living room and he brings three beers from his kitchen. His house is decorated with Christmas lights hanging along the tops of the walls, movie posters and various clocks.

“Do you collect clocks?” I ask.

“We should call the police,” says Loren.

“Nah, man, that’s alright. They got their punishment. Yeah, I love clocks, man. I build ‘em too.”

“They should be in prison. Now they’re angry and they’re just going to hurt more people.”

“Prison ain’t gonna fix that. They’d just come out worse than before. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Least they got a taste tonight, though.”

“Well, okay,” concedes Loren. “I’m just so grateful for you. Thank you so much.”

“Hey, today you’re the victim, tomorrow it’ll be me. Just make sure you get a gun by then,” he says, and winks. “Y’all feel free to smoke. I’m gonna light one up myself.”

I notice a stuffed animal on the floor. “We should really get out of your hair. Don’t want to wake anybody up.”
“Oh, kids aren’t here right now. At their mother’s.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Woman is a straight up sociopath, no bullshit. Only way she could get part-time custody was those sociopath powers, man. She knew just how to manipulate the judge. I gave her eight years of my life, and I still can’t believe I didn’t see that shit sooner. But that’s the nature of it, man—people like that know exactly how to play a role, you know?”

“I’m so sorry. That’s terrible,” says Loren.

“Couldn’t even get her to bring the kids over when it was my half of the week, at first. Had to fight her in court some more. I spend all my days without those kids praying, that’s all I do. Pray at work, pray at home. Sometimes I go over to her house and stand outside, but I don’t wanna get too close or she’ll find out and I’m sure she’ll do something to fuck with me over it. But I just want to be close to them, I want to feel like I know nothing bad’s going on. I just pray that she won’t hurt them or use them badly, you know. To get some shit she wants.”

“Fuck,” I say.

“Then when it’s my turn with them, when they walk up my steps, I don’t even look at her, she’s standing right there. I don’t even look at her. I just look at my kids, my little balls of love, and I walk them up the stairs, shut the door, and hug the hell out of them.”

We talk with him a little more and then say our goodbyes, thanking him repeatedly.

On the drive to my house, Loren seems calm. We get home and barely say anything. We just get ready for bed and go to sleep.

The next morning I’m on the stoop drinking my coffee. It is one of those overcast super-foggy New Orleans days that barely feels different from the night before it.
A car pours through the mist and parks. A man gets out and starts to walk towards me. He’s in the early stages of balding, and he’s got one of those faces with a constant grimace, like the upper corners of his face have been pinned up permanently. The fog moves out of his way and bounces around him like dancing pixies. He’s walking straight towards me.

“Excuse me, Dr. Peter London?” His voice is much more high-pitched than I expected.

“Maybe, who are you?”

“I’m Jeffrey Schlitz, Times-Pic. How did you discover that Dr. Mosby had child porn?”

“I’m not disclosing anything you haven’t heard from the news. I’m not saying anything.”

“Who’s that young man in your kitchen?” he asks, peering through my window.

“Fuck you. Don’t look inside my house.”

“How old is that fellow?”

I surmise that being frowned upon publically is far worse than being fully condemned for worse things that you did not do. “That’s my boyfriend Loren. He’s twenty years old, he’s smarter than me, he’s definitely smarter than you, and I love him. Please go away or I’ll call the police.”

“I’m allowed to stand here on the sidewalk.”

“I’m allowed to call the police.”

“You know, I’ve never written a story about an innocent person who was unwilling to talk to me.”

“Okay, thanks buddy. Have a good day.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” says the reporter, and leaves.

Loren comes out with a cup of coffee in hand. “Who was that?”

“Doesn’t matter.”
“I asked. It matters to me.”

“A reporter.”

“Jesus Christ. Ugh.”

“Loren, I’ve got to tell you something.”

“You can tell me anything. You know that.”

No point in meandering around the point. “I do sometimes fantasize about that kind of stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Bad stuff.”

“Younger boys, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think that’s unnatural. That’s why it’s called fantasy.”

“Yes. I mean, you’re correct. Still.”

“I sometimes fantasize about women. It’s ridiculous. Obviously I’m not attracted to them. Sometimes a man just has an urge to fuck the worst possible thing he could fuck. Then he whacks it and forgets about it. Taboo gets the blood flowing, Peter. What makes him a man is that he does not act on it.”

“I know. I know all that. Still sometimes I worry about what I’m capable of.”

“I know you’re too smart to think that you’d actually do anything like that. You’re just projecting Mosby onto yourself. There’s something else here, though. Am I right? What’s really on your mind?”

“Well, sure, there is. I mean, with us, you and me—I acted on it. You came to me, but I let it happen. Isn’t it a slippery slope? When you actually fulfill one fantasy?”
“Peter, you’ve been through a lot. You weren’t the one who did something bad. Okay?”

“Okay. I’m talking over one problem to really get at another, Loren. I think it’s dangerous how we just plunged into this relationship. A person needs their young adult years. You need to find out what the world means to you. At your age, you need some time of your own.”

“Peter. What are you saying? Are you really going to let that pedophile affect our relationship?”

“You’re so smart. I know you understand. You can’t waste your youth. I just think a year of taking this slower would be good for us. A year of just being friends. You can be with someone else, if you want, start your PhD and just, you know… just be a student for a bit.”

“This is insulting. I’m a grown-up. I understand why you’re worrying like this, but it’s insulting. I can make my own choices and I know why I’ve chosen to be with you.”

“I hear you. I understand. But my instincts and my logic tell me that this is the responsible decision. It’s just one year. I just want to make sure that you know what you want from life. I don’t want to keep influencing your choices and your life’s path.”

“It’s too late, now. You’ve influenced me. If you leave me, you’re influencing me even more.”

“I’m not leaving you. It’s just a year. I still want to spend time with you. You barely even spend any alone time in your own apartment anymore.”

“Okay, fine. I’m not going to argue with you. I’m going to let you make a stupid choice because I’m not trying to tell you what to do in your life either. You need to know, though, that I think this is a mistake. It’s insulting to even presume that you have more influence over me than I do over you. This choice is much more of an attempt at having control over me than you even
do right now in our relationship. If you believed I was as smart as you say you do, you would know that it’s best to let someone make their own mistakes. And I’m not going sit around waiting for you. The only way I can approach this is that we’re breaking up. And then maybe, in time, we’ll feel like getting back together.”

“Oh, Loren, that’s not what—”

“You can’t have it both ways, Peter. You’re in this mythological cage in your head. You need to stop comparing yourself to other people. You are brilliant when it comes to facts and concepts but I think you should talk to someone, you should learn more about being with yourself and being with other people. You are not an Erastes and I am not your Eromenos.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s me that needs time to figure my own brain out.”

“I love you,” says Loren, kissing me. “And I’m not going to be petty. I’m going to let you make your own mistakes. Or solve them. On your own. I’m going home.”

***

It’s one o’ clock and I’m sitting in my armchair with a Bell’s Oberon on the table beside me. My next class is in two days, and for the first time in years I’m afraid to teach.

Perhaps I am being too harsh on myself. Too harsh on him. But my limits have never been tested. I’m being greedy. I should call Loren and apologize and he can come over and we can make up.
What happened to me? Sophrosyne is the Ancient Greek term for the mediated self-control that an Erastes was expected to have with his Eromenos, in order to showcase how an adult is supposed to act. That is what I’m doing, with this one-year plan. Showing self-discipline. But he’s right, I’m not an Erastes. He is not merely smarter than me, he’s wiser. My mythological cage, he says. He may be the person to help me leave it. I could afford to show some humility. I decide to try to meditate. If I’m doing this year off for discipline, there’s no higher discipline than meditation. I put my beer down and close my eyes, right my posture, lay my hands palms-down on the armrests. I try to eliminate all thoughts from my brain. It works for a few seconds. Zeus intrudes. He’s got his arm around Ganymede, the most beautiful boy in all of Greece, and Ganymede is past grief at this point. He’s resigned himself to being Zeus’s slave. I cannot yet escape Greece. It is massively arrogant of me to think I could live without influence while I cannot even control my own influence over myself. Or to even think I should. I have earned this self-imposed prison. The only karma in reality is action and consequence. I open my eyes, take a gulp of my beer, and light a cigarette. I turn on the TV and it’s on a children’s show with the kids singing an old nursery rhyme, to which, in my head, I add my own ending.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7,

All good children go to Heaven.

8, 9, 10, 11, 12,

All bad men go straight to Hell.
A Girl You Can Bring Home to Mom

My dad called me this week, which is once more than he usually calls me in a week. It’s not that he’s a bad father, quite the opposite. He and mom just think I’m not expressing even a minor portion of my potential, and so I generally prefer to call them, when I’m prepared with a list of realistic-sounding personal ambitions. He left a voicemail which I’ll listen to later, which is what I always say and then forget to do.

I got my six-figure income by creating a ton of websites with ads. For years I messed around doing low-paid useless things until I found a way to get paid to do nothing. I’ll never need to do real work again. Which is good, because people weren’t meant to do what we call “real work” today. They were meant to survive and have hobbies. Surviving is hard enough. I host a lot of parties, some orgies, and the occasional semi-intimate brunch.

I do a lot of stuff, but I stick with almost nothing. I have no “stick-to-itiveness.” This was improved when I started taking Adderall daily, but not completely fixed.

If you put your upper teeth on your bottom lip, with the right amount of moisture, you can make a sound exactly like a housefly buzzing around. I used to go to coffee shops and do this, and watch people look up frantically, swatting around their heads. That’s one example of the “stuff” I do.

I’m not a psycho. I believe my head is more clear than most.

Being horny is like an illness. Except it’s congenital, chronic, and it flares up and down. In every past relationship I’ve been afraid of myself—I’ve been afraid that in a weak and terrible moment I would cheat on my girlfriend. I’ve cheated before. When I’m horny I want hands,
faces, tits, asses, and then once I climax all I want is to make one person happy. Horny Jekyll and Caring Hyde.

Once, when I was poor and alcoholic, a robber tried the unlocked knob of my apartment and came on in.

I sat in my cheap Goodwill recliner and didn’t look at him and said “Take it all.” It took him a good hour and a half to haul out everything he wanted. While he did that, I made some breakfast-for-lunch, jerked off, took a shower and read some comics.

When he went for my Maker’s Mark I said “Don’t touch the liquor.”

Before he left he said “Damn man, easiest job I’ve ever pulled.” He put his hand on my shoulder and smiled appreciatively, like we were buddies.

But immediately after he left I used my neighbor’s cell phone and called the cops. I told them the guy’s vehicle type and license plate number which I’d viewed out of the window while showering. The more stuff he took out of my apartment, the more years he’d have in prison. Later I saw in the newspaper that he was sentenced to eight years. He earned it.

Per capita, most people are illogical, ignorant, self-deceptive, outwardly manipulative, reckless, lazy, or mean. Every single person has at least one of these traits within them to a large degree, and probably thinks they don’t. You are no exception. I am no exception.

You might think I’m a misanthrope now. I’m not. I love people, in spite of their flaws.

Let me be honest: I’m telling you this because I am starting to get scared. In spite of my money and how easy my life is, I can’t bring myself to really care about anything. It was the same when I had very little money. I just don’t care. Everything is funny to me. Serious and funny are the same thing from different angles. But I met this lady and, like a totally healthy
person, I’m going to put all my eggs in her basket, so to speak, and rely on her to fix all my problems.

***

I never go and rent movies or TV shows since I can pay for everything and watch instantly now, but two weeks ago I walked into Indie Video because through the window I saw a new woman working there.

Her nametag said Daphne. She had a little burnt red bob haircut, but not the “excuse me, I ordered this salad with gluten-free dressing, I’d like to speak with your manager” type of hair bob, more like the “I still haven’t left my art school phase but I’m working on deciding where I’ll go next” type of bob.

While browsing, I overheard her telling a customer about how Tarantino’s newest revenge trilogy signifies his move into a more serious filmic depth, but if the customer wanted to watch something totally serious, they should go with Lars Von Trier. I knew I needed to talk to her. But not right then. I prefer to plan before I act. Okay, plus I was afraid.

You should know that I love sex. It’s one of the only activities that stops me from constant over-analyzing, self doubt, and pessimism. Not that this was what I was thinking about her. I wanted to grok her mind, not her body. Okay well yeah her body too.

I came back and waited at the coffee shop across the street, reading the paper. When I saw her come out for a smoke I got up to leave and started to walk past her. I stopped short.

“Got an extra smoke, by chance?”

“Nice to meet you too,” she said.
“Sorry. I’m a real jerk.”

“Not just a jerk. A creep, too. I saw you come into the shop earlier and not rent anything and leave.”

“Shit,” I said. “You’ve got me pegged. I better go before I keep digging.”

“Oh, it’s okay, you seem nice enough. Plus, you’re attractive. Sure, I’ve got plenty to spare.”

She handed over a Pall Mall and lit me up. A Pall Mall is for several very specific types of people: old men, usually black; hipsters trying to pretend they don’t care and want to save money; people who actually don’t care and are trying to save money. If I had to guess, I’d say she seemed like the third category.

“You like working here?”

She stared at me. “Next question.”

“Well, okay then. What are your dreams? Your hopes and dreams.”

“You went straight from nothing to everything in five seconds flat.”

“I see no reason to ask the questions in between.”

“Me neither. Unfortunately I still have no answer, as dreams are for the short-sighted.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“So, you assumed I am short-sighted?”

“Is that unfair? Isn’t almost everyone?”

“Yes, good point,” she said. “I don’t know why I should expect you to know me without talking to me.”

“Phew. For a second I thought I’d lost your favor.”

“Almost. You don’t seem to be totally deluded. Want to go for a walk?”
“Don’t you have to go back to work?” I asked, full of compassion. “Won’t they fire you?”

“I could use a change,” she said.

“Okay.”

We walked and said nothing and smoked. It was getting dark.

A guy in a ski mask holding a gun ran from around the corner and pointed it at us.

“You know what it is,” he said. “Gimme what you got.”

Without a thought I removed my coat and threw it to the man. “Take it,” I said, unzipping my fly and pulling my jeans off, then my shirt. “Take it all! Here!”

“The fuck, motherfucker?”

I even threw my boxer shorts at him and they landed on his head and I think this is what made him angry enough to strike me in the head with the butt of his pistol and scream more profanities as he took off, holding all my clothes and Daphne’s wallet. She carries a wallet, I thought about for the first time, as I lay on the ground dazed, and I also noticed the look on the man’s face as he ran away, decipherable even through the thick cotton ski mask showing only his eyes and eyebrows, and he seemed to feel sorry for me, but for who I am, profanely enough, not because he’d just robbed me.

Until the police arrived Daphne cradled me indifferently, like a cow being positioned for branding. Two people stumbled upon us, with me naked and in Daphne’s arms, so they called the cops for us.

“So, the guy wanted all your clothes?” said Officer Mansavage (I kid you not, that was his name).

“What can I say, officer? He wanted all my clothes.”
A white lie like this was necessary to avoid the inconvenience of being jailed for public exposure. I’m willing to do what I have to when I have to.

All they had for me to cover myself was a folded canvas and a zip tie to fasten it. They offered us a ride home but we declined.

When they left we continued walking and blasted through cigarettes. “So. First date and already we’ve gone to second base.”

She chuckled. “A date, huh?”

“Hey now, I’m not assumi—”

“Relax, I get it. You’re trying to be funny and failing. How ‘bout a drink?” she asked, offering a flask from her back pocket.

“I’m a recovering alcoholic.”

“Why avoid something you’re good at?”


“Yep. Shouldn’t you call your bank and cancel your cards?”

“I don’t have any cards. Not that I keep on me.”

“Ah.”

I was glad she had something to drink. I was becoming frightened to be around her. I think because she seemed a lot like me, and I’m intolerable.

A lady approached us. “Daphne, there you are. Where the hell have you been? Ricky is yelling. Ricky never yells.”

“Alice, Ricky’s a softie.”

“Well he’s mad at you.”
“Even if he fires me he’ll give me a good recommendation.”

“How Machiavellian,” I said.

“Aren’t you just special, Daphne,” said Alice. “You can just walk out of work and make everyone else work harder.” Out of nowhere, Alice’s face contorted like she was about to cry.

“What’s wrong?” asked Daphne.

“Jimmy broke up with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I can tell you are. Really,” said Alice. “Don’t hurt yourself coming over to hug me.”

“Sorry, Alice,” said Daphne. She stood and hugged her friend. “Why did he break up with you?”

“He says I’m too needy. He says he’s not ready for this type of commitment and that even when he tells me that, that I keep treating the relationship too seriously.”

“Is he right?” I asked.

“Thanks, asshole.”

“No, no. I’m only saying, either he’s right, in which case, change yourself. If he’s worth it. If you’re worth it to yourself. If he’s wrong, forget him. Who needs him.”

Alice began to sob, and nuzzled into Daphne’s shoulder.

“Alice, listen. You shouldn’t worry about this,” Daphne reassured. “You should put it past you. It’s all the same.”

“What’s all the same?”

“All of it. Your mistakes and successes. The people you believe you know and believe you love. All built of the same stuff. Zoom in, just zoom in, and you’ll see all of it, identical, one unimaginably large conglomeration of identical single items, so small they can’t even be called
items. Beneath everything is atoms and then beneath that quarks, and beneath that something we haven’t observed yet, but oh, it’s there, and it’s all identical. The tools you use to zoom in—also the same stuff. That’s just physics. Irrefutable. My words, right now, their vibrations, all the same stuff. The neurons I use to think of the words. All of it. There’s someone else out there with a virtually identical makeup to Jimmy, but even better. You’ll find him.”

“What the fuck?” said Alice.

“I like you,” I said, without planning to.

Her friend Alice trembled all over, like she was about to have a seizure. She stormed off.

“You’re not too bad yourself,” said Daphne. “But hey, now that we’ve been robbed and I have an excuse, I might as well tell my boss about it and keep my job.”

“Alright.”

“Here’s my number,” she said. “Give me a call some time. Or don’t.”

**

I’m not completely useless. I do a lot of things.

I make my own hand soap and I stamp an image of a DNA double-helix into the front of each bar. I make my own housecleaning products with lye, which involves wood ashes and water. I make my own bread; I keep enough dough for about ten loaves in a mini bucket in my fridge, pull out a clump every few days, bake it. Most bread you can buy in America is too high in sugar, and the simple-carbohydrates in bread are some of the least efficient energy for their calories. You probably already know that, though, since you’re an intelligent and responsible human being.
I try to fix and build whatever I can in my huge penthouse apartment, but I’m not afraid to admit when I’m out of my depth and need to hire someone. I have thirteen (13) different types of coffee makers—9-bar manual espresso machine, automatic espresso machine, two Turkish coffee pots, a French Press, an Aeropress, a classic Mr. Coffee, an Italian Moka Pot, a Japanese siphon, a pour-over filter, a Chemex, a percolator, a Bodum vacuum brewer, and a $4,000 fully automated self-grinding self-timing brain-scanning fuck-off machine. That last one makes the worst coffee.

I like creating fun areas in my apartment more than I like actually using them. For example, my breakfast nook. I fashioned it with an expensive American Empire period chair, I even carpentered my own table out of sandalwood. I paid a ton of money for a half-moon window looking out on the willows outside along the river. I was gonna have the goddam cutest fucking 30-something bachelor breakfasts alone in that nook, staving off Alzheimer’s with crossword puzzles, sipping on coffee with coconut oil to boost brain power. Nope. I never do that. But at least I built it.

On the other hand, I’ve had some resounding successes. Years ago, I got sick of being pick-pocketed on the metro. Into the rear of a pair of pants I sewed an extra long pocket that ended near my asshole and fitted a rectangle-shaped clump of cotton into the pocket-wall to make it look like a big wallet. I extracted small pieces of my own poop and put them in the bottom of the pocket. For a few days I did nothing but take the metro until someone finally took the bait. I grabbed their arm before they could retract it, turned my head, smiled insanely and whispered “dingleberries.”

I wear a grey wool Chesterfield coat that extends just below my waist, and white collared shirts, and jeans that stay dark blue because I never wash them. I smoke Rich brand European
cigarettes and when I feel like it I flip my collar up, even if it’s only barely justified by the temperature that day. I am sure that this causes a good portion of people to think “what a douchebag.” I don’t care about those people. Sometimes, if I feel like thinking harder about something, I put on a sweater. Of course I’m just like anyone else—I pretend I’m a certain type of person and wear the clothes to match. Oh, believe me, you can try simply not thinking about what you wear. That doesn’t excuse you from being a person. You’re still a type, you’ve just relinquished control over it.

So, there’s that. I’ve learned some crafts thoroughly, like fashion, breadmaking, pick-pocket revenge and breakfastnookery. I’ve exerted some control over my life.

It is not escaping me that right now I sound like a salesman trying to convince you that a lemon ain’t a lemon.

***

For a week I just kept thinking how little I care about anything, how unlikely it is that anything important will happen, how ineffectual I am. Finally, I said to myself, well if you’re that useless, then you must be making the wrong choice by not calling her. So I called her.

When she picked up she said “Make it quick.”

I said, “Hey, sorry I didn’t— ”

“Oh, it’s you. I don’t accept your apology. Let’s go to the bar near the video store.”

“Okay.”

“Fifteen minutes.”

We sat in a corner booth.
“What do you want?” I offered.

“Scotch and soda, please.”

I ordered the same. We sat and stared anywhere but at each other. I couldn’t think of anything to say, and I was briefly worried that we wouldn’t resume our former palaver.

“Are things okay with your friend? The one whose boyfriend broke up with her?”

“She’s fine. She could use a little toughening up.”

“So what turned you into a grouch like myself?”

“Oh, the usual. Entire family murdered and such.”

“Really?”

She lowered her thick-framed glasses and peered at me over them. This I knew to mean ‘Are you an idiot?’ and she pulled it off beautifully.

“No. I’m grumpy for the same reasons you are, I think.”

I smiled, she smiled.

We became quite drunk and eventually went back to her place. There was a fierce miniature yapping coming from behind the door.

“She rarely barks like this. Maybe I shouldn’t trust you?”

“Trust me to do what?”

“To be a gentleman caller, of course.”

When I stepped in the door her adorable Pomeranian started biting my ankles. It didn’t pierce the canvas of my jeans but I felt the sharp tooth-tips through it.

“She really wants a chunk of me.” I kicked my feet in small thrusts and raised the sole of my foot to the dog’s face to keep it off me without hurting it.

“I guess she doesn’t like you,” said Daphne.
“I’ll let her bite me ‘til she gets tired. I’ve probably done something to deserve it. I’m sure I owe at least that much to the dog race.”

“Well that’s a creepy thing to say. What have you done to dogs?”

“Oh, pet them as if they wanted it. Use them like a pillow. As if they asked to be bred into little balls of need and unashamed happiness.”

“Who says you know what’s best for nature? You’re being silly and arrogant under the pretense of wisdom.”

“Sorry, you’re a human. It’s hard for me to avoid when I’m with another human. Another point against me.”

“Now you’re being self-deprecating. None of this is attractive.”

“Now I don’t know what to do. I’m drunk, my faculties are impaired.”

“Just be yourself.”

“Who else would I be?”

“A too-smart-for-anyone’s-good, depressed faux-philosopher with a cross to bear.”

“What’s my true self?”

“A genuine misanthrope,” she said, and leaned over to kiss me while her dog chewed my ankle. “Did that feel nice?”

“Sure did.”

“You see,” she said. “You’re human. I can’t blame you for that. Feel this.” She took my hand and put it on her chest. Then she put her hand on mine. “What do you feel?”

“Am I supposed to say your soul? Or your heart?”

“No. An organ that pumps blood to your extremities, your dick and your brain to keep you and me playing a game. I feel nothing too, just like you.”
“Oh, yeah. Keep talking dirty to me.”

“Seriously,” she smirked and play-slapped my shoulder. “I agree with you. We’re born into a battle we’ve already lost. But the one advantage we have is: there’s a few ways to lose miserably, and a million ways to lose gracefully.”

“Okay,” I said, “I get it,” and we start removing each other’s clothes. For the next couple hours we fucked each other in ways limited only by the vagaries of her dog and the boundaries of your imagination.

After hours of fun we were lying flopped and contorted on her bed like seals on tranquilizers. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met,” I said.

“That’s literally true of anyone you’ve ever met,” she said.

I thought to myself, I am outmatched. It only made me want her more.

“Let’s live together,” I said.

“We’d be like a pair of lepers without a doctor.”

“Yeah. And if we can’t cure each other, at least we can observe each others’ limb loss.”

“It’s an idea.”

“A good one?”

“Either that or bad,” she said.

“How will we find out which?”

“Rigorous scientific scrutiny. Only by starting the experiment with everything accounted for ahead of time.”

“So, what? Do we wait and see?”

“Yeah. Let’s wait. And see.”

We fell asleep.
When I woke up she was going down on me. It was better than any of the coffee from any of my thirteen coffee machines.

I returned the favor and, while I never know anymore if it’s real or not, I try to judge by the spasms and seizures and yelps of pleasure whether or not I’ve taken her all the way. I did this until it seemed like she’d orgasmed a good five times, figuring that each time increased the chances at least one of them was real.

I took full liberty with her kitchen and made breakfast and coffee while she lay inert in bed. By then her dog was only nipping my heels every ten minutes or so. I guess I was losing flavor.

We ate in silence, recovering. It may have been comfortable or uncomfortable silence, I couldn’t tell. She turned on the TV and put it on the news.

“I hate the news,” she said.

“Yeah, me too.”

“But I love it too.”

“Me too,” I said.

She turned to me and said, “I watch a lot of TV.”

“Oh? Okay. I sometimes do too.”

“No,” she said, almost worried. “Like a lot of TV.”

“Well, that’s okay.”

“Thanks, but I’m not asking if it’s okay. I’m just warning you.”

“Ha, well thanks for that.”

“C’mere,” she said, and eased my head onto her shoulder.

“It feels like you’re my mother,” I said.
“Well, this just got awkward.”

“No, come on. You know what I mean.”

“I truly don’t. Is there something about your childhood we need to discuss?”

“Oh, you. No, I mean you make me feel like when I was a kid. When I wasn’t worried about anything. When I would never describe anything as pointless. Everything was exciting. You’re exciting.”

“That’s sweet. Why are you being sweet? It’s disgusting.”

“I know, revolting.” I agreed.

“I think I would have preferred it if you had a sexual relationship with your mother.”

“That would certainly make this all a lot easier.”

“So what do you want to do today?”

“Nothing, really,” I said.

“Me neither,” she said. “I just wanna do you.”

“Agreed.”

“Have you got any fantasies?”

“No particularly. I think I’m pansexual—anything can get me off, if I want it to. Men, women, everything in between.”

“Does that mean you could enjoy having sex with an animal?”

“Yes. Without question,” I said. “I bet you think that’s weird.”

“Actually, no. I just think it’s honest. And it’s kind of… relevant.”

“How so?”

“I have this fantasy,” said Daphne. “I’ve never tried it before.”

“Go on.”
“Well, I’ve always wanted to be a sheep. A little, scared, fluffy, helpless sheep. I’ve always wanted a wolf to just come along and take me right there in a field.”

“That can be arranged,” I said. “With enough money, anything can be arranged. And I’ve got plenty.”

“You haven’t even told me what you do.”

“Yeah, well I—”

“That doesn’t mean I care.” She looked at me. “Relax, I’m kidding. Go on.”

“It’s really nothing exciting. I host websites, like porn, video game guides, recipe archives. Blah blah. I make money on ads.”

“Wow, that really isn’t exciting, you’re right.”

We went and bought a werewolf costume, which was actually pretty much a wolf costume, an absolute ton of cotton balls, some cloth, a glue gun, some planks to build a small fence, and dozens of green tinsel strips to recreate grass. Go big or go home, we decided.

We went back to my place, since I have a lot more room than her and plus her Pomeranian could ruin the illusion. We set everything up. She carefully cut a hole in the crotch of the wolf outfit. I sewed together an adorable sheep’s mask with holes for her eyes.

When everything was ready and the field was set up in one of my rooms where we’d pushed the furniture out of the way, we started the fun. I lurked hungrily, she pranced around her field on all fours, and then someone knocked on my door.

“Woops,” she said. “Hey, aren’t you gonna take off the wolf?”

“Who cares,” I said. I opened the door.

“Hello, son.”

“Whoa. Dad. What are you doing here?”
“Dad, eh?” said Daphne, a little Sex Sheep peaking around me at my father.

“What…uh. Am I interrupting?” he said.

“No, no, it’s. She’s… I’m a wolf. She’s a sheep. It’s uh.”

“What? Don’t be shy. Roleplay?”

“Yeah.”

“Marry this woman,” said my dad.

She laughed and extended her hand. “I’m Daphne.”

“Arthur. Wonderful to meet you. David, you never told me about her.”

“We just met.”

“Definitely marry this woman.”

“Alright, pops. I get the message.” I hugged him and ushered him into my foyer. “Is everything okay?”

“Son,” he said. He took his fishing hat off and clutched it to his chest with both hands. He was much balder than when I last saw him. “Your mother left me.”

“Shit. I’m sorry dad. What happened?”

“I’m gonna go take a bath,” said Daphne, nervous for the first time since I’ve met her.

“It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

“You too.”

She went off to the bathroom and we moved into my living room.

“Sit, dad. You need anything to drink, or…?”

“Something hard and strong.”

I gave him a scotch.

He drank it down in one gulp. I poured him another.
He was tucked into a corner of my leather couch, his too-big shirt ballooning in places, clutching his scotch like medicine. My dad looked like a shriveled, depressed egg. I had no idea what to do. I sat in my armchair facing him and sipped my scotch and said nothing. It felt like he was far away from me.

“It was my fault. I fucked up.”

“Oh.”

“Kid, listen to me, I’ve got to say some things,” he said, suddenly eager, and leaned forward, “She seems wonderful. She’s a lot like your mother. Exciting, smart as a whip. Snarky.”

“Yeah, she is. You got that from exchanging five words?” He receded back into himself. “Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean that in a bad way. I was just impressed. Nevermind, keep talking.”

“Let me tell you something, David. You’re going to get bored. I don’t mean because of her. I mean, that’s life. Life is way too long and way too short. The five-thousandth time you wake up and have coffee with Daphne, you’re gonna wonder what it’d be like with someone else. But just let it go. Just have those thoughts, and then let them go.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

He leaned forward again, with grotesquely widened eyes. “I’m not kidding.”

“I know you’re not.”

“I’m entirely serious.” He downed the rest of his scotch and indicated he wanted another. I poured it. “They’re everywhere, David. Smart, gorgeous women. And those perverted, filthy thoughts will never stop coming. You won’t hear anyone say that at the office. In polite company. But it’s true. It happens to every man.”

“Almost every man.”
He looked at me, angry and fearful. “David, are you saying that doesn’t happen to you? I thought you… I thought that was all you really did. Was have sex and waste time.”

“No, it definitely happens to me. Just not every man.”

“So what? There’s an exception to every rule. You learned that in kindergarten. God damn it, right now, I’m talking to you. About you. And about me. Shut up and listen to me.” He paused, and began fingerling the zipper handle on the beige Harrington jacket he’d worn for decades.

“First of all, if…” he said, drifting off, adjusting his jacket and clearing his throat, like these were his final instructions before death. “If you’re with someone and they’re worth it. Fight those urges whenever they come up. Just shut them down. It is a lifelong battle. Go wherever you can and jerk off, if you have to. I’m not kidding. Women… women will say they struggle the same way. They don’t. You are a prisoner, and… but listen, I’m not giving an excuse. It’s all my fault, son. All my fault.”

“Okay. I hear ya.”

“Do you jerk off enough?”

“Dad.”

“Nevermind. Second of all,” his voice sounded higher pitched now, like he felt sorry for me. “You’re sitting around wasting your time. You have money, so what? Money is just a bed to sleep on. It’s not a reason to wake up. Choose a goal that you might have a tiny chance of achieving. Something that has nothing to do with love. Do something impossible, David.”

He took a deep breath, deflated back onto my couch and leaned his head back. He started crying. I went over and put a hand on his shoulder. Eventually, I led him by the arm into one of my guest rooms.
I tucked him in and gave him some bedside water. He was curled up snoring mildly, and he looked like a child. I walked back to my living room and sat down. Daphne emerged from my bedroom back in her normal clothes, holding her bag. “I’m gonna head out,” she said.

“Okay.”

“I heard most of that.”

“Yeah, it sucks. I gotta call my mom.”

“Yeah, you should.”

“Talk to you soon?”

“Hey, I know this isn’t the best time to say this. But this is moving pretty quickly.”

“Well okay. I didn’t mean for it to. It just happened. I sort of thought we both…”

“I know, I’m not saying it’s your fault.”

“I just, kind of—you’re such an asshole,” I said, “that I know I can trust you.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“I feel like with you, I finally found something I want to stick to. I wanna stick to you like a quarter that glued itself to the sidewalk.”

She stared at me. I don’t know why, but I kept talking.

“Not, like, in an unhealthy needy way, I mean. Like a quarter and a sidewalk that spend plenty of time getting to know each other first.”

She kept staring.

“Like where, for a long time, the quarter was there to watch the sidewalk stay strong in spite of everybody stepping on it day-in and day-out, and where the sidewalk watched the quarter get kicked around, knowing its unused potential. And then one day they said, yeah, let’s get the strongest glue we can find.”
She put her finger on my lips to shut me up. “That’s a terrible analogy,” she said. “I’m not a sidewalk. You’re not a quarter. And this is what I’m talking about. Slow it down, cowboy.”

Right, I’d forgotten, like I always do: not everything I want will come to me immediately. Or ever. The best things in life are the hardest things. All that fortune cookie jazz.

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It’s been five days since all that happened and since I saw her. I called her yesterday, she didn’t pick up.

After talking to my mom on the phone, she called my dad and said that she’d give him a chance but she needed time. A lot of time. Time is precious to people nearing eighty.

On the phone he kept choking out apologies through sobs. I’ve never seen him so humble, like a supplicant, this former Assistant VP of a trucking company who rose up in the ranks over decades.

I haven’t cried since I was a kid. My parents might be done, now, and I still haven’t cried. I’m trying to care. I’ve had pangs of sadness here and there. Some definite excitement, with Daphne.

And now I’m building up the idea of this woman in my head like some badass movie Heroin who’ll come and whip me into shape. Teach me to feel. That’s the advice I want, how to deal with that. Slow it down, cowboy, she said.

Maybe that is the advice my dad gave me. A goal. I’ll build bridges—the best bridges in the world. Can you start an engineering degree at thirty-five? Sure you can. Can I? Remains to be seen.
I get a text message from her.

“Was at work when you called and then I passed out. Call you in a bit. Things better with your dad? Wanna pick up where we left off?”

“Awooooo,” I text.

“Baaa’aaaa,” she replies.
A Little Bit of Good Makes It All Look Real Bad

The reason people are afraid of me is because I’m afraid of myself. I have sex with either gender and unless the other person wants one, I often don’t use a condom. I occasionally call people out on the bullshit that makes up 80% of their conversation. Usually I don’t, of course, because I need to get along. I often make money by using people who let themselves be used—filming porn with subjects I meet and uploading it to ad-supported websites, selling whatever drugs I happen upon in my travels. But sometimes I make it legitimately—landscaping a lawn here and there, selling my small paintings at local art shows, I’ve done most jobs under the sun and out of it. I carry a projectile taser, a .38 revolver, a bowie knife always sharpened with my diamond sharpener, a can of bear mace, a video camera, my phone with an external battery case, an iPad, several external solar power adapter sources, all the necessary plugs and cords, a vacuum-sealing food bag, a small gas stove, three microfiber towels, and usually a pack of smokes. I also carry five cyanide pills with me at all times, distributed in different places in my clothing and my rucksack, in case I ever need a way out. If you think that’s paranoid then you’ve never been homeless, you’ve never seen what someone can do to you in an alley at 4am.

I consider myself an apprentice in the ways of Manipulation. Wherever I go now, I learn more about how to use people to get things. But I want to be a Member of Society too—I always try to give them something in return. This is not a bad thing—everyone is using everyone else. But I’m still learning and exploring new worlds.

Sometimes in an alley when I am sheltered from the din of humankind, I hear the engines of the demon-carriages of the universe working. I start to imagine the accidents the demons want unleashed upon me. They want me de-gloved, my raw finger bones and muscles exposed to the
world so it hurts to touch anything. They want me castrated, to tear out any natural urge to be close with other humans. They want my throat sore so that I can neither speak my heart to others nor swallow the fruits of the world. They will one day achieve these and more, but that’s not something to worry about right now.

I could easily not be homeless. I could easily find a shitty job and a shitty apartment, or probably a decent job, and so could almost every homeless person you see. Don’t listen to all that “you don’t know what they’ve been through, they’ve had a hard life” bullshit. It’s true for like ten to fifteen percent of them, the truly insane or the ones with the most deserved prison convictions. The rest could fuck off and be fine, but they don’t want to, even if they don’t know it. I know it, I just don’t want to. I’ve lived in a thousand cities and I still haven’t seen a fraction of what I want to see. I haven’t fucked a fraction of the people I want to fuck, witnessed a fraction of the streetside tragedies and miracles I want to be privileged to witness.

But the best things in the world can exist in an alley too. I found Tara in an alley in a small town with population 3,000 in the American midlands. The town had one bar, three restaurants, two cafes, and four churches.

The first night there was pretty easy, it never got below 58 degrees. I slept inside my sleeping bag where I’ve sewn Velcro along the top layer of under-fabric and along the rim of the upper-fabric, allowing me to fold it down over my head and have only my face exposed, my urban cocoon. Years ago my friend Melissa over in Bucksville, Illinois taught me how to hand-sew before the town started to suspect me of chicanery.
It was my second night in the town, and I woke up to the sound of a whimpering dog. I emerged from my nest as quietly as possible and went over to observe. It was actually a young woman heavy with makeup, couched in a bundle of rags, whining. She had a box cutter and she was slicing out rectangles of flesh and slowly, carefully pulling them off. There were areas of revealed gore and slices profuse with blood. She heard me and rolled over to look, she had a pale face with a few dark hollow pockmarks. I came up and gently clutched the hand holding the box cutter and pulled it off to the side.

“This is none of your business,” she said.

“It is now. I can’t let you do that.”

“Yes you can,” she said, scooting to sit upright, turning to look at me. “You easily can. Things happen all the time that you have nothing to do with.”

“Yea, but I stumbled on this one. It’s happening, I’m involved.”

“You are a skilled bullshitter.”

“Listen…” I tried to leave it sounding open-ended, warm.

It worked: “Tara.”

“Listen, Tara. For all I know, the moment I leave, you can do whatever you want to your body. Right now, I’m here, I can see you doing it. I don’t want you to do it. Will you stop?”

She looked at me for a moment and then drew the blade back into the handle of the box cutter and stowed it in one of the pockets of her huge wool coat. “I wouldn’t mind one more cigarette.”

“One more”

“Before I kill myself.”

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I pull out my pack of Pall Mall reds, move to sit against the wall next to her and hand her one.


“What?” she said loudly. “Stop saying my name.”

I could not think what to ask someone who has decided they have no life left. “How long have you lived in this town?”

“Fuck off.”

“I won’t. You can already see I won’t.”

“I know how to use that knife on more than just myself. Believe me.”

“I believe you.”

“Forever. I’ve lived here forever.”

“That’s a long time.”

She gave me a small laugh, barely there. But it was an opening.

“Do you like it here?”

“Jesus Christ. What does it look like?”

“Did you ever try going somewhere else?”

“Of course I’ve tried. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Will you stop asking me questions.”

“I have traveled lots of places. You don’t always need money.”

“Money isn’t the problem.”

“Oh.” I leaned back against the wall and lit a cigarette of my own. A few stars shone through the light of town. There seemed to be roughly half visibility from what I could tell. I
remember that I couldn’t make out any constellations. “Isn’t it incredible. We’re only seeing like half the stars right now. There are billions more.”

She hacked out a cough and cackled like a smoker. “Nice try.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re seeing a tiny fraction of the total stars, professor. There are hundreds and hundreds of billions of stars.”

“Yeah? I was just guessing from what I remember.”

“You don’t remember much.”

She was a challenge for anyone. “I suppose not.”

“Sorry. Just saying.”

“Don’t be sorry. How do you know about stars?”

“This new thing called the internet.”

She repeatedly outwitted me in conversation, which was enough to make me really like her. Some people can dish it out so easily. I got a little annoyed, which is only instinct when someone one-ups you. But I didn’t want to keep being a fucking monkey like everyone else, annoyed by the least gesture of another human. I wanted a robot-like control over my words and actions, and I still do. I want to know how to control everyone I meet as much as possible, and the best method is to let them think they are in control. But right then, she actually was.

“Ah yes, the internet—I think I’ve heard of it,” I said, smiling warmly, subservient, like I was embarrassed by how much I liked her. I leaned in a little closer. “Now listen. Can you promise me dinner? Can we have dinner? I want to talk to you more about this internet thing, and about stars.”

She rolled her eyes but that was good, it was Recognition.
“If you’re going to kill yourself I want to know who’s dying, first. Don’t you want someone to know you well before you die?”

“Aren’t you a charmer.”

“Professional charmer, actually, yes.”

“Don’t know how you got your license in the first place. Who the fuck are you to say nobody knows me well?”

I sighed and sagged my shoulders, to appear like I was giving up completely.

“Fine,” she said.

“Fine you’ll do it?”

“Yes, fine I’ll do it.”

“Fine, good.”

“Where?”

“Any good places around here?”

“Maury’s Diner. People like it.”

“Good. You promise you won’t do anything to hurt yourself before then?”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“Promise me.”

“I am not making a promise to a guy I met in an alley.”

The situation seemed to be fading from me, moving out of my control. It was hard to believe she would think about me ever again after we parted. I began to move to get up but she squeezed my arm a little tighter, pulled me close. She nuzzled her head into my chest. After a while she whispered, eyes closed, “you feel like my dog. I love my dog. She’s Agnes, an Irish Setter. She’s the most comfortable thing in the world. I am sad I have to kill myself.”
“I want to help you.”
She was exceptionally still except her quiet breathing. “I’m dying anyway. I just am doing it myself, sooner.”

“What do you mean? Are you sick?”

“Yes. I have chronic lymphocytic leukemia. For a while now. But it’s gotten worse, gotten real bad.” She said this with a little excitement, like she was telling me about her favorite movie: “I have barely any time to live.”

“Why end it sooner?”

She opened her deadly brown country eyes wide so I could really see them for the first time. “Fuck off. You ever been dying?”

“I’ve heard dying makes everything clearer.”

“You really just say whatever comes to mind. Batshit folk wisdom and all. You let words go like diarrhea and you never seem to wipe. That’s good. I’m tired of everyone’s bullshit. Tell me what you think, even if I need to get out my crayons to show you why you’re wrong.”

“Okay, so, what? Nothing’s fun for you anymore? I’m good at making things fun.”

“I hate men. You think every problem can be solved, and you’re the one to solve it. The only reason you aren’t stabbed right now is I’m dying so I don’t care anymore.”

“Oh, no need to stab me. I’m harmless. Anyway, there are plenty of good reasons to hate men.”

She leaned up and kissed me aggressively. I had never been kissed so heartlessly before and have not since. I think she was just trying to shut me up. She jammed her tongue into my mouth and I did what I could to avoid egging it on but I couldn’t help it, I didn’t pull away from
her. It was like she was teaching me what a kiss was when you filtered out all the emotional bullshit and just have the physical fleshy salivary thing in itself.

“Yeah there are. For example, my dad raped me. Got me pregnant. I had to abort a child from my own dad. Abort as in beat my stomach with a four-by-four until I was convinced nothing could survive in my belly. Also, my brothers beat me up whenever they got rejected by a girl or came home too drunk.”

She lay her head back on my chest and adjusted to get comfortable. I could tell under the cushion of her layers of clothes and her large coat that she was very thin. Her face was like a sculpture: a precise jaw, dark brown hair and deepset eyes and full brown perfect eyebrows.

In another century she would have been a Celtic warrior instead of an abused cancerous whippet. Or in this century, born differently, loved more. There was still time.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

“Stay here.”

“I promise, I’ll be right back. Promise.”

I went to get my sleeping bag and returned to our place against the wall, wrapping her and me under it. A roach crawled across my leg and moved along it, and I didn’t brush it off. When I fell asleep she was wrapped in my arms.

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The sun was bright as hell the next morning. There is the constant need for awareness on the streets, just like in the military, so I woke up when she left in the middle of the night but I acted like I was still sleeping.
I put everything away in my pack, emerged from the alley and stretched. The street was busy. Out from an unbearably cute gift shop called *Notions* emerged an army of sexy young women, covered in Prada, Coach, Gucci, J. Crew and other unnameables, a couple of them holding lattés. They were undefeatable, unanswerable. They found all those objects necessary for life. And even then I had to admit, clinging to riches is one way to pretend that you are not alone, plummeting through space, learning how to be a human for the first and last time.

I observed myself stretching in the reflection of the window of a store called *Context*. I learned in the military that humans are just sophisticated robots. I used to be weak and helpless, but with a merciless, decisive outside force (read: Commanding Officer), all that changed. With the right mechanisms, we can upgrade our thoughts and shift our thought processes. We just need to know the right keystrokes. Believe me, it’s true; people say “it’s so hard. I need drugs. My momma beat me. People don’t change.”

I headed to Maury’s around 3 o’ clock, ordered some pastries and a coffee.

At four-thirty the waitress approached. “You all set, then?”

“Not yet.”

“This isn’t, like, a coffee shop, you know.”

“I’m staying through to dinner.”

She hesitated. “Okay. Do you think you could come back at dinnertime?”

“I don’t know when my friend is coming.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s say, how about you give me a beer and some chili fries until they come.”

“Sure, that’ll work.”
After sitting, eating and drinking for hours like a mope, I had actually been processing the situation slowly. I realized that Tara was the first person in a long time that I didn’t want to control. She fascinated me. I just wanted to discover her.

Two and a half hours and two beers later, a slew of dining parties had passed through and the place was busy. The waitress was eying me nervously. A busboy came to me from the back.

“Someone told me to give this to you. She wouldn’t tell me who she was. I mean. They. They wouldn’t tell me who they was.”

It was a note. Cute. “I can’t meet you there. I’m sorry. I won’t do it—you know what—for a little while longer, though. Meet me about three miles out of town tomorrow, early, early. Leave before the sun rises. Three miles out. Do you know Sockets Road? Two miles out Sockets, and turn left on Pine, right on Poor Mile, left on Davis Lane. I will see you then? If I am alive. Sorry.”

***

It was a farm. There was a note on the front door written with childlike roundness to the letters. “Come around back.” I knocked modestly on the backdoor and she opened it into a feast, complete with elders and pets. The room hung with the smell of coffee, fruit glaze, fried bacon.

“Sit, sit.”

“This is my friend,” she said to her grandma. This old lady was a cream puff of warmth emanating from a pinewood throne.

“Then, he’s mine too.” Grandma reached up and I took her hand gently.

“Wonderful to meet you.”
“Isn’t he nice?” said grandma. “Do you like waffles? Have you ever had Stroop Waffles?”

“They’re amazing,” Tara nodded at me. “Try one,” she said, plopping one on the plate that had already been set for me.

“Thank you so much. This is all so generous.”

“No problem…” said Tara, drifting off expectantly. I understand.

“I’m Rolf,” I said to her grandpa. Names are important. She knew my name now, so she knew the title that encircled the view from my brain of all the shit shows I’d witnessed from the birthday when this show opened.

“Hello Rolf. Good to meet you. What do you do?”

“I do freelance work right now. I write articles on my laptop for a newspaper back in Seattle.”

“Wow. Seattle. Long way from home.”

“Yep. All the fog. I got tired of having a 10-foot radius of visibility, you know?”

The old folks laughed.

“I’ve been to Seattle.”

“I don’t remember that. Are you sure, Tara?”

“I’m sure, Mams. You don’t remember that? I went to a summer camp training thing for meteorology.”

“Oh,” said grandma, and she took a bite very quickly.

“Tractor ride later?” she asked her grandpa.

“Sure, my Tara.”

“I’ll go get it ready, don’t worry. Sit.”
We all ate for a while in difficult silence. Finally her grandfather spoke.

“So. How did you meet Tara?”

“Oh. At the coffee shop.”

“I see, okay. Greene’s Grounds? On Main?”

“Ah, no. It was, ah. Something Nation. On State I think.”

“Caffeine Nation. Right, that’s a good one.” He leaned forward. “It’s really nice what you’re doing. You know, considering. But it’s dangerous. You know? For her, for you. I know some people would have a problem, say it’s wrong. For someone like you, and someone like her. But I think it’s a good thing.”

I nodded, as I didn’t want to lose control, but I had no idea what he meant. I started to formulate a response, to try to draw more from him, but Tara burst back in through the door.

“Let’s go,” she said.

The tractor coughed us along past cows in their solitude. They stared ahead chewing a bolus, thinking about nothing, waiting for the next BM and the next sleep. To her I am sure they are not so indifferent, inside of her imagination. I’d like to get inside that. She looked ahead, behind, everything in her view from the back of the riding platform hitched to the tractor. In her tight jeans, her legs dangled and swung like it was summer. She had on a plaid under her thick coat and I wanted to cure her cancer and make a teepee out of all her clothes and live inside of it with her.

She held my hand. “This is my grandparents’ farm. Grandpa gave it to my dad but when my dad started to behave badly…he took it away. My dad got really pissed. But dad does love me.”
That was not love. It could not be. I thought to myself: if I see him I’ll kill him. I said to her: “Do you want me to take care of him for you?”

She put her finger on my lips, ignored what I said and smiled like a thrilled child, like we were at a carnival game shooting streams of water at gaping clowns.

Grandpa looked back at us every so often. After a while she put her arm around me. We bounced together in countermovement with the ground. I saw him trying to yell something but over the engine it was unclear.

She leapt off and pulled me with her and we ran into a field. Grandpa saw this and looked regretful. She waved at him and we kept running.

She ran, I ran under her command, and the corn appeared to be rising from the winter stubble.

She was raising it. She was making all the ground fertile.

She had an intelligence childlike in its potential, adult in its cynicism.

Why was I there? What did I want from her?

What I always want. A world—she had a world I could explore.

***

“How about that little Japanese restaurant at the edge of town? You ever been there?”

“Oh. Geez,” she said high pitched, like a trickster angel, like she was playing with me, but kindly. “Wasabi? I’m amazed they survived here so long. They’ve been here ten years and they only get like a few regulars. But there’s no chance any of the bad people will see me there.”

“Your father and brothers?”
“Them. And others.”

“Is it good?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. Choosers…” she thought for a second, “are always losers.”

She said this last phrase like it was wisdom from the Mahatma himself. We went to Wasabi. The old hostess was eager to please us, but the place was actually busy. She handed us menus.

“Woo. Look at all of it. It’s a wonder they’re not more popular.”

“Good selection, yeah.” I ordered the ramen and she got two sushi rolls, it arrived, we ate.

She looked at the menu, fascinated.

“Is this your first time coming here?”

“Nope. Just my last time. And I’ve never learned what most of this is.”

I ignored her remark, but taught her about the menu, that nigiri is pronounced *nuh-geery*, and sashimi is just like it sounds.

She moved to my side of the booth. We got awkward and even angry looks from people at other tables.

“Okay. So what’s *soba* and *udon*?” she asked, and she started to cry. I explained. I think she just wanted to hear my voice. I think she might’ve already known these things or not cared, or cared so much that it made her sad.

“Keep going,” she said. Her eyes were red and puffy now, and she clutched my arm, leaned closer. She kept crying and nodding eagerly at me as I spoke, looking me in the eyes, looking at the menu, looking back at me. But soon I ran out of things to say.
“Rolf. It’s just that it’s all for the last time, you know?” She covered my idle hand in hers, righted her posture, prepared for something. “I want you to kill me.”

I swallow my bite of noodles and broth with difficulty. “Don’t mess around.”

“I’m not. I’m going to die. Soon. Horribly. I want to die sooner, with you.”

“This is absolutely silly.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Haven’t you ever read any fucking poetry?”

“You are full of it,” I said, smiling. She didn’t smile.

“Now, more than ever,” she moved her hand to my cheek, “seems it rich to die. To cease upon the midnight without pain.”

I recognized this from somewhere. I couldn’t tell what was happening: I was either in the middle of a ridiculous redneck poetry session, or falling in love for the first real time. “Can’t we just enjoy this dinner for now?”

“Don’t want the bad mixed in with the good, huh? It’s bad, Rolf. It’s really bad. There is all this bad shit mixed in with the good. Promise you’ll help me and we can enjoy this even more. When you’re gonna die, things become more clear. Promise you’ll help me and we will know what we have now.”

“Why are you asking me to do this?”

She wouldn’t look at me. “I can’t do it alone. But it has to be done. Please. I love you.”

“We just met.”

“I feel it.”

“It’s infatuation.”

“Love starts that way.”
What? What should I have said at this point? Should I have not wanted her to feel that way? Was I digging this person further into her grave?

“Besides,” she said. “Infatuation is the best part. If that’s all I have before I die, what could be more perfect?” She raised the end of perfect like she was pretending to be a valley girl. I knew it was pretend. She was that kind of person who observes others, adapts their nuance, and in expressing it, you could tell she appreciated it: it was a flattering mimicry, not a mockery. I couldn’t stand it. I felt deeply sorry for her. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of charity.

It was absolutely true; she was right. I could be the love of this woman’s life until the end. I could make her happy for the absolute rest of her life.

“Okay,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said, seriously. “How?”

“Can we talk about that later?”

“How?”

“I carry several cyanide capsules with me.”

“Seriously?”

“I do.”

“In case of…what? Like some kind of spy? Who are you?”

“Rolf,” I said. “Seriously, though. Yeah. I don’t know where I might end up, what might happen to me wandering around. Some bad stuff has happened to me and I got these pills for free from a friend of mine in Carson City, so I kept them.”

“My great grandpa was a spy for America in World War I.”

“Really? Like spied for who and on whom, doing what? Any exciting stories?”

“Well for one thing, I remember he used to tell me this joke.”
It was time to eat and to listen. Only these things. Every action was discrete and serious. I felt like I was dying with her.

“An American had been acting as a double agent in the KGB for years. His biggest problem was the vodka. It was all he could drink in Russia but he hated it, and he loved whiskey. Finally one day he got so tired of it, he gave up.

“He told his partner ‘Okay, Vladimir. Let me admit something. I’ve been working for America all these years. Pack me up, ship me to a Gulag, but I beg you, give me just one bottle of whiskey.’

Vladimir says ‘You think I didn’t know?’

‘Well, if you knew, why didn’t you tell anyone? Why am I still here?’

‘I wanted you to suffer like we suffer.’

‘Suffer, what do you mean? What about all the secrets I’ve been feeding to CIA HQ?’

“Vladimir says, ‘Secrets? There are no secrets between Russia and America, not with all these spies. There is only one secret in Russia: we all hate vodka too. But do me a favor and please don’t tell Gorbachev.’”

I laughed sincerely and it almost bled into a cry. I worked briefly as veterinarian’s assistant. Her happiness was like watching a puppy enjoying its last can of wet food. She was absolutely thrilled about this petty little thing. “That’s terrible,” I said.

She looked upset, lowered her head. “It’s my grandpa’s joke.”

“I’m sorry. Hey, sorry. I was just kidding. I meant like, it’s a funny kind of terrible. I laughed, didn’t I? Come on, it’s funny.”
The next morning, we went to her favorite place, a little clearing in the woods a ways outside of her grandparents’ farm. We bought some fresh hot cider from a stand on the road somewhere and she kept it in a thermos as we went to her place. I don’t know how she was so sure of herself. I have the courage to do a lot of things, but not to kill myself; I have thought about it many, many times. Out there all we heard was the chatter of two squirrels talking to each other nearby. Soon they stopped.

“Let’s sit like this,” she said, kneeling down.

“Okay, Tara, of course. You know, it’s called seiza. The way of sitting.”

“That is beautiful. How do you know so much about Japan?”

“I lived there for a couple years.”

“I love learning about you. Sit right there,” she pointed in front of her. “Look at me. Smile at me. I want to watch the sun finish rising behind you. You are handsome as a Rockefeller, you know. And sexy as dirt. Like Brando.”

“Tara, do you have to do this?”

“Don’t say that. Nothing like that. You promised.”

“Okay.”

“But say my name again.”

“Okay, Tara.”

“How much do you love me?”

“More than I’ve ever loved anyone before.”

“Who am I? Why do you love me?”

“You’re my best friend. I knew it the moment I met you.”
“Thank you. And who am I?”

I didn’t know what to say. This was not something I could fake.

“Will you wipe these tears?”

I did, but more were streaming down.

“Thank you. Can I please have the cider now?”

***

I went to the town’s only bar to process what had happened. After about five more minutes of the two of us just sitting quietly, she had told me she was ready. I asked if she was sure, and she said nothing and drank the cider. I’d made chloroform from bleach and alcohol, and I knew I had to use it quickly before the seizures and heart attack from the cyanide would take her painfully, forever, but it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I looked at her for a few moments and just wanted this not to happen. She looked at me, swallowing nervously, and her eyes said to me that she had heard there was something people call life which had passed her by completely.

So I found the bar and nursed a beer for a while.

I knew I would pay for this, one way or another. But how soon, how much—this would not be settled, I thought, for some time. Choosers are always losers, she had said. I kept turning it in my head. She had pronounced it officially, but it seemed made up then and there. It probably was. It’s true enough: if you choose any one thing, you are losing out on everything else. But there’s more to it. It’s impossible to know with even remote certainty the consequences of your
actions. You can upgrade yourself, learn as much as possible, but you can’t control what you don’t know.

This guy a few stools down was hanging his head down, leaning on his elbows. I decided to distract myself and speak with him.

“What’s wrong, man?” I said, friendly. “Wife got you on the couch again?”

“Ha. Nah, man. Wife is dead a while now. God rest her soul.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. No, it’s my daughter. She been missing again. She’s got bad mental problems, real bad, skizzofrenna. She runs away sometimes, stays away awhile, and it just scares me to shit every time.”

“Are you messing with me?”

“What’s that? Of course not.” He glanced at me, angry. “Who are you? You ain’t from here are you? Why would I mess with some tourist.”

“Nevermind. I’m sorry. What’s her name?”

“Nevermind, yourself.”

I looked at what should have been myself in the mirror but instead of me it was a demon that looked exactly like me and it was truly happy. It was the other side of me: the side with perfect memory, a perfect understanding of my life’s narrative that I couldn’t put together. It knew something I didn’t. I sipped my beer for a while. The guy stopped talking for a while too. He spoke with the bartender. I waited, ordered another beer. After a while the man headed out the back door.

I followed him outside. He was heading to the outhouses. I pulled my revolver from its buttoned pocket on my rucksack and ran up on him, grabbed him.
“What is her name?”

“What the fuck, man? Jesus Christ.”

I shoved him to the ground.

“What’s her name?”

“What do you want? Here’s my wallet, take it.”

The stench of shit rose from the outhouse behind Tara’s father.

“Does Tara have cancer?”

“What the fuck? Do you know her?”

“Answer the fucking question.”

“Alright, alright. Shit. If you believe her she does. If you believe her she’s got every which fucking disease that came since Adam got the itch. As far as any doctor ever said she is healthy as a newborn babe except for her mind problems.”

“Did you rape her? Did you beat her?”

“What? Where is she? Did she tell you that?”

I pulled him up and held onto him but this could have provided an opportunity for wrestling my gun free so I backed up and pointed it, clutching it securely. I did not obey rule number one of owning a gun: keep your finger off the trigger until you shoot. “Come with me.”

I walked him into the woods.

“Hey this guy here! Somebody—” he began, and I pistol-whipped him, sinking him to the ground. He was limp and whimpering, shaking a little.

“Get up and move. Now. And shut the fuck up.”

When we’d walked at least two miles into the forest, I kicked him to the ground.
There he was before me, a supplicant. But how do you know someone? If they are standing right in front of you, what is the best hammer to pierce the walls around their true self, their darkest or brightest part? And if there is no sure method, how can anyone act as judge, ever? Sacrifices are necessary, sometimes unnecessary ones.

I shoved my elbow with force into his abdomen and with the same hand I grabbed one of his hands, isolating his finger. “Did you rape her?”

“No.”

“Do you have some way to prove this to me?”

“Motherfucking fuck, man. How can I prove it to you? The whole past ain’t fuckin’ recorded, man. Please, why would I rape my daughter.”

I cut around his cuticle and then dug the blade in between his nail and fingertip, prying it off. He screamed the whole time.

I let his hand go and stood up. “Did you beat her?”

“Jesus Christ no, I did not. Oh my god.” He was choking out every breath. “Where is she? Is she okay?”

“No, I don’t know where she is. I’m sorry,” I said, fitting my gun back into my rucksack pocket and pocketing the knife. I crouched down, and he was staring at me with only fear. I don’t know who I thought I was. I don’t know how I thought I was going to be able to make the right decision in this situation. Eyes are not windows into anything. There is no window into another person because we are not fucking houses. I could not live with him for the rest of my life and find out who he was or what he’d done.

“If you tell anyone about this, I promise you, they won’t get to me before I kill you. If I misjudged in this situation, I apologize with all of my heart. I mean that truly. Now, I want you
to listen to me very well.” I stared at him. He nodded. “I want you to understand that all of this was because of what you might have done to her. What she said you did. Now maybe that was her schizophrenia talking. Maybe not. No way for me to know. If you are innocent, you have every right to be angry, but I want you to imagine what you would do to the man who raped and beat your daughter and allowed his sons to do the same. If you are guilty, I want you to know that I will find out and I will come back and kill you. Not before torturing you far worse than this.”

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The next morning the bus out of town was a quarter full. I was careful and half-expected cruisers to come up on me at any moment, but it appeared the man did not tell anyone anything. There was an old lady wearing a wide Sunday hat and a cherub’s smile. I paused my walk down the aisle and said to her “Boy, you’re having a good day.”

“I surely am. My son is getting married. And he’s got this really nice job for a few years now. He’s buying me a house near him in Fresno.”

“Well, now. Congratulations.” I smiled and went on, took a seat near the bathroom in the back.

I saw a man in Fresno drinking coffee next to his wife on the couch, hands cradling the mug, dogs and cats flitting and sniffing around them, children playing in the corner. He was awaiting the arrival of pure warmth.

My mother. Before she died she lived in my head all the time, in a little nook in one corner and reminded me every so often to let the comfort in when it comes. She died a while
back and the memory is not enough. I need other things now, other people to remind me that sometimes the searing fabric of death, with its reminders omnipresent, can be beaten back for short moments here and there.

The bus idled far longer than I could stand. I came to this place like an angel of death. I left like some failed migrant worker. Finally we started to move. I saw fields of early crop growth, cows that stood like a mottled regiment of deficient beings, crop-encircling fences. It seems constantly like the inanimate and lower-conscious things of the world know more than me about something. About everything. I know that this is metaphysical nonsense. But it’s relentless nonsense. Do the crops want to become feces that in turn becomes life again? Do the cows dream of the captive bolt pistol that will brain them? Do the fences come to love the three living things that will bump into them over a single fence-lifetime and allow them to serve their life’s purpose of maintaining security? None of this material knows anything about any of this. No futures exist. They are neurons living as imagined images in my motherboard.

The sad stupid dreamer in me says that I could have kept her alive, even if she was schizophrenic, that she wasn’t in her right mind and didn’t really want to die. I could have loved and lived to help Tara for the rest of our lives. Maybe then I wouldn’t still be wandering this country.

The truth is that she wanted to die, whatever else is true. She wanted to die with me.

This is what I tell myself at night before I sleep, but I believe it to be true. When I say her name out loud, I know it to be true.

She was the bringer of a new knowledge to my databank: control is a myth. I don’t care for it anymore, beyond what is practical. I am a wanderer seeking an unbroken analog of Tara. I am not a judge, I am a witness. I’ll watch carefully. Probably there is nothing to see.
Vita

Brendan Frost was born in Washington, D.C. He received his B.A. in English with a focus on Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He has worked as a college instructor, copywriter, administrative officer, phone call transcriber and landscaper, among other odd-jobs. Brendan is a vaping enthusiast and a grateful resident of New Orleans.