Days of Forgetful Pirating and Other Stories

Daniel Morales

Creative Writing Workshop, drmorale@uno.edu

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Days of Forgetful Pirating and Other Stories

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Daniel Morales

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# Table of Contents

## Days of Forgetful Pirating

“Of Captain Thaddeus Darkheart” ................................................................. 2  
The Pirate’s Story .............................................................................................. 6  
Days of Forgetful Pirating ............................................................................... 22  
Looking for Love ............................................................................................. 52

## Other Stories

Her Project ........................................................................................................... 55  
Uncle ................................................................................................................... 58  
Manuelito ............................................................................................................ 75  
Outrageous Fucking SUVs .............................................................................. 92  

Vita...................................................................................................................... 109
Days of Forgetful Pirating
“Of Captain Thaddeus Darkheart”

From Donovan Daft’s *Epical Pyrates and Their Infamous Affairs Volume I* (1725)

Captain Thaddeus Darkheart is a Legend on one Side of the Atlantic and destitute on the Other. Few Pyrates had as contentious a Reputation as He, and for many Incidents, the Facts fail to provide proper Scaffolding for the Fictions created about the Man. Nonetheless, Darkheart is said to have ruled the Caribbean for nearly a Quarter Century, and surely None are as consistent in their Determination and unpredictable Temperament.

I should confess that He was also an important Source for much of the Material contained within this Volume, yet surprisingly He has steadfastly refused to make any Account of his own Story, thus this Chapter is noticeably condensed in comparison with the Others, as I was only able to verify the most meagre Selection of Events, and his Story avoided even my boldest Attempts at Embellishment. I shall, in any Case, attempt to provide as full a Portrait as possible.

*Darkheart* the Man stands nearly two Yards tall without the Musculature to fill out such an imposing Frame. His Jaw is weathered and grim and narrow, and his Nose is fine and beaked at only the slightest Angle. Time has bent Him, and now He hobbles with the Assistance of a Cane and a false Leg, but when He happens to recount a Tale, He has the Habit of punctuating dramatic Passages by rising for a Moment to his full Height. He has shaved his famous black Beard in a vain Attempt to accord Himself a Kernel of Anonymity. His Hair has grown out and
is beginning to grey, and he braids his Locks down his Back and fancies Bicorns and other Hats of the Era. While he keeps Himself neatly dressed, He cannot afford the latest Fashions, and his limited Cloathing has worn and become ragged. His right Eye is patched, ‘tho there is no Story in particular associated with its Loss. Instead, Legend grew around the Organ like Scar Tissue. Some say He pulled It out himself, while Others claim It just fell out one Day on its own Accord.

Darkheart was born the son of Bakers in London in 1682. The family was not well off, yet not of the lower Classes either, and He seems to have enjoyed his Life for most of his Childhood, until some ill Humour in the Home forced young Thaddeus out, perhaps a Desire to avoid falling into the familial Occupation, and by the Age of Fourteen, He is serving on Ships to the Brazils and other international Destinations, where he no doubt became acclimated to the Life of a seafaring Man. By Fifteen he has made it to the West Indies via New York in America.

The next Accounts of his Whereabouts put him on Infamity alongside Patrick Broadshanks, whose Tale we have recounted previously, and to which I refer the Reader in order to avoid Redundancy. Darkheart’s Role in Broadshanks’ Demise is disputed, and some Accounts even have Him involved in all Manner of Intrigue nefarious and vile, but were This the Case, then Darkheart is truly an Actor of the first Rate, for he became quite animated while recounting his Memories of Broadshanks and even shed a Tear and had to pause while I refreshed his Cognac. Whatever the Truth may be, suffice it to say Broadshanks’ Passing shook young Darkheart, and shortly after He found Himself, according to nearly every Account, the youngest ever to captain a Boat of forty Guns in the Caribbean.

The Death must have steeled Him as well, for He wavered not after acquiring the Position and soon after built quite a Reputation, notably in his Thirst for Cognac and Destruction. This dramatic Shift from Broadshanks to Darkheart sent Some over the Side, in search of a more
natural Rationality, and drew Others who could appreciate the Intensity and Drive, with which He lashed his Crew. Indeed, those who quartermaster’d with the Man went on to an astounding Rate of Success, with their own Crews. Snodgrass, Smythe, Fellows, Waltham, Crass, Todd, Bullard. A Perusal of the List and their Affairs, as recounted earlier in this Volume, shows that Darkheart, despite the Abandon with which he led, was an effective Leader.

But your Author seems to have become distracted, drunk on the Tales, which He was unable to confirm, neither with Darkheart himself, nor with his former Men, nor Any that suffered the Captain’s Wrath, for Darkheart implemented a Policy of Silence amongst his Crew that kept their Affairs mostly Mystery.

The next Note We have of the Man is upon his Return to England in 1718 when He surrendered Himself to the King’s Proclamation, when His Majesty offered Amnesty to Pyrates in exchange for abandoning their criminal Lives. Darkheart returned with one Leg and one Eye fewer than He left and, allegedly, his Pockets weighed down with Diamonds. Your Author never set Eyes upon these Diamonds, but He did speak with numerous Tradesmen who bartered Services for the Gems. They became the Equivalent of counterfeit Currency as the Ship from which They were taken was bound for New England.

Darkheart has relied on the Charity of Family, Friends, and Acquaintances, but even his own Brother was hesitant to harbor the Man for an extended Stay, as He worried about the Uncle’s influence on his Nephews. Thus, the Captain has eked out a meagre Lifestyle, which must be far from the Luxuries He enjoyed abroad.

And such is all I am able to account of Captain Thaddeus Darkheart. I offer my sincere Apologies for ending the Volume with a Portrait of a Pyrate whom We might term the sad Man of London. I hope to follow with a second Volume full of more Adventure as soon as I can take
the Stories from my Sources, and Instinct tells Me *Darkheart* may add to his own Account.

Something, some Decision made early in his Career, coloured the Rest of his Time at Sea and kept Him from sharing too much, no matter how much Liquor with which I plied him. Cognac, indeed, seemed to have had quite the opposite Effect and served only to further seal his Mouth and Mind.
The Pirate’s Story

The pirate entered the bakery shortly after eleven, as he did every Saturday. Everyone on Deftworth Street called the man the pirate, and Anne could see the obvious: his peg leg meted out each short step from the door to the counter behind which she stood, and his right eye was covered with a black leather patch. He brought his good eye close to the glass counter and bit his lower lip as he admired the delicacies behind the panes.

“Good morning, sir,” Anne said.

“Good mid-morning, milady,” the pirate responded. He wore a long, brown leather coat over a gray waistcoat, knee-length, gray breeches, and a frilly, white shirt that had started to yellow with age. His long, gray hair was tucked behind his ears, and a black bicorn hat kept the locks close to his head. His lack of stockings revealed skinny legs. Deftworth Street was a young neighborhood, no match for the Piccadilly, but even Anne could see that the pirate was out of place amongst the numerous inns, shops, and residential blocks that had sprung up as developments around the Great North Road. He would have fit in more with her hometown in the countryside where the people were much less fashionable.

Anne had arrived in London two months earlier with two days’ worth of clothes in a canvas bag and an envelope containing a note to her uncle that her father thought she couldn’t read. Her father didn’t know that she’d taken Volume One of Donovan Daft’s *Epical Pyrates*
and Their Infamous Affairs from his bookshelf and hidden it in with her items. Nor did he know that after the wagon crossed the first river, she opened the note and learned of her fate: her parents, burdened with six others and one more on the way, had indentured Anne to her uncle. Her parents had kept her older sister, but Anne at twelve was more useful away. She would send home half her wages and keep the rest for herself. She would help her uncle until she could be married off for the collective benefit of the family. Anne was heartbroken.

The uncle eyed the torn envelope but said nothing and led Anne to the second floor of the bakery where he lived in relative comfort with her aunt and four cousins, all boys, all younger than herself. The blue-eyed boys were all topped with sandy-colored, curly hair, and they watched Anne with equal parts suspicion and curiosity; her hair was long and black, and her nose hooked a little, but it gave her distinction: she was beautiful.

Anne was given a small mattress which she laid on the floor every evening and folded every morning. In the quiet, few minutes of dim dawn before the house awoke, she immersed herself in the adventures in her book. The stories themselves were exciting, but more than anything Anne appreciated the sense of movement they provided. Captain Crass’s flight from Hispaniola and Captain Waltham’s escape from Madagascar were faster than the wagon that brought her to London, faster than the carriages that rattled along the cobblestones in front of the bakery, and they were Anne’s great escape.

Naturally, imagination had gotten the best of young Anne, and as she stood behind the counter, she wondered whether the man had been a pirate, and if so where he had been and why he would be so interested in baked goods. There were rumors that the pirate had been an actual pirate captain, and that after years of infamy he had surrendered himself to His Majesty’s proclamation, returned home to London, and secreted himself away in the every day of city life.
But Anne had trouble seeing him as a pirate from the stories she read. This pirate was always clean shaven, and his small face seemed like that of a jockey at the races. She tried painting a beard on his jaw and darkening his skin, but even then it was difficult to imagine. The man was bone thin, so much so that he couldn’t have been eating the pastries he bought every week. He was regular as clockwork: after examining each and every one of the confections, he picked out six caraway comfits, a dozen almond conceits, and four ratafin biscuits.

Anne slid open the grate behind the case, took out the wax paper bag she had prepared earlier that morning, and placed it on the counter. “Anything else for you today, sir?” Anne secretly hoped their conversation would take a more dramatic turn, that maybe he would reveal some anecdote to her and her alone, that he might even invite her on his next journey, which in Anne’s imagination began here and now, as soon as they could man his ship, but reality was far less urgent, and she rarely had the opportunity to say anything other than what the transaction necessitated.

“No, thank you.” The pirate stuck a hand into his breeches pocket, pulled out two coins, and placed them next to the bag. He was a half pence short and reached his hand back into the breeches. When he found nothing, he scowled and dug around more desperately.

Anne felt bad watching him. In the two months she had been helping her uncle, the pirate had never once been short. He always made the same order, produced three half pence, and placed them carefully on the counter next to the bag of treats.

The pirate checked the rest of his clothing. He found nothing in his jacket pockets, nor in the back of his breeches. He looked at Anne with an air of discomfort and then reached into his waistcoat and moved his fingers about. Anne could hear something knock between his fingers; it wasn’t the metal clink of coins, nor was it the dull click of bone dice she knew from the games
she played in the evenings with her aunt and uncle and cousins. Anne looked at the pocket, and when the pirate noticed her attention, he pulled two small hazy, white rocks from the waistcoat. “Just me lucky stones,” he said and held them in the air before her.

The stones looked like quartz, the kind she had occasionally dug up from the creek bed near her house in the countryside. The pirate returned the stones to his waistcoat pocket, ran a hand through his hair, and then replaced his hat.

“Bring it next week and we can settle the account,” Anne said.

“No,” the pirate said. He hobbled to the door and opened it. “I’ll not put meself in yer father’s debt. Good day.”

Before Anne could do anything, the door was shut. She ran to the window, but the pirate had already stepped out into the traffic of Deftworth. She ran back to the counter. The half pence sat forgotten on the counter next to the package. She grabbed the bag, stepped into a pair of overshoes set outside the door, and ran after the pirate.

Carriages and wagons passed in the street, and Anne weaved through them and the crowds emerging from the stores on Saturday errands. She passed the coaching inns and taverns where travelers arriving on the edge of the city stopped for a night of rest, and as she did, friends of her uncle turned their heads in surprise as she went. She would most likely pay for this little episode. She thought she had lost sight of the pirate, but she overtook a group of young boys playing in the street and caught up with him just as he was turning off the main street into the narrow residential streets to the north.

“Sir,” she said. “Please, sir.” She held the bag before her.

“I’ll not be indebted to yer father!” he said and knocked her hand. The package of treats flew into the muddy street, and the pirate stomped off.
“He’s not my father, he’s my uncle!” Anne shouted. Her eyes filled with tears. She squatted to pick up the bag. Mud covered one side, and the contents had been jostled and split up a bit but were still salvageable. With the two half pence on the counter, she’d only have to relinquish a half pence of her own to cover the cost. But her one connection to the stories, a possible source of the tales themselves, and perhaps even freedom incarnate, had run off and, judging from his attitude, might never be coming back. The rejection hurt worse than the financial burden.

When Anne looked up, the pirate had returned and was standing in front of her with two hands on his cane. He reached out a hand, and Anne took it to lift herself up. The skin of his fingers was thickly calloused but smooth to the touch, and the fingers themselves strong. She looked at the pirate who was hesitant to meet her gaze.

“He’s not my father,” she said. “And I’ll lend you a half pence of my own.” Anne thrust the bag at the pirate, and he took it from her. She reached into the pocket on her apron and retrieved her coin purse. The pirate accepted the half pence she gave him but then looked blankly at her open palm before him. “There, I’ve lent it,” she said. “Now you have to settle the bill.”

The pirate returned the half pence to Anne, and they stood staring at each other. The traffic on Deftworth passed behind the girl. Neither seemed to know what to say, so the pirate doffed his hat and headed into the residential area.

When Anne returned to the store, her uncle was on his knees polishing the pastry case. She froze in place. Her uncle stood, dropped the rag he was holding into a bucket, and then upended the dirty water with his foot. “You can spend the rest of the day washing the floor,” he said.
Anne tried to take her time with the chore, but she finished early enough that her uncle set her to kneading until her arms were engulfed in flames and she could no longer bend her fingers. Only then did he let her carry the bucket to the well and run her fingers under the cool water that emerged from the pump. The entire time, her cousins watched silently out of the corner of their eyes as they completed their own tasks; her uncle’s steady gaze and her aunt’s absence ensured that there would be no organization of labor on site.

That night as Anne rested her head on the pillow, she found it almost impossible to sleep. It wasn’t her uncle’s snoring nor the sounds from the tavern across the street keeping her awake. She was caught up in tales, imaginary ones, and the majority stemmed from the pirate’s hands. Hands like those surely had gripped muskets, cutlasses, ropes, shovels, gold, any number of things. She examined her own fingers and found only dried dough under the nails. They still ached painfully.

The next week, the pirate entered the bakery, walked to the counter, and placed four half pence on the counter.

“That wasn’t so bad now, was it?” Anne said.

“Your generosity has humbled me, miss.” The pirate removed his bicorn and bowed.

Then he stood and examined the confections in the cases.

“The same as every week,” Anne said.

“Aye,” the pirate said. “But such a bounty never fails to impress.” Then he looked at the treats again.

“I’m Anne,” she said.
“You don’t say.” The pirate stood and angled his head so he could get a better look at her. His left eye bulged and seemed larger than it should have been. “That’s the name of me sister-in-law.”

Anne smiled. It was strange to think of a pirate with family; the ones in the book seemed isolated, free of connection. But here was one with a family of flesh and blood. A sister-in-law, which meant a brother as well, and perhaps even nieces and nephews. A pirate for an uncle.

“Are you really a pirate?” Anne asked.

The pirate let out a roaring laugh, and for a moment Anne felt her face redden with embarrassment. “I’ve long since retired,” the pirate said, “but when me hairs were less gray, aye, I were a pirate of sorts.”

“Do you have any stories?” Anne asked.

“Stories?” the pirate asked.

“Please,” Anne said. “Oh please. You must know how one goes to sea.”

The pirate stroked his chin and looked at the door. “Aye, I’ve stories.” The pirate paused for a moment. “But if going to sea be your intent, then perhaps we should step outside.” He nodded to the left. Anne’s cousin Benjamin stood behind her on the stairway to the apartment above. “We’d be less likely overheard in the streets.”

The pirate hobbled to the door and stuck his arm out. Anne paused for a brief second and remembered her uncle’s response the week prior. She looked at Benjamin, her middle cousin; he would recognize that she left and delight in sharing with her uncle, but he was too young to recognize the customer, so in Anne’s mind the reward outweighed the potential punishment. She joined the pirate and stuck her arm through his. The couple, an odd pairing for certain, stepped out into the street, and the pirate began his tale.
“Once not so very long ago,” he began, “there were a Welshman named Frederick Dudley, captain of a schooner around the Chesapeake Bay.”

“That doesn’t sound like a pirate name,” Anne said.

“Aye,” said the pirate and smiled. “But Dudley he were born and Dudley they called him during his initial tenure aboard his ship by the name of The Nail. Captain Dud. Dudley were born into a family of little means. So little that he were cast off to the piers at the tender age of eight. A child of the sea he were, and as a wild cat will, he feasted himself on whatever he could whenever he could regardless of his appetite. Food, sure, but goods as well. They say his pockets were full of the most unusual items. Shells that shined the colors of the rainbow, corks, bent and rusted nails, bits of paper with pretty pictures printed on them, feathers from ravens and pigeons, twine discarded by harbormen. Anything he could possess he took, and this behavior manifested itself at sea.

“He worked his way up, taking larger ships, adding to his fleet, until eventually one day, off the coast of Dover, he comes upon a frigate at anchor. Twenty guns they count as they round it, and Dudley decides to approach as it flew no colors and had no sign on men on the decks. He boards it with his crew, but some of the men refuse to join the party, seeing as it may have been occupied by the spirits.”

The pirate slithered the beginning and end of the word “spirits,” and Anne could feel the hair on her arms stand at attention. A chill ran down her back. “Was it haunted?” she asked.

“This were what some of the men feared.” The pirate arched an eyebrow. “But Dudley promised double shares for those who boarded, and those who did were lucky enough to find naught but an empty warship stocked with sugar. Sweet spoils indeed. With a skeleton crew, he
piloted the frigate back to the Chesapeake aside the schooner and hid away in various of the small rivers and streams that feed into the bay.

“He named the frigate The Hammer, and from there Hammer and Nail laid waste to any and all ships that came into the bay. The frigate were fast and deadly, and he and his men got fat and happy on the spoils. Dudley used the wealth to add more guns, bringing the count from twenty-two to forty-four. Then he gave the ship a coat of red lacquer that earned him the name Chesapeake Red.”

“That sounds more like a pirate name,” Anne said.

“You’re well familiar with men of the mast, young Anne.”


The pirate stopped in the streets. People walked by, and a carriage had to adjust its path. The driver yelled as he nearly clipped the pirate. “Careful there, Anne. Tales of that nature will do nothing but alter your expectations in the most unusual ways.”

Anne tugged at the pirate’s arm. “What happened next?”

“He added another mast and more sails, which meant more men and more provisions,” the pirate said. He started up his off-kilter walk again.

“Before long, no man dared enter the Chesapeake. They say his guns could reach from Nag’s Head to Wildwood, a fiction to be certain as that distance be nearly a hundred leagues, but this were testimony to the reach of Dudley’s legend. So the crew sat. Men would leave and others joined, and Dudley befriended governors and townships. Mostly he fed on the wealth and in the stasis became obsessed with stocking the ship. But no matter how much he amassed, how powerful he became, Dudley were always that boy on the piers back in Wales with a seed of desire that could not be quenched.”
The pirate took a breath and dove back into the tale.

“He hosted a watchmaker and installed a clock on the forecastle and assigned a man to sit watch and dry it and ensure the movement was wound and greased. He commissioned a set of twelve bronze swordfish and adorned the sides of the boat. The damned fish required men to shine them once a fortnight, which worked out to a fish every day or two. He were the first of the pirates to fashion a crow’s nest. First it were nothing more than a plank nailed into the top of the mast as a foothold, and men called it the crow’s cross, and they held the mast tight like a lover or a mother as they stood there praying while they stood watch. Dudley then fashioned it into a proper nest. In his quarters, he fixed cages for all manner of beasts—cats, dogs, monkeys, alpaca. He had them all aboard and their keepers to clean the kennels and prevent the odor from driving men off.”

“How did he fight with so much on board?” Anne asked. “Surely it weighed down the ship.”

“Aye, it did,” the pirate said. “They say The Hammer sank lower and lower, and the response to the winds grew slower and slower. Eventually men began to leave from sheer boredom. They’d had enough of Dudley and the winding of the clock, shinning of the swordfish, painting and repainting of the hull, and emptying of the cat cages. The first man to abandon outright were a lad named Wilde who jumped as the ship came off the Atlantic and rounded Cape Charles to head inland. He abandoned his post at the clock, sprinted toward the side of the boat, and arced himself gently over the rail into the water.

“Every man aboard looked at one another for a moment, and by the time the ship made it to Delaware, there were but a dozen men remaining on board. The rest had poured off in gigs and other smaller vessels in Dudley’s armada, and Dudley were forced to anchor. That evening he
huddled around a fire with two half-wits on his ark, and in the morning he found that the half-wits had gone with a horse and a mule he kept. They say that Dudley just sat there in the fog of the Chesapeake and that the ship hasn’t moved to this day.”

When Anne looked up, they were in the cramped residential district where she had parted with the pirate the previous week. He took his arm from hers. “And this is where I must leave your company, young Anne. I will see you again next week.”

“What kind of pirate story is that?” Anne asked. “There was no treasure or swords or fighting. Nobody walked the plank, nobody had a wench. Nobody was marooned, and nobody mutinied. That wasn’t very good at all.”

The pirate scowled with a look of incredulity on his face. His one good eye opened widely. “No treasure! Ha!” He lowered his head so it was closer to hers. “Good or not don’t matter, milady.” He set both of his hands on the top of his cane again and leaned into it. “You’ll learn more from the truth than from tales made tall by men who’ve nothing to say. My advice, unsolicited though it may be, is to put down the Daft. There be only unnatural and even dangerous games at work with fiction of that sort. Daft is a daft fool and nothing more.” And with that the pirate walked off. When Anne returned, her uncle was waiting with his arms crossed, and the punishment was as she expected. Sadly the pirate’s story, even though it had been immensely pleasurable to walk with him and to be listening to a real story from a real pirate, did not ease the pain in her hands or her back.

That night Anne dreamed she was aboard *The Hammer*. When she came to within the dream, she stood next to a large clock. The movement whirred within, behind a pane of glass. The ship was surrounded by fog and empty of people. She climbed to the crow’s nest, checked the bunks below deck, and sat in Dudley’s leather chair in his quarters. It didn’t feel like she
expected. Anne looked out over the rail of the ship into the fog and realized that the ship was still. There was no movement. Her oldest cousin woke her from the dream with a kick to the side. “You’re sleepy this morning,” he said. Anne had missed her morning reading.

She worked through the week and prepared the pirate’s bag of treats the following Saturday, but he didn’t appear. At one, she sat on her heels outside the store and watched the traffic pass. She walked to the residential area and looked up at the windows of the houses but couldn’t bring herself to knock on any of the doors.

The next week passed, Saturday came again, and again the pirate did not come. Anne tried to distract herself with her volume of Daft, but the text had lost its initial luster. In the countryside, the tales, each a page or two long detailing the comedic and occasionally dramatically tragic exploits of infamous pirates, illustrated a quick adventure that occupied all of Anne’s senses. But the pirate’s words haunted Anne, and the tales now felt more clearly like artifice.

Months passed, the pirate did not return, and eventually he disappeared from her mind until, over a year later, when she found an envelope on the doorstep one morning as she swept the stones out front.

The envelope was addressed with only her name in a neat cursive handwriting. The back was sealed with wax, and into the red wax had been pressed the shape of an eye. Anne lifted the flap and found a folded letter and, cozied into one corner, the two hazy stones the pirate had produced from his waistcoat. The letter was short:

I trust the Absence of Signature and the Gifts contained within are Enough to identify the Author of this Message. The Sea has called, and I must be off. Appearances deceive: the Stones within are Diamonds. May they bring you Luck as they brought me. I appreciated your careful Attention to me Tale, and I apologize for the Lack of a better Ending.
Anne held the stones into the air and let the light from the morning sky filter through them. One single word on the paper—diamonds—had transformed the stones in her mind from creekside discoveries to weighty rocks of consequence. They felt heavier. The light through them shone more brilliant.

Anne kept them close. She sewed them into a piece of cloth which she wore round her waist. Before she went to bed, she pressed her hand against them and indulged in dreams about what they might someday bring her. Riches. Access to the ocean and what lay beyond the Atlantic. A life better and more exciting than her own. During work when she had downtime she rested a hand against them and wondered what adventures the pirate had been through to get hold of them. She wondered if the pirate were Dudley himself from the story, or if he was one of Dudley’s men, escaped from the frigate.

Life continued for Anne. She worked for her uncle and built her savings and imagined what she would do when she sold the diamonds one day. A year later at fourteen, her cousin caught influenza, and she was sent back to her parents where she labored for a month during the winter and hated the emptiness of the fields and the cramped cottage her family shared; she imagined them instead the endless ocean and a ship full of mates. When she complained one day, her older sister said, “At least you’ve been to the city,” and Anne saw accusation in her eyes.

She returned to London and at fifteen was introduced to a baker’s son across the city. The match was favorable for her uncle; the connection meant access to a better supplier of sugar. But the baker’s son was a doughy, quiet lad without much to recommend him. The first time they met, Anne and her uncle’s family were hosted by the baker, and the baker’s son smiled when he
saw her. He wasn’t bad looking, but when Anne asked what he did in his leisure time, all he managed was to shrug and say, “Dunno.”

Anne knew that if there were ever a time to use the diamonds, that time was now. The risk of being tied to a single location for the rest of her life seemed too great. She had to escape. The baker’s son wanted to set up a shop in Bristol, “somewhere near the water,” which sounded pleasant enough to Anne, but lying on her mat that evening after the introduction, she realized that watching the boats pass up and down the River Avon and being forced to see that freedom in action could never be pleasant if she herself were tied to the land. So she went to the jeweler when her uncle was out making deliveries one day.

The jeweler on Deftworth was hunched from sitting at his desk. He shaved his head to the skin and eschewed the white curly wigs worn by more fashionable men. His fingers were abnormally large, and he rolled one of Anne’s diamonds between them as he observed it through a magnifying glass—just the one because Anne was hesitant to risk both. She gasped as he took a file to the diamond, and he cackled.

“The file left no marks,” the jeweler said and held the diamond up to her between his fingers. “It’s real. Another of the Darkheart diamonds.”

“I beg your pardon?” Anne said.

“Are you certain this creature doesn’t have a sibling? The captain often gave them out in pairs.”

“Captain?” Anne said, confused.

“Young lady, I know where this diamond came from. There’s no need to conceal your story.” The jeweler explained that Darkheart—the pirate’s name, Anne learned—had returned to England with diamonds from ships destined for colonial interests. “It was only a matter of time
before he tried to cash them in. No banks or jewelers would take them, so he bartered at taverns and cobblers. And, apparently, bakeries.” The jeweler looked at Anne, but she said nothing. “Not many lasted as long as you.” The jeweler smiled and then closed the jewel in his palm. When he reopened it, the diamond had disappeared. “These are to be turned in to the authorities.”

“That’s not fair,” Anne said.

“Pirating’s not fair,” the jeweler said.

“But I didn’t give him anything for the diamond.”

“And you get nothing in return either.”

Sooner than she realized, Anne was out on the street, her hip padded with but a single stone. The next month she was married and moved to Bristol, and a year after that she had produced a son of her own and discovered that the baker’s son woke earlier than she did. She often caught him sitting at the open door with his head in a book and a pipe in his mouth. The masts of ships swayed above the horizon beyond, and hot coffee was waiting for her. She had a daughter the next year, and when the baker’s son came home one day with a bundle wrapped in brown paper and red ribbon under each arm, she realized that—modest though their life was—her ship was slowly filling.

Captain Darkheart had the story all wrong. Why on earth would Dudley want to stay on the ship, Anne wondered. Anne, despite all her love and happiness—for Anne was happy—was unable to shake a seed of a feeling that had hardened like a diamond within her years before and forced her to stay unattached, to seek the movement her father had started in her, the movement from the Daft stories that had fueled her in formative years; in short, she wanted to fling herself over the rails of the ship of her life, leave everything behind and find the shore on her own.
Though it pained her to watch the boats come and leave and she was never able to satisfy that deep longing, she still had the lone diamond. It allowed her to keep her breath and live with the hope that she could one day outlast the memory of Darkheart’s legend—as she figured Darkheart himself must be trying to do—and cash in on the score if she had to.
Days of Forgetful Pirating

Avast, Francis! Avast, Edward and Samuel! Gather round, you scallions three, and steel yer bowels for a tale so brutal and bloody, so laced throughout with romance and intrigue, so full of whimsy and regret and sordid swashbuckling that yer father and mother will surely ban yer poor Uncle Darkheart from the premises for at least a fortnight. Aye, ’tis a tale of me youth when I were not but a year or two older than Francis now, and not nearly as meaty about the arms. Yer darling parents certainly keep you supplied with steak. You grow so bloody fast.

The chance of profanity be high, so if I plan to swear, I’ll draw a finger across me eyebrow like so, and that’ll be the signal for you, Francis, to clamp your mitts upon Samuel’s ears so we don’t spoil his development. Gentle now, gentle. The goal be not to take the ears, just to seal them. Eldest but gentlest, Francis. As I can testify, the eldest brother be shouldered with the most responsibility, and yer uncle expects no less from you.

Now give yer uncle a moment to settle his bones, settle his bones in yer father’s leather chair of wondrous comfort, and the details of the tale should begin to coalesce from the ether. No, no, ’tis not the story of how I lost me eye and me leg, nor be it Samuel’s favorite tale of the monkey on the chandelier in the Custom’s House in Kings Town. This be a new story, a story I’ve yet to reveal, a story I swore to conceal till the characters within, both guilty and innocent,
had passed on to calmer waters aboard boats with smoother decks. So gather round close, nephews, and no nodding off, Samuel—I seen you last time, and yer uncle weren’t pleased.

Now, then… *There. We. Were.* The members of *Infamity*, a 48-gun Dutch-built guineaman with a crew of 300. *Easily* the prettiest and most fearsome ship west of Barbados, captained by none other than Patrick Broadshanks himself. Broadshanks were the most iconic of a generation of restless seafarers. After the Peace of Ryswick in 1697, right around when yer uncle had gone to sea, scores of men were rendered free agents. These were men who’d been treated as refuse by the world, used one minute for the crown’s benefit and discarded the next. Miraculously, he were the only man aboard that ship unscathed by previous battles. Men say Broadshanks were magical, either cursed or blessed, and had run across colonial battlefields through musket fire yet remained whole. Driven mad by war, he hijacked a ship and escaped into the Caribbean, forced into piracy as the only means of keeping his freedom.

However, Broadshanks were known far and wide for a benevolence of means. After establishing *Infamity* as a force to be reckoned with, he began to be more judicious in his selection of targets. He’d leave the missionary ships be, avoid the French altogether, and go after only the crown and its colonies. But often were the day when minnows attempted to knock off the top shark, and thus we were forced to exercise a display of power. That’s how *Infamity* thrived: We fed off the feeders.

We’d spent the month of March roaming from the Keys and Cuba to Caracas, sacking ships and fencing what goods we could, taking smaller crews on sloops into ports to resupply. We were gearing up for a trip to Madagascar, pirate’s paradise, where the men could lay up for a while and drink their fill without having to worry about being taken by surprise. Life were good, nephews! Never a worry in me brain, yer uncle enjoyed himself some pirating. He gunned with
the gunners, fished with the fishers, toasted his skin to a lovely caramel color, and forgot about anything and everything that ailed him. I woke everyday with a smile on me face and a list of duties in me mind that set me on me way about the decks of *Infamity*. Scrub the decks, salt the pork, clean the cannons. Yer uncle enjoyed it all. Aye, yo ho, yo ho, and all that nonsense; *that* were the life, nephews.

At the time, I were a mere sailor and me task for the day were fishing, catching stock for supper. A crew of six of us had been out in a cay, and suddenly I felt the pull of a mighty grouper. I pulled and pulled at the line only to reveal more fish.

“Christ,” says one of me mates to me. “That fish be without bottom.”

So I pulled again, showed more fish, pulled again, and finally tucked the tail into the boat. We returned to *Infamity* and upon slitting the bastard open discovered two oysters, shell and all, the size of a man’s head in the belly of the beast. For a moment, yer uncle were a legend. Word went round, and I got pats on the back from some and glares of jealous suspicion from others. Before I knew it, the Captain’s mate was calling out, “Darkheart to the Captain’s Quarters!” Hundreds of faces turned toward yer uncle, and I walked under the pressure of attention.

I bowed me way into the Captain’s Quarters for the first time and were awed by the contrast ‘tween light and dark. The setting sun shone through the starboard portholes and cast the bronze finishings of the room, the golden candelabra, and Broadshanks’ set of silver cognac snifters in blinding halos while the crevasses of the mahogany walls and Broadshanks himself were shrouded in murky depths. His mate announced me and left.

You must understand, nephews, that at the time yer uncle were a greenhorn and unrepentant worshipper of all things *Infamity*. I were drunk on the thrill of it. From me position
below deck with the gunners, I’d only seen glimpses of battle, but Broadshanks were said to stand gallantly on the prow amidst the chaos and call out orders. On occasion I’d see him flash by in the corner of me eye, on his way to a different part of the ship. There’d be the flash of his blond hair and a whiff of the musky cologne he fashioned, but before that moment yer uncle never had occasion for conversation with the Captain, nor even to stand before him. He were more of a figment of me imagination than a real man, so when I saw him in his quarters, yer uncle were shocked.

The Captain were huddled in a mass over his desk with one hand on his cognac and the other on his forehead. He were a huge man, as big as the name suggests, and his face were curtained off by long, unkempt locks of deep gold. Oddly, he were wearing no shirt. His skin were covered in beads of sweat from the tropical heat, and he sipped periodically from the liquor he held.

After a minute he stood and walked over to a one of the portholes which were shuttered closed. He folded down the flaps, and when the light came in he squinted at its brightness and moved his head as though he were trying to discern something outside. “Today is an auspicious day,” says Broadshanks. “A grouper of such an incredible span comes but once in a lifetime. Not to mention the oysters.” He walked back to his desk and rapped his knuckles upon it—once, then twice. “We leave for Madagascar tonight. Hang the supplies, the grouper means we go.”

Broadshanks walked up to me, put a hand on me shoulder. His ethery breath hit me in waves; evidently, he were quite drunk. “Two pieces of unsolicited advice for you, Darkheart. The first: Don’t let ominous events determine your actions, but do allow them to comfort the decisions you do make in order to feel more decisive.” I must’ve looked confused because after a second he adds, “The second: Never. Trust. Anyone.”
“Aye, captain,” says I. “Thank you.”

He paused for a moment and took a sip of cognac. Then he says, “Join us for dinner. Feast on your fish. You catch it, you get your share.”

I thanked him again and retreated to the gunners’ bunks where I sat and shared the news with the other green recruits like meself. Darkheart, a weasely little stick, only six months into his tenure on Infamity, were privy to an audience with Broadshanks himself.

“Bloody hell,” says me mate Jacobs. “Were he wearing his full captain’s regalia?”

“Did he have the skins of six tigers laid out on the floor?” asks Alcantara, another of the gunners.

“No,” says I. “He were just sitting there in the dark. No rugs or nothing. Weren’t wearing any shirt. Just sat there and drank cognac.”

They all laughed and muttered that anyone could be captain if that’s what it took, and yer uncle were disappointed and uncomfortable and at the most inopportune moment he decided to say, “Aye, I could be captain.”

I say inopportune because that was the moment the Boatswain walked down the passageway. “What was that, Darkheart?” he says and paused outside the door of the bunks.

The Boatswain were a man named Lansing, a skinny bastard with a beak for a nose and one eye gone that he refused to patch. A blackened hollow spot occupied the space where the eye should’ve been. His other eye had grown larger like it gorged itself on everything he saw. One of the most privileged aboard the Infamity, Lansing were born in the New World, the son of diplomats stationed in America who then had to return to London with their tails tucked between their legs when their colonial investments went south. They left their son behind to fend for himself, and he’d grown mean.
Me mates quieted and went about their business.

“Nothing,” says I. “Just said I’d like to captain some day, that’s all.”

Lansing walked up to me and brought his one good eye near me. “That’s the sort of talk you should keep to yourself, Darkheart.” He walked to the edge of the hold and then let out an amused laugh. “Darkheart as captain. That’ll be the day.”

When I looked back, me mates were lying quietly in their bunks and had nothing to offer me in terms of moral support.

When I entered the officers’ mess for dinner, I found that Broadshanks had undergone a startling transformation. He’d cleaned up. His white smile reflected the candlelight, and his golden locks were braided neatly back down his neck. His mammoth chest were draped in a frilly-edged, white shirt, and despite the heat he had his French cuffs secure with links of pearl that glinted whenever he moved his hands about. Here he were jovial and generous with laughter. He engaged all the officers, no matter how high or low, who all sat along a massive table. The grouper were stretched out, nearly as wide as Infamity herself, and the two oysters positioned on either end had been sliced into a dozen juicy pieces each.

“Darkheart,” says Broadshanks to me when he noticed me at the edge of the room. “The seat of honor is yours.” He stood and pulled out his own chair, a tall throne upholstered in deerskin, and motioned for me to approach. He pulled out a smaller chair for himself which looked like it would crumble under his heft, but somehow he managed to squeeze his frame into the seat. I sat, and he sat next to me, and he treated me like kin. He wanted to know from where I hailed, how I’d arrived at Infamity, whether I’d lost me land legs yet, and how I planned to make piracy me future. Around the table sat the Boatswain, the Sailing Master, and the Navigator, each attended by their Mates. They eyed me with suspicion as Broadshanks spoke, and I answered
with meager responses, anxious not to draw attention to meself. The Captain saw that I were hesitant to serve meself, so he grabbed a plate and piled generous servings of the grouper, oysters, and the bounty of potatoes, tomatoes, sprouts, and salt pork that were on offering. Then he hands it to me and quickly pours out a huge mug of grog pungent with nutmeg.

Nephews, I were unnerved by this new Broadshanks. He were so far from the sweaty, tired, superstitious man in his quarters, and I didn’t at the time know what had caused this change. I kept mostly to meself during the meal, politely responding to questions from the officers and the mates.

“Today is an auspicious day,” says Broadshanks to the table, repeating the message he’d given me in private. “You may be destined for greatness, Darkheart.” Can you imagine that, nephews? An epical war hero and pirate legend telling yer uncle he had promise, that greatness were within his reach. Broadshanks squinted at me like he were reading a fortune written on the inside of me skull. Then he laughs. “Ha! And if not greatness, you’re at least destined for Infamity!” Then he snapped up one of the grouper’s eyeballs and popped it in his mouth like a piece of hard candy.

All the officers chuckled at that, and Broadshanks grinned, but in his eyes I could see he were the same man from his quarters. Then I knew not why, but I can attest now after years on that God damned boat—ah, damn, damn, damn; there be yer uncle with the swearing: Apologies nephews. What? Samuel’s already knocked off. Well thank Christ. A little swearing never hurt boys yer age, but we can spare it for Samuel. What yer uncle were trying to say were this: the burden of leadership, of having to make each and every one of the decisions that had built Infamity and made her a success, were deep in Broadshanks eyes, and that were something yer uncle didn’t understand until later.
“A toast then,” says Broadshanks to the table. “To grouper, to Darkheart, and to Infamity.” The officers lifted their drinks and clinked, but before the group had returned their mugs to the table, Broadshanks stood with a terrible look of fright, his eyes wide open in a spasm of pain, and he collapsed onto the spread, deader than the grouper.

For the briefest moment the laughter continued and, drunk as they were, they thought it was a joke, but when he didn’t rise, Lansing stood and jostled the Captain’s shoulder. When he didn’t move, a silence went over the room, and they all looked at me, the odd man out and instantly the most suspicious bastard on board. Yer uncle were just standing there holding his grog, sixteen years old and not a care in the world until that very moment when he knew his life were at risk.

Now Francis and Edward, you’ve been exposed to all manner of pirate yarn, nephews, but one thing the stories get wrong is the overall attitude. The serials be a load of rubbish that make seafaring men out to be a crate of hairy apes, willing to kill for a banana. This misconception be easily explained by the Pirate’s Paradox: there be no men more rule-driven and democratic yet none as nihilistic and able to enjoy leisure. There be repercussions, even among pirates, for every crime imaginable from eating an extra portion to killing a crewmate. And captain killing be the most serious of all. Unless it were a mutiny, which be a story of a different beast and equally consequential. Suffice it to say, nephews, that there be rules to pirates, and we follow them. The men that night needed an answer to the question of who killed Broadshanks, no matter whether it were accurate or not.

The officers looked to the door next, and one of the mates ran out for the Surgeon. Quartermaster Sturmgard, Broadshanks’ second in command who’d been on watch on the deck, burst through the door and walked up to the Captain. Sturmgard’s ruddy face were wreathed by a
tangled, gray beard that carried with it the scents of the sea and smoke from the man’s pipe. He were another legend aboard the ship. Rumor on *Infamity* had it he were a Scandinavian master sailor and had been run out of Europe by bad debt, but he were friend to no man on *Infamity* and kept mostly to himself. The miserable bastard must’ve thought he had landed in Hell in the Caribbean. He sweat and sweat and let his fat tongue hang out his mouth like a dog, lapping at his chapped lips and rangy mustache, desperate for water.

The silence in the Quarters were total, yet yer uncle heard the drumming of blood through his ears. They all watched as the Surgeon attempted to revive the Captain, but it were already hopeless. Broadshanks were gone. Sturmgard stomped back out and a minute later rushed in with the Cook by the collar and sealed the officers in with the Surgeon and me. “Nobody leaves till we settle this matter,” says he, and he casted a squinted eye at them all.

First he set his sights on the Cook and covered the poor man’s face with enraged spittle, but we all knew this were theatricals: we’d ate the grouper ourselves. The cook, a baby-faced Swedish lad who had more fire in his belly than anybody estimated, held his ground and traded volleys of hellfire with Sturmgard. His face redder and sweater than in front of the oven, he stormed out, parting a sea of curious sailors that quickly scampered off from around the doorway, and slammed the door behind him.

“Darkheart,” bellows Sturmgard. “You were the closest. It was you!”

Again the faces of the officers turned to me, this time their hearts in concert with Sturmgard, and yer uncle stood there on the verge of soiling his britches.

“He caught the grouper, Quartermaster!” says the Navigator.

“You *ate* the grouper,” says Lansing.

The Navigator quieted and looked at Sturmgard.
“But I did hear Darkheart telling tales,” says Lansings. “Down with the gunners earlier today. Seems he has aims at being captain himself.”

And that’s when all hell broke loose. The sailors outside the mess fell in pile through the door where they’d been listening, and one shouts, “He were telling tales! I heard him with me own ears!” This were echoed by me mates Jacobs and Alcantara, and soon Sturmgard had sidled up to me.

Indeed yer uncle had been telling tales, talking too much perhaps, with an ambition too large for the reality of others. He were joking at first, and his comment today had just been a bit of bad timing, but who in his right mind wouldn’t want to be captain of Infamity? When we brought the grouper on board, there were a moment when the ship looked like a winged beast sleeping calmly, building up its energy for the next move. I sat in the sloop, encumbered completely by the massive fish, and I could sense the power lurking within the ship and imagine the sails being unfurled in a strong breeze and yer uncle at the helm. It were a piercing vision, one I’d had before, but it’d been dreams, stories, yarns, fictions, nephews, nothing anchored in reality. Me crewmates had turned it all against me. This moment learned yer uncle well, so let this be a lesson to you as well: Never. Tell. Anyone. Anything.

“How do you defend yourself?” says Sturmgard.

Yer uncle were in shock and had no idea how to respond. The silence in the cabin had returned, and the wardrums in yer uncles ears beat fiercely. Yer uncle weren’t sure whether to keep quiet or to say something. But say what, nephews? What would he say?

“You treasonous rapscallion,” says Sturmgard. “We’ll have your head!

So finally, yer uncle wobbles a bit from one leg to the other and looks from face to face, searching for a weak spot, a way out, not knowing what to do, when suddenly his decision were
made for him. A voice from the main deck: “A merchantman on the starboard side! Showing the Jolly Roger!” Pirates! Tracking us all day, they were. Biding their time to approach from the glare of the sun on the western horizon.

“This tribunal will continue, Darkheart,” says Sturmgard. Then he pushed me up to the deck and yelled for all hands to man stations. I headed for me station with the gunners, but Sturmgard grabbed me round the neck with a calloused mitt and says, “Where d’you think you’re going?” He revealed a set of teeth brown as barnacles, and his breath were rotten. “You’re with the boarding party today, Darkheart.” So he dragged me to the bridge deck and for a moment consulted with the Navigator and Lansing who stood at the wheel, drawing Infamity around in line with the merchantman to take us out of the line of fire.

A pirate ship on the brink of battle be a wondrous sight to behold, nephews. Pirates get a bad name, but the weak be whipped into shape or left at the nearest port, and the strong be tanned by the Sun into leathery sea beasts who’d sooner give their right hand than see a shipmate suffer at the hands of the enemy. Any man who can make it on the sea be worth fifty French infantrymen. From me vantage point near the wheel, the ship were a hive of activity as sails were drawn and ropes secured. Below deck, the ship rumbled with the activity of the gunners who rolled powder kegs and loaded the first volleys.

Sturmgard grabbed me by the sleeve, pulled me down to the weather deck, and handed me a rifle and a cutlass. “One shot, drop the plank, then we board,” says he. “Save the shot till we’re close. One good shot makes the boarding breezy.” He lapped his tongue out over his lips and then stared out at the merchantman.

The rest of the boarding crew were veterans, and their faces showed not a speck of fear or worry, merely grim determination. Stanton, the hook-handed Dutchman; hunchbacked Gregory,
the only free man of dark skin I ever saw; the Rothmore triplets and their constant bickering; Inomata the Japanese who had escaped the locked ports of the Shogun; dozens of others who’ve escaped me memory—suffice it to say we were the motliest crew in the Caribbean.

We lined the sides of the ship while *Infamity* flirted with the merchantman, turning this way and that, judging the winds and trying to show the guns without exposing ourselves. Each man prepared for battle in his own way, and there were an eerie tension in the air. Inomata wrapped a red bandana in a thin band about his head. Gregory held the point of two daggers ‘tween his fingers and tapped the hilts in rhythm on the rail of the boat. Stanton bit his knife and then secured it in his waistband. Sturmgard stood sharpening the Arabian scimitar he fancied.

“How goes the split, Sturmgard?” says Stanton, but Sturmgard ignored him and continued to draw the whetstone along the arc of his blade.

Says Gregory: “You heard him, Quartermaster. What’s this man do to the split?”

“New man,” says Inomata. “What money give to new man?”

“He gets none!” yells Sturmgard. “You inbreds satisfied now?”

At that point yer uncle realized that the men were speaking of shares of the spoils. All men aboard *Infamity* were entitled to a share, but the boarding crew got extra according to injuries inflicted and suffered. They were concerned yer uncle would take their precious overpay. The men quieted and seemed satisfied.

Sturmgard walked up to me and whispered in me ear, casting his foul breath over the side of me face. “You abandoned your share when you killed Broadshanks, and I’ll be damned if you take me down too.” And that’s when yer naive Uncle Darkheart realized what were afoot: Sturmgard were aiming to put yer uncle in harm’s way and have him killed by enemies, or to kill him himself amongst the chaos of the boarding.
Normally I were below deck, caught up in the repetition of the cannons, unaware of the complexity of battle. Now I were able to see it all, and Sturmgard’s threats heightened me awareness—I were able to see and hear all range of things. The gritty strokes of cutlasses being sharpened. The noxious puffs of black smoke from the guns. The screams of men and crack of splinters from the ship upon a direct hit. We traded fire, gave more than we got, and before long it were clear that the main fight were to begin. Infamity lined up with the merchantman, drifting closer and closer.

Yer uncle at that point were scared but resigned to his fate and watched closely those around him to see he were doing the right thing. I sat me musket on the rail of the ship and waited, and waited, and waited, and BANG. Me mate next to me fired, and I accidentally unleashed me own shot and watched it ping futilely off the hull of the merchantman.

The planks fell, three from each boat, and smacked onto the opposite rails. Sturmgard lifted me up off the deck, set me onto one, and placed a boot firmly on me back to send me on me way. The others crowded me from behind, so I had no choice but to grit me teeth, grip me cutlass, and run across. The sea shimmered indigo in the waning twilight, and the planks flexed with the weight of sinful men. For an instant, yer poor Uncle Darkheart were thinking to himself, “Darkheart, now be yer time. You truly be a pirate now. You be holdin’ a cutlass, walkin’ in the air above the sea and about to—” But before yer uncle could finish his thought he’d arrived at the merchantman, fell to the deck, and were clubbed on the head by a hefty bald bastard.

When I awoke, I were covered in bodies of friends and foe but still alive. I wiped the blood out of me eyes and touched a hand to the top of me head, which had clotted up into a big bloody knot around the wound and begun to scab up. It were still sensitive and me brain hurt something awful. I wriggled me way out, grabbed the nearest weapon, and attempted to stand.
Chaos ruled the merchantman and *Infamity* alike. Men ran this way and that, chased or chasing, and others grappled or traded steel here and there. Inomata were howling like a banshee and disarming foe with nothing more than a long, sturdy stick of Japanese white oak. Gregory, despite his curved back decorated with the scars of servitude, dueled with a razor sharp rapier and one hand behind him in excellent form. One of the Rothmore triplets had been cut down and the other two were enraged and taking down the enemy.

Sturmgard had two of the enemy squeezed in his elbows and he were smiling with the struggle of taking them down. I stood, and me vision, still not right, turned the single Sturmgard into six and the enemies to twelve. I stumbled, and the number increased and decreased, but I were able to make out the doubled figure of an enemy with a dagger sneaking up behind the Quartermaster like a child about to take cake off a counter. I squinted, and two became eight became four, but the figure were clearly making its way in for the easy kill.

I took off from me position, swerving dizzy this way and that, and by the time I made it across the deck, the figures had coalesced into one, and yer uncle rammed into him, knocking him to the deck. Not bad, ‘eh? Yer uncle weren’t always a haggard old man with a limp. Keep yer eyes open, now. I see ye nodding off there. I know you two can last longer than Samuel.

*So…* Sturmgard wrenched the necks of the bastards he were struggling with, dropped them, and turned to see what was the matter. He sets his eyes on yer uncle splayed out on top of the assassin, and that’s when his eyes went large and insane. He licked his lips and drew his scimitar around, taking the villain’s head off in one easy sweep of his arm.

Yer uncle at that point had managed to regain his wits. He stood slowly, shook his head to remove the last of the cobwebs, and faced the Quartermaster for a moment. Sturmgard were wiping the blade of his scimitar along his trousers, leaving a long, crimson mark on the khaki
fabric. He eyed yer uncle with hesitation, and for a moment I thought he might take me head off as well, but I stood me ground, and a second later a wave of fighting flowed over us, and we were engulfed in battle and separated by the confusion. I found meself in possession of a cutlass and a handgun of questionable reliability, but the heft were comfortable for some reason and also useful for maintaining me balance.

By that time, *Infamity* had swayed the tides, and men from the merchantman had begun to surrender. Those who didn’t were picked apart and thrown overboard. I awkwardly attempted to make meself useful. Yer uncle pointed his cutlass and yelled curses that’d make yer mother blush. After the last skull had been cracked and the goods from the hull hauled aboard *Infamity*, we set a charge on the merchantman and made our way off into the darkness. In the distance, the merchantman blew into an enormous red fireball that sparkled on the waters of the sea.

Men gathered in front of the officer’s mess and bent their necks to see inside. The door were ajar, and in the space we could see Broadshanks’ tremendous body still draped over the table where he fell. Sturmgard parted them and made his way in. He called for the Surgeon who brought a board, and with two others they carried the legend onto the dark deck where his sleeves fluttered in the wind, somehow free of their links.

The Surgeon examined the body. “There be no wounds!” he shouted, which left all the men scratching their heads and passing around rumors of poison. There were a brief funeral service, and Gregory read a few Psalms and called Broadshanks the “last of the innocent pirates.” Then we unceremoniously dumped the captain’s mammoth body into the inky depths of the Caribbean.

After a momentary silence, the crew’s attention turned to yer uncle. The tribunal continued in the Captain’s Quarters, and Sturmgard sat behind Broadshanks’ wide desk, sipping
on cognac and examining Broadshanks’ belongings. The other officers frowned and looked back and forth between yer uncle and their new captain. Lansing in particular kept a close watch on yer uncle.

As with the grouper, word had gone round *Infamity* that yer uncle were involved in an intrigue aboard the merchantman. Me mates had questioned me as we marched the enemies over the planks and onto *Infamity*, but me lesson learned, I bit me tongue and said nothing. Beyond avoiding the accusation of being a teller of tales, this bit of abstinence had unexpected benefits. Men whispered in ears, telling tales themselves, and the story became inflated beyond the actual occurrence, which were a bit of sheer luck on yer uncle’s part. A foot this way or that, and yer uncle were a goner, impaled by the assassin’s dagger. But men had it in their heads that yer uncle had gutted three men as he did the fish and then breathed life into Sturmgard, who were out cold on the enemy deck. Sturmgard were the last of the legends on board and the only figurehead capable of keeping *Infamity* together. Everybody knew the consequence of losing him.

“Darkheart didn’t do shit,” says Sturmgard, breaking the silence. “Look at him.” All the officers turned toward yer uncle. “You think a twig like that could take down a legend like Broadshanks? The Captain’d sooner floss his teeth with Darkheart than be killt.” A few men chuckled. Sturmgard swirled the cognac, took a long hit from the dram, and set the snifter on the desk.

Lansing stepped forward and says, “Surely he can’t be entirely innocent. He was the only odd element at the meal.”

Sturmgard shrugged. “Broadshanks hit a bump in the road, as it were. That poor bastard’s luck finally ran out.” And with that pronouncement, he settled the matter. There were no pursuit of the truth. As with Broadshanks, Sturmgard had his benevolent side, and he were thanking yer
uncle for saving his life. Understood and unsaid were the matter of the intrigue—whether Broadshanks had really run into a bit of bad luck or if he were poisoned or the like.

After a moment of consideration, Sturmgard tilted his head just a wee bit to the side and adds, “But we’ll put Darkheart in the crow’s nest just to learn him a lesson.”

“On what charge, Quartermaster?” says Lansing.

Sturmgard raised an eyebrow at the Boatswain.

“Captain,” says Lansing. “On what charge, Captain?” Men weren’t used to the new chain of command just yet.

“Telling tales,” grumbles Sturmgard.

“Telling tales,” echoes the Lansing, and he grinned at me.

The rest of the room murmured under their breath.

And that’s how yer poor Uncle Darkheart ended up in the crow’s nest for a month of spot duties. It were Hell in parts and Heaven in others. The minute the Sun rose over the horizon, I were blinded, and there were no escape from its rays. Sturmgard allowed me a quarter hour each day at noon to descend and stuff me mug with food and drink, but it only made going back aloft more painful. I sat there, and the life drained out of me until darkness hit and the Moon pulled a fabric of constellations across the sky.

The first day or two were fine, and I had no symptoms of insanity, but as a week passed, me skin grew dark as Gregory’s, and I began to see and hear hallucinations of the wildest varieties. The Navigator’s chimp brought me a cup of water in the afternoons. One day, in lieu of his normal screeching, he says to me in the Queen’s English, “Brought ye something sweet!” I took the cup he gave me, knocked it down me throat, and as I fell over from the heat, I found meself thinking, “This water tastes of cake!”
At night, the ghost of Broadshanks hovered up from the deck of the ship to talk with me. He were as broad-shouldered and jovial as in real life, but the sleeves of his shirt fluttered loose in the night wind, still link-less, and his lower half looked like the vortex of a waterspout that the spirit used for ambulation. He roamed about the boat, casting a fine eye on the rigging, inspecting the sails for perforations, even in death making sure Infamity were in ship shape.

“Darkheart,” says the spirit to me.

“Aye, Captain,” says I.

“What are you doing up here?” says the spirit.

“Canned for telling tales,” says I.

“Telling tales?” says the spirit.

“Aye,” says I.

“How will you avenge my death then?” says the spirit.

“It’ll have to wait a month, Captain,” says I.

“Call me Patrick,” says the spirit.

“Aye, Captain,” says I.

Then he smiled and zipped around the sails a bit.

‘Round midnight, the afterimage of the horizon dissipated from me vision, the heat madness wore off, and me thoughts were me own again. I could lie there on me back, and the only things in sight were the black tip of the mast and the rest of the universe, and It. Were. Brilliant. Staring at the ever-shifting brilliance of the stars like that got yer uncle thinking deeply. Deeper than he ever had before, and he were able to access thoughts he never imagined possible in his corn kernel of a brain. And this is what he thought: What a waste. What a terrible waste it’d be were Earth the only place with life. If not one of these sparkles in this ripple of the Milky
Way and beyond weren’t blessed with the goodness and badness of life. What a terrible thing it is to spend it alone.

The universe played a nasty trick on yer uncle and made him weaker when he were already in a prone position. Or perhaps it were a trick played on yer uncle by his own mind. He’d only been at sea a year or so and on Infamy for half that, but looking back now, yer uncle realizes he probably grew up lonely and were looking for something, some sort of ultimate connection. The kind that men write stories about to hide their true feelings.

And he also thought this: What ever happened to that brother of his he left in London with his mum? He looked like me when I were a wee lad, at least everybody said he did. How old were his mum when he left? She couldn’t have been older than twenty eight, and yer uncle but fourteen, the brother just three. No da to speak of, of course, which was why the resemblance were fishy, but maybe yer uncle, and the brother, resembled his mum more than his da. And why did yer uncle run off at such a young age? What were he chasing?

I must’ve been speaking these things out loud ‘cause suddenly, I hear a voiced reply:

“Why did you run off?”

I rolled on me left side and lying there next to me looking up at the selfsame night sky were the prettiest nymphet I ever laid me eyeballs upon.

And it appears we’ve lost Edward. ‘Aloo there, Edward. You sleepin’? Typical. Right when the pretty lady appears, Edward plays at sleeping. Or maybe he has fallen asleep. Right, then. Francis, me lad, have you ever had the opportunity to romance a lady? You have? I should’ve known, you rapscallion. Well, then you must first realize, there be no romance allowed on a pirate ship. Men go for months without the calming effect of the gentler sex. Upon first
encounter with a lady after days at sea, some men turn to mutts without manners, and others just shyly scratch at their beards not knowing what to do.

When yer uncle saw this lady, this beautiful nymphet, what with her dark auburn hair, her diamond-pointed chin, and freckles like a universe of their own on her face reflecting the light of the stars, he stood up and shook his head and swore it were the heat still affecting his thoughts, but it weren’t. The ghost of Broadshanks hovered up over me shoulder and said, “Darkheart, you devil. I’ll leave you be.” The spirit disappeared, but the maiden remained. She were real, Francis.

When I first turned to look at that maiden, I felt me heart break for a moment and open wide, willing to accept anything. The beauty lay there and smiled at me. She had her hair pinned back behind her head, revealing ears which were pulled ever so slightly away from her head. On her left forearm were an inked representation of two gears enmeshed. Simple lines, a striking image.

“How’d you get here?” says I.

“I asked first,” says she. “Why’d you run off?”

“Me mum booted me fer stealing!” says I.

“No she didn’t,” says the maiden.

“I killed too many wolves and had to leave England!” says I.

“You’re funny,” says the maiden.

Unlike you, Francis, yer uncle hadn’t been properly familiarized with romance, so all he knew were the stuff of stories: rubbish from the serial papers and pirate yarns spun by drunk shipmates. He had no way of knowing how ridiculous he sounded. Stealing! Too many wolves! Pants me, Francis, I were doing the worst thing you can do in the presence of a lady—puffin’ meself up in an obvious, artificial way. But I weren’t able to maintain me facade. The bloody
universe had turned me from a stalwart pirate lad who’d learned his lesson ‘bout telling tales into a soft pile of custard. Yer uncle were disarmed entirely by this maiden.

I scratched at me head and tried valiantly but vainly to disguise the smile on me face. “I were after an adventure,” I says after a minute. “And opportunity.”

“How about answering me question now,” says I. “How’d you get here?”

“I have my ways,” says she. And then she were quiet for a bit.

“What’s yer name,” I ask her. Again she said nothing so I sat and looked at her as she lay there.

“How do things work on Infamity?” she asks after a moment.

“I reckon the same as they do on other ships.”

“Well who runs things?”

“Was a bloke named Broadshanks. Big fellow. You must’ve seen us send him off last week. Bad news if you ask me.”

“Why’s that?”

“He was the glue what kept the ship together. Not sure if anybody else’ll manage that, least not with the same panache as Broadshanks.” I lay back down and began an attempt to charm the maiden. I pointed down at the ship where a few men were running about evening tasks like wee, little ants. “Now we’ve got Lansing in as Quartermaster, and he’ll never do. Mean as you need to be for the position but can’t handle the maths. Much more suited for Boatswain. Then there’s Maldonado the Boatswain, formerly the Navigator, who’ll be fine, but neither him nor Lansing have the character to captain.”

“You know quite a bit about Infamity,” says the maiden.
And yer uncle certainly thought he did, so he went on with his explanation, pointing out the men here and there, telling her what they were doing and where things on the ship were kept and how the loot were divvied up and from where the men hailed. Yer uncle talked and talked, and the maiden batted her lashes.

“What about the other big fellow? The one with the beard.”


“Why’s that?”

“Hard to put into words.” Yer uncle had watched from the nest as Sturmgard took charge of the ship, and what he’d seen took him by surprise: Sturmgard seemed happy. As the new Captain he was content to keep himself indoors and out of the sun for the hottest hours of the day, and damn if I didn’t catch a smile on his face, which had begun to heal over and return to its Scandinavian pallor. He usually peeked his head out of his Quarters at sunset and then took a lazy stroll to the stern of the boat and admired the sea with his hands behind his back. On his return, he looked up at the crow’s nest a couple times, and I ducked me head. He’d lost the anger that’d driven him as Quartermaster.

Without warning, the maiden leaned towards yer Uncle Darkheart and placed her strawberry lips directly on his. For a moment he couldn’t breathe.

“Well, I enjoyed our little chat,” says she.

“Going already?” I says. “Stay a bit longer. I still don’t know yer name.”

“Fret not, young pirate.”

She stood, and I rose to my feet and looked down at her. Just before she vaulted off the crow’s nest and into the darkness, she leaned over to re-lace the tall boots that ran halfway up her calves. When she stood, dirty little bugger yer uncle was, his gaze were drawn to the soft area
around her chest which was held tight with a cotton bodice laced firmly. Evil deeds have a way of reminding us what we should never do, Francis, and oh yer uncle wishes he had not gazed at the maiden’s perfect breasts. For if he hadn’t, if he had maintained focus on her beautiful, blue eyes instead, he might not have noticed that when she stood straight, a pendant necklace was dislodged from its happy home in her bosom, and that hanging at the end of the necklace were Broadshanks’ pearl cufflinks.

“See something you like?” says the maiden, and she gave me a light slap on me cheek. She stood and leaned over the edge of the crow’s nest and fixed her eyes somewhere far in the distance, beyond the flats of the sea which were dimpled silver by the Moon. Before I could say anything, she jumped off the mast, spun through the rigging like an acrobat, and landed noiselessly on the deck.

It were she, Francis! She had ravaged the body of Broadshanks during the battle with the merchantman, and perhaps even been involved in a nefarious plot to kill the man. I immediately began to descend, yelling me lungs out as I went for the Captain, but when I came to the last rung, I looked over me shoulder and saw that the he were standing there and had leveled a pistol at me head.

“Get your arse back in the nest,” says Sturmgard.

“But there was a woman—”

“The hell there was.”

“No, she had Broadshanks’ cuff—”

“Move!” He fired the pistol into the air to me left, so I scampered back up and sat. Sturmgard set a sentry at the base of the mast, ensuring that yer uncle were trapped. I were
thrown back into life in the nest, unable to do anything about me predicament. Me gaze had gone from the heavens above to Infamity below, and I watched for any sign of the maiden.

Of course Lansing is the first man she takes down. Just as he was closing the pantry for the night, she slipped a wire garrotes around his neck and tightened it. Though she were slight of frame, her geared arms held tight as he spasmed and his face became rouged and he finally died. She guided the body to the deck, relieved him of the key, and raided the stores. Then she slipped him overboard to hide her trail.

I slept little, me eyes were peeled and always on guard, but I couldn’t help but fall asleep here and there, and once when I did awake there were soda biscuit and a lime waiting for me, but I had no appetite for these treats from the maiden. I waited for me fifteen minutes, climbed down the mast, and took me water and rations while half a dozen men watched me with frowns on their faces. They ignored me when I tried to explain that there was a woman on board who had killed Broadshanks and Lansing and were set to terrify the crew. A few laughed even.

Their countenances turned from frowns to looks of caution as she took down Maldonado and his mate while they took their shift at the wheel in the middle of the night. This time she weren’t so neat, and there were plenty of evidence of her work. Me screams were muted by the crash of Infamity on the water, so I watched helplessly as she crept up behind the man and quickly inserted a dagger into his neck. He collapsed, and the mate withdrew in shock until she threw the same dagger and caught him in an eye and pierced his brain.

The ghosts of the others killed floated up along with Broadshanks and kept me company at night, and it became difficult to keep their voices out of me head. “Just go down there, lad,” says the ghost of Broadshanks. “Avenge us.”
“He can’t, Captain,” says the ghost of Maldonado. “They’d cut him down as soon as he hit the deck.”

“Aye,” says Lansing. “Things were tense when I was killt, and they’ve only got worse.”

The spirits were right. Men began to suspect each other. Fights broke out during the cleaning and the cooking and at all other times as well. One young recruit was thrown overboard to satisfy the bloodlust of the unchecked mob, but the next day they found the Surgeon dead. Within a week all of the officers but Sturmgard had been eliminated and their positions filled by new recruits who had no idea what they were doing. Sturmgard himself could do nothing to prevent the horde from having its way.

The maiden climbed up to the crow’s nest and sat across from me. The spirits floated up behind her.

“Careful, now, Darkheart,” says Maldonado.

“He’ll be fine,” says Broadshanks.

“So you’re just going to sit there and ignore me then,” says the maiden.

“What am I supposed to say?” says I.

“Perhaps a hello to start.”

“Tell her to hang herself,” says the ghost of Lansing.

“Aye,” says Broadshanks.

“Hello,” I says.

“That wasn’t so bad now, was it?” says she, and she lay down, just as she had on her first visit.

Yer uncle were torn, Francis. That initial kiss had stolen his breath and his heart, and then she stabbed me in the back and went about routing the crew, destroying everything that were
holy to yer uncle—*Infamity* itself which were more than just a ship, more than the contents of those on board. Broadshanks had been the only one who could guide it in a proper direction. And it were all me own fault. I’d done the yapping, and now the ship were suffering the consequences.

What’s that, Francis? *Why* were the maiden attacking the officers? *That* is a mystery even to yer uncle. The pearls prove that she were motivated at least in part by personal profit, but something about the look on her face in the nest that second visit frightened yer uncle. She had a look that said she were enjoying not only the chaos below but the chaos in yer uncle’s mind. I pretended not to have noticed anything, and our stupid conversation continued until she stood, which is when yer uncle made his move. I stretched out me arms and lunged at her neck, but she easily swatted yer uncle away, took one of his elbows in her hands, and wrenched it painfully behind his back.

“Truce, truce, truce!” I cried.

“You go after my throat and now you’re calling truce?” says the maiden. “What kind of pirate are you, Darkheart?” The maiden had learned me name, and when I asked where, she laughed. “It’s all over the ship. You’re a legend, Thaddeus Darkheart.” Men had been telling tales again. Yer uncle went from fisherman to captain killer and teller of tales to the madman on the mast, yelling about a woman on board the ship.

“You’re as soft as Sturmgard.” She kicked me legs out from under me, and I fell face first onto the planks of the crow’s nest. She brought her face down right next to mine and I could feel the warmth from her skin. Her breath smelled slightly of rosemary. “Enjoy your last week up here. When you’re down there, you’re the same as the rest, and I won’t discriminate.” Then she flipped off the mast as she did the first time, and yer uncle lay there for a moment to catch his
breath, and he couldn’t help but cry. Twice now the universe had punished yer uncle for running his mouth when he shouldn’t. But he couldn’t help it. It were a fundamental flaw in his makeup, written into his bones. But now I were sorry. Yer uncle wanted to return to the days of forgetful pirating when there weren’t so much trouble and it were enough to drag up an ugly fish from the sea to be a hero.

“Stop your crying, you pansy pirate,” says the spirit of Maldonado.

“There, there,” says Broadshanks. “Let him have his moment.”

“Don’t be so gentle with him, Captain,” says Lansing. “Rough him up a bit, get him going. He needs it.”

Broadshanks raised an eyebrow at his former sailors, and then through some uncanny magic transformed his face into that of a horned devil and began to roar at me. “Darkheart!” he says. “You’ve had your cry, now get your arse up.”

I stood and held on to the edge of the nest. We were still two weeks out from the Cape of Good Hope, the first chance we’d have to find harbor and solve our problems, which in all likelihood meant a disbanding of Infamity.

Broadshanks continued his appeal. “You’re the only one in a position to make this right, Darkheart. So forget your fears. What you do now is going to determine how men talk of you, so quit your pissing, stand up, and spend the next week steeling yourself to confront the wench.”

So I sat there for another week, and more ghostly spirits drifted up from below. Jacobs, from the gunners. Paulsen, assistant to the cook. Another of the Rothmore triplets. She were becoming less and less artful about whom she assassinated. So when I finally did climb down, I knew I would have to watch me back. A week later, I descended to the slow clap of Sturmgard himself. He looked jolly, all done up in fighting gear with pistols tucked into his belt and the
scimitar hitched to his side. But it were all for show. The men were gathered around the deck to see what were happening, and Sturmgard were trying to make an impression.

“Well done, lad,” says Sturmgard. He put his arm around me shoulder and proffered an apology, said he wisht he hadn’t needed to put me in that situation, that he owed me his life, but that he’d had no other choice, what with the mysterious way Broadshanks went and all. “Have to maintain order after all,” he says.

Order, Francis! Sturmgard were talking about order when he’d let a single interloper render *Infamity* a ghost ship. “And it looks like you were in a safer spot up in the nest anyway,” he says. The man laughed. He were able to laugh and live easy despite the mayhem that were ensuing. Word on board were that he locked himself in the Captain’s Quarters with loaded guns and came out only to make occasional inspections, which had gotten more and more lax. He were more of a cowardly ninny than yer uncle.

“I never thanked you properly,” says Sturmgard, and he offered out his hand.

Before he could say another word, I pulled one of the pistols from his trousers and sent a slug into his head. His great body swayed just a moment before toppling over and sending a shudder through the ship. Men gasped, and some ran off. I pulled the other pistol from his belt and the scimitar from where it hung, and as I did I saw his spirit peel away from his body and grin at me. “Not a bad play, you scoundrel,” says his ghost.

“Blimey,” says Lansing. “That was a bold move.”

“Behind you!” cries Maldonado.

Yer uncle spun and cut down Sturmgard’s mate, probably the last man on board who had any loyalty to the big bastard. The others on deck were taken completely by surprise by me
actions and were unsure how to respond. Then I hollered as loud as I could and surprised them even more. Infamity were yer uncle’s boat, and he were no mad man.


I grabbed me head for a moment. “Shut up!” I yelled and kept yelling. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” All grew quiet on the deck, and the men looked frightened. So I gave them all orders and called Inomata, Gregory, and Stanton forward to assess the situation. We needed them as a core of boarders, but they were in a position to know who were worth keeping as officers, and to me surprise, they nodded with a respect yer uncle probably hadn’t earned, but it were the respect I were posing to expect, Francis. Francis? Not you too, lad.

Well, that’s just about the end of the tale, and perhaps it’s best you didn’t hear, or if you do, if all you sleeping scallions hear it somehow and are poised to learn from the experience, know this—yer uncle zipped his lips and said nothing, gave men nothing but cold glares from that minute forward as our dismembered crew got about their proper duties. Let them talk, build on me actions, but I would take them. I stuck Sturmgard’s pistol into me belt, and as I walked the decks, I knew that the maiden were coming for me, and I knew that the ghosts in me head were going to be torture and keep me awake and on guard. Next time, it would be her dead body thrown overboard and into the ocean, and yer uncle would be the one to do it.

Hold on, hold on. I hear yer knocking. Give old Darkheart a moment to peel himself up out the chair. On me way, on me way. There we go. Now who goes there? Avast, Brother! Avast, lovely Anne! Ahoy there, night owls. How were the opera? Excellent, excellent. Give me a moment to collect me hat and I’ll be out yer way.
What? Oh, nothing, just telling tales. The wee scallions three be sleeping. Francis caught most of me story but nodded off before the end. Edward and Samuel dropped off earlier. No, no, nothing too disturbing. Well, a little blood and glory and grouper, but nothing harmful. Nothing that will keep them up at night, clearly. Not like it do me at least.
Looking for Love

They say Captain Darkheart, the youngest captain ever to pilot a ship of forty guns in the Caribbean, could communicate with spirits. He spoke with the previous captain, argued with enemies he’d executed, and regaled friends he’d lost. For Darkheart, the crew of the guineaman *Infamity* was innumerable.

“A tall burden indeed,” said Frederick, a bearded gunner with a broken smile and stubbled face. He addressed the new recruits around his bunk huddled over a single candle nearing its finish. “Hence the decorations on his arms.”

Darkheart patched his right eye, and in its place, he adorned his upper arms with snake-like coils of callous in the pattern of two eyes, one on each side, just below the shoulder.

“To keep watch over the spirits,” said Frederick. “And no man has ever seen beneath the patch.”

A hush fell over the bunks. As if on cue, Gabriel Plomquist, a freckle-faced lad who had replaced Darkheart’s regular mate that evening, stumbled into the bunks, his pallor paler than a Swedish lass’s inner thigh.

“I seen the eye,” he said.

“Horse shit,” said Frederick.
“Darkheart was drunk as hell,” Plomquist continued. “Singing songs even, leaning out his porthole. So I says, ‘Evening, Cap’n Darkheart. Your cognac, your lime, the juice of one pineapple, and three strips of dried beef.’ And I set the tray down on his table.” Plomquist paused for a moment. “Darkheart turns to me, and he starts with fear, like he don’t recognize me. Then he approached.”

Darkheart’s wiry beard had nearly brushed the side of Plomquist’s face. Fumes from the captain’s breath washed against his cheek. The captain then slowly lifted up the patch, and Plomquist could see that the eye had no scars whatsoever; the wrinkled lid flapped weakly over an empty socket, and Darkheart raised it like a curtain. Underneath was nothing at all but fresh flesh, like the eye had gone and popped out two minutes earlier.

“Darkheart regards me with the socket for a moment and then lowers the patch and says, ‘You resemble her a bit. Freckles and all.’”

The captain had then sat in a chair and chewed on a strip of beef with an air of defeat.

“He looked at me,” said Plomquist, “and he says, ‘I see ‘em all but her.’” Plomquist stood there uncomfortable and watched Darkheart trace his fingers over his extra eyes.

In the bunks, the crew considered the story, tossed it around with what they’d heard from Frederick and others, all of whom had contributed to the legend that one evening, Darkheart, already Captain at that point, replaced a Portuguese lad named Alcantara on his watch in the crow’s nest, and that as the lad descended, a meteorite burst in a flash over the night sky and Darkheart gazed upward and said, “It’s her!” He then raised his right eyebrow so high, looking for something, that the eye slipped from its socket, plunked off the deck, and fell into the sea.
Other Stories
**Her Project**

My girlfriend, the PhD candidate, brought all her books with her when we visited Montaigne’s tower in France. And I mean all. Her worn Shakespeare paperbacks, the fat-volumed Victorians, two different Japanese writers named Murakami—everyone. She fit what she could into her rolling, red suitcase and a rucksack. Then she filled mine. The rest she double-bagged in wrinkled plastic CVS bags.

As always, I was the unhappy recruit, helping with her project. “Couldn’t we have bought them when we got there?” I asked as I shoved the bags into the overhead compartment.

Everyone in the surrounding aisles was looking at us, and others were waiting to get past her, but she didn’t notice. “No, they have to be my books!” she said and took her seat. Usually I enjoyed being the hanger-on boyfriend and only pretended not to enjoy her scenes, performances, antics—devices she used to recharge after her marathon library sessions and late-night research papers—but there was no need to pretend with this exercise. She kicked a bag of books under the seat in front of her and bent over to dig out an anthology of Barthelme stories, which she alternately read and used as a pillow.

We must’ve looked ridiculous, each of us burdened by a rucksack that towered over our heads, by rolling suitcases, and by the wheelbarrows, now full of plastic-bagged books, that she somehow got the airline to gate check. The guy at immigration called over his boss, but my
girlfriend talked us through. She kept repeating, “Pas de vente.” Of course we weren’t going to sell them, but she thought that simple line communicated what the books meant to her. None of them had held the umbrella when it rained during her meditation outside D.H. Lawrence’s tomb. None of them had lurked on eBay to get that Dickens first edition while she was teaching.

Once we arrived at the tower, she got even louder. She said, “Je suis un étudiante!” whenever the guards reached for the books. The tower was a circular, silo-like building made from gray stone. She picked out one of the arched entryways and dropped her books. “Finally!” she said. Finally, indeed. She started stacking the books in the entryway and shouted, “C’est de l’art!” when anyone approached.

I watched with my hands in my pockets until she said, “Am I doing this alone?” So I helped her stack, she on the inside of the tower and I on the outside. We worked like bricklayers, evening the rows as we went. She emptied the suitcases, the bags, and the wheelbarrows, and the stack of books got higher. Near the midway point, she shouted, “We need a window! Where’s my Orwell?” I passed her the copy of Homage to Catalonia I had been reading.

The French, initially perturbed by Americans making a scene, began to understand that this was some kind of performance and looked on in admiration. They spoke animatedly in groups, and even the officials took out their cameras. They brought ladders, and we filled the entryway to the top. I could see my girlfriend through the two-foot square we left in the middle. She had to jump to see through. “We’re!” she said and jumped again. “Almost! There!” Her ecstatic grin and poofy hair flashed in the window with every word.

We saved Montaigne’s essays for the top and slid in a thin volume of haiku to fill the final gap. The small audience that had gathered clapped, and someone shouted, “Magnifique!”
Gone were the wrinkles in her brow. Gone was that vacant look in her eyes when she was paused at the keyboard, writing her dissertation. The books created a perfect door. She was blocked in the tower, but I could see her, and she was beautiful.
Uncle Adam the artist gets in late at night from New York where he lives, and Dad goes to pick him up at the airport. I’m supposed to be asleep, but I get out of bed and peek out the window. I can see him smoking in the back yard. He has curly hair like mine and a beard. I go back to bed, and in the morning Mom tells me I’m not supposed to wake him up early. I think he might get up if he hears me talking, but he doesn’t.

When I get home after school, Uncle Adam is on the couch watching the Food Network, and he says, “The Chuck Monster!” He doesn’t have a shirt on, just jeans and a red bandana rolled up into a band and wrapped around his forehead.

I run at the couch and try to hit him in the stomach, but he puts his hand on my forehead so I can only swing my arms in the air. Then he picks me up and throws me on the couch. He smells a little dirty, like he hasn’t showered, but not in a totally bad way. A little smokey and kind of like incense.

“You’re taking me to the parade,” I yell.

“Am I? Am I?” Uncle Adam says and tickles me until I laugh and say uncle, uncle.

“Would you mind?” Mom says. She’s at the counter getting dinner ready. “Roger’s going to be exhausted when he gets home, and I could use a little time on a few projects.”

“We mustn’t disturb the artist at work, Chuck,” Uncle Adam says and smiles at me.
“Mom’s not an artist,” I say. “She’s a writer.”

He walks over to Mom, steals a piece of cheese off the cutting board, and leans against the counter. I follow him, but Mom slaps my hand before I can take any cheese. I sit at the table in the kitchen and look at Uncle Adam’s camera which is lying there. It’s got a big, black lens attached to the front and a long, thick necklace that says “Nikon” on it.

“Speaking of art, how’s the collective in Brooklyn coming along?” Mom asks.

Uncle Adam scratches his beard and pops the cheese in his mouth. “We’re starting to get some traction,” he says while he chews. “But New York is big. It’s hard to stand out. And you end up having to work mad hours to get someone to notice you even a little.”

“Which is why you came down to New Orleans...”

“Come on, Annie.” Everyone is quiet for a second. “I had to get out of the city.”

Mom looks at Uncle Adam and he scratches his beard again.

“And I can use the photos for something. Everyone will go nuts for New Orleans photos.” He picks up his camera and takes a picture of Mom. She doesn’t say anything. All there is is the chop chop chop of her knife on the cutting board. Uncle Adam looks back at me. “I guess we’ll tag team it, eh, Chuck? Where do we get to watch?”

I tell him that we can watch near where the TV news station sets up, not far from the hospital where Dad works. The news people have a platform and all the bands play when they get close because they want to be on TV.

“Head out in a couple hours?” Uncle Adam says.

“Yeah, but you gotta shower first,” I tell him.

“Why?”

“Because you smell like an asshole!”
Uncle Adam laughs.

“Charlie,” Mom says.

She pretends to be angry, but I can curse when Uncle Adam is around. He’s her younger brother. If it were Aunt Alison, Mom and Uncle Adam’s older sister, I couldn’t because then she wouldn’t take me and Dennis (my cousin) to the zoo, and Dennis would cry (he’s two years younger than me). (I’m in fourth grade.)

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Before we leave for the parade, Mom kneels down to talk to me. “Take good care of Adam.” Normally Mom isn’t very serious about Uncle Adam. He’s always “Uncle Adam the artist,” but this time he’s just Adam, so I know I need to take good care of him.

Dad lets us out near the parade route and pushes some money toward Uncle Adam when he gets out of the car, but Uncle Adam puts his hands up in the air. Dad pushes it toward him again, and eventually he takes it. This is Dad’s way of taking care of Uncle Adam.

We walk over to St. Charles and I find us a spot in the crowd on the street side. Uncle Adam asks where the Mardi Gras is, and I tell him it’s here.

“Right here?” he says.

“Right here,” I say. “And there too.” I point across the street at the neutral ground. There are a few ladders with kids in them but nothing like on Mardi Gras Day—you can still see the grass and walk through in places. “It’ll get more crowded,” I say. It’s early, but the street is already closed off, and lots of people are walking up and down the parade route including guys with carts selling inflatable animals and water guns and glow sticks. Uncle Adam buys me some
poppers, and I throw them in the street while he takes pictures. They snap on the concrete and make little sparks in the shadows. Uncle Adam kneels down real low and gets one of me with my hand over my head about to throw a popper. He laughs and shows me the picture on the back of his camera.

“So people give you money for your art?” I ask Uncle Adam.

“Sometimes,” he says. “I’ve gotten a couple of them published.” Uncle Adam is quiet after that, so I guess he doesn’t want to talk about it. But then he says, “You know, Chuck, your mom’s an artist, too.”

“Art goes on a wall,” I say. “Mom does writing.”

Uncle Adam raises his eyebrow. “Do you have a camera?” he asks, and I tell him no. “Let’s fix that,” he says.

We walk across the street to CVS, and Uncle Adam buys a disposable camera for me and a beer for him. He puts his finger over his lips and gives me a wink when the lady at the register rings us up and puts the beer in a brown paper bag. Uncle Adam rips off the wrapping for the camera, hands it to me, and tells me to shove it in my pocket.

Back at our spot, I take out the camera and look at it. It’s made of black plastic with green stickers on the outside. There’s a lens on the front, and you have to look through a little square on the back to see what you’re taking a picture of. Uncle Adam shows me how to crank the wheel on the back.

“Only when you’re ready to take a photo,” he says. “When it stops, that means your trigger is live. You can capture something. Here, do one of me for practice.”

Uncle Adam steps away from me and holds his hands out wide. I look through the camera. In one hand he has his beer in the paper bag. The other is free. His big camera hangs
from his neck in the middle of his chest. He’s wearing a gray T-shirt and over that a long-sleeved flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. And his jeans. He did take a shower, but he wore the same jeans. Behind him is the crowd and the street. You can see the oak trees hanging out over everything, and people are standing next to ladders or sitting on the curb. Uncle Adam smiles, the first time I’ve seen him do that since he’s gotten here, and I take a picture.

“Now holster it until you see something else good,” Uncle Adam says. He points his finger right at my nose, like he’s trying to send me energy, and he says, “Art is a way of looking at the world. What do you see, Chunk Monster?”

***

A few days later, Uncle Adam slides a thick envelope under the edge of my plate at dinner. I look up at him, and he’s smiling again.

I put down my fork and pick up the envelope. There’s a bunch of handwritten marks on the front, which I can’t read.

“They’re your photos,” Uncle Adam says.

I peel back the flap and pull out another envelope, this one made of navy plastic. Inside, behind the clear plastic of the inside pocket, are the twenty-four photos I took over the weekend.

“That’s very generous of you,” Mom says, like she’s actually kind of impressed. “What do we say?”

“Thanks, Uncle Adam.”

I take them out and start flipping through them. The pictures are in the order I took them. The photo of Uncle Adam with his hands out wide, a few pictures of the crowd, some blurry
photos of the parade. Photos from the next day when my friend John came over and we lowered
the basketball goal to five feet and took pictures of us trying to dunk. Pictures of Hercules, our
cat, lying asleep on his back with his legs stretched out.

Mom starts laughing. I look up, and Uncle Adam is showing her some other pictures. Dad
leans over to look too. “Damn, Adam,” he says after a second. “Annie told me you’d sold a few
pictures, but these look good.”

“What are those?” I ask.

“Some of the shots I took,” Uncle Adam says.

“I wanna see,” I say and run around the table.

Mom and Dad are holding Uncle Adam’s pictures in their hands, passing them back and
forth. Mom has the one of me throwing the popper. Behind that is a photo of a guy holding a
flambeaux. The picture is really close to his face. You can see the little holes in his dark skin and
the pieces of hair that mix together on his chin into a goatee. He’s got a towel wrapped around
his head and is sweaty. His teeth are bright white. His whole face reflects the orange glow from
the fire above him.

Mom’s holding another photo of me. It must be during a break in the parade because
everyone is looking down the street to see what’s coming next, and I’m standing on the edge of
the sidewalk and holding my plastic bag of beads open and looking down into them. I’m in the
center of the picture which makes me stand out even though there is a big crowd all around me.

I sit down and look at my photos again, and they just look like the old TV Dad keeps out
in the garage. Uncle Adam’s look like HDTV.
I get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and Mom is sitting in the dark house in front of the glow of the computer with her glasses and pajamas on, working at her writing. I lie on the floor and listen to her type for a little while. It sounds like really slow, electric rain.

“What’s up, Chuck?” Mom asks after a few minutes. “You okay?”

“Could I get a camera like Uncle Adam’s for Christmas?”

She laughs.

“What if it was my birthday and Christmas combined?”

“I’m sure we can get you a camera, but I don’t know about a big one like that.”

“You wouldn’t have to get me anything for my birthday. So that’s like the camera divided by two.”

“I’m sure Dad has a camera you could practice on. Why don’t we practice first, and then we can look into getting you a camera. What happened to your iPod?”

“The camera on it sucks.”

Mom doesn’t say anything. She just keeps on working on her writing, and I fall asleep. When I wake up, the computer is off, and I have a pillow on the floor and a blanket over me.

***

It’s Thursday, and I still don’t have a camera like Uncle Adam’s, but Dad did find me one of his old film cameras. Uncle Adam says film cameras are cool, so I bring it with me to Mrs. D’Onofrio’s party. She lives next to the empty lot on our block and always throws back our
baseballs and says, “Y’all play hard.” She throws a big party in her back yard before the Muses parade every year, and everyone on the block goes.

She’s talking with Uncle Adam. “Well isn’t that nice,” she says, “the whole Marshall family is so artistic.”

I go up to Uncle Adam and punch him in the arm. “We’re gonna miss the parade,” I tell him.

He looks at his watch and then at Ms. D’Onofrio, who also looks over at his watch. “Babe, y’all got plenty of time,” she says. “Parade ain’t going nowhere.” She turns back to Uncle Adam, and they keep talking.

All our neighbors are standing around in small groups and eating and drinking, and their kids are playing in the grass on Ms. D’Onofrio’s lawn. I eat another cookie and go over to Mom. Mom likes to hug people once she’s had some wine to drink, and she’s already had two glasses, so she hugs me when I get over to her.

“I’m ready for the parade,” I tell her.

“Not too much longer, bud.” She takes a sip from her wine. “You going to take me some good photos tonight?”

“Yup,” I say and hold up the film camera. Dad dug it out of a big box underneath his desk which was filled with cords and loose batteries and computer parts. It was just sitting there for all these years.

Uncle Adam walks over. He has his hands in his pockets, and his big camera is slung around on his back. Mom gives him a hug, and he takes out one hand and pats her on the back. I look through Dad’s camera, and I can finally see why Mom and Uncle Adam are related: they
both have the same eyebrows and nose. Like someone made two different bodies with the same Mr. Potato Head parts.

Uncle Adam looks up at the sky and smiles. “It’s Golden Time,” he says.

“What’s that?” I ask. I look up at the sky, but it just looks blue to me.

And that’s when Uncle Adam tells us about the atmosphere and how the light passes through it to make the colors we see. Right before and after sunset, the light makes interesting angles with the atmosphere, and somehow that makes the light seem special. “Basically it means we should head over to the parade,” he says.

Mom tells us to come back right after and that she’s going to stay at home. “Roger’s manning the ER tonight, so he’ll probably be back after y’all.”

“Y’all,” Uncle Adam says and laughs.


Uncle Adam laughs again, and we start walking. On the way over to the parade, I ask if I can try his camera.

“I dunno, Chuck Monster.”

“Please, please, please,” I say.

“All right,” Uncle Adam says. “But you have to promise to be really careful. I need this for work.”

I hold out my hands, but Uncle Adam looks around like he’s nervous.

“Let’s wait till we get set up somewhere,” Uncle Adam says. Where do we watch this one?”

I tell him farther down the street—this parade runs not far from our house, so we’re walking. It’s a school night, but we only have one day left before the weekend, and then we get
the next week off for Mardi Gras, so there are lots of kids out. We make it to the corner where
the parade turns, and it’s blocked off. There are no cars and only a few people walking and some
on bicycles. The road seems wider and more rounded than normal. The light is pink and purple:
Golden Time.

Once we get to a good spot, right on the side of the street in a space that isn’t too
crowded, Uncle Adam puts the strap around my neck and then carefully places the camera into
my hands. The road is still pretty empty, but the light is starting to go away, so I need to work
quickly. I walk out into the street to look around for stuff to take pictures of. Uncle Adam jumps.
“Where are you going?” he asks.

“To find art!” I say.

Down a side street I find a garage that has vines crawling up the side and onto the roof,
like the plant is swallowing the whole thing. Not far away, people are eating crawfish off of a
table on the sidewalk. I find a metal horse head on a post outside of a house, and we see two
people riding on one bike that has two seats and two pedals. They stop so I can take a picture of
them. There is all sorts of art near the parade. The photos look really nice on Uncle Adam’s
camera, and I can’t wait to see what they look like printed. Uncle Adam promises to get them
printed tomorrow.

On the way back to the parade, we pass a bar, and Uncle Adam’s head turns slowly, like
he’s locked on to something. He says, “Hey, Chuck, you need anything to drink?” And then he
takes to a stand outside a bar on the street. There’s a lady selling drinks to people. Once we get to
the front of the line, Uncle Adam orders a Coke for me, and then he asks the bartender, “What do
you recommend?”

“Bloody Mary’s good,” she says.
The bartender has one side of her head shaved real short and dyed red. The rest is long and brown and sometimes hangs over the red part and sometimes over the other side. She’s wearing black jeans, green Converse shoes, and a tank top that shows off her tattoos. She has a lot of them, including some words that go in a curve above her boobs like a necklace. I don’t read them because I don’t want her to catch me looking at her boobs.

“One of those,” Uncle Adam says. “And make it a double.”

The bartender raises one of her eyebrows and nods at me. “You sure you’re gonna be in good enough condition to keep track of him?”

“Oh, he’s not mine,” Uncle Adam says and smiles. “I’m just watching him.”


“I’ll be good,” Uncle Adam says. “Cross my heart.”

“A double for the big roller,” she says and pours a bunch of vodka into a glass of ice. Then she dumps in a thick red liquid and mixes it all around.

“You from here?” Uncle Adam says.

“I am now,” she says. She picks out some green beans from a jar and pokes them into the drink. Then she puts a piece of garlic, an olive, and an okra on a skewer and puts it into the drink and turns them all a little like she’s arranging flowers. “Ten,” she says.

Uncle Adam digs through his wallet and pulls out a twenty. “You should show me around town,” he says. “I’m thinking about moving down.”

“Where are you now?” she says while she’s getting change.

“Brooklyn,” Uncle Adam says.

“Nice. What do you do there?”

“I’m a photographer.”
“Uncle Adam is an artist,” I say. “He’s just too shy to say so.”

Uncle Adam scratches his beard.

“Well, Uncle Adam, the artist, I’m Coleen” she says. “Come see me at the bar sometime.” Then she smiles at him, and Uncle Adam smiles and doesn’t say anything. He just puts two dollars in the tip jar, and we walk across the street. He glances back at her a couple times as we’re walking.

We wait for the parade, and Uncle Adam keeps turning his head and looking at her from where we’re standing on the edge of the street. I think he likes her. I take a picture of Uncle Adam, and the flash surprises him.

“Papparazzo!” he yells and puts a hand out to block the camera. Then he takes a sip of the Bloody Mary Coleen sold him and coughs. “Spicy,” he says.

The first marching band comes down the street, and a bunch of big guys wearing shiny purple and orange jackets start pushing the crowds out of the street and up onto the sidewalk so that the tubas will fit by and the drummers won’t hit anyone with their sticks when they swing them.

The crowds push me backward into the people behind us, and I almost fall, but Uncle Adam reaches out and grabs my sleeve. When we’re safely on the sidewalk he takes his camera off my neck and gives me back Dad’s. “Might be best for me to hold onto it for a while, Chuck. It’s getting a little crowded.”

When I look down at Dad’s camera, though, I realize that the dial says “1.” I took too many pictures earlier.

***
Golden Time is over, it’s dark, the parade is stuck in front of us, and we are surrounded by drunk college guys.

After Uncle Adam took the camera back, he took a few pictures of the first floats and marching groups and then started to focus on the parade. He put me up on his shoulders a few times, and we caught some nice stuff. Then the parade stopped moving for some reason.

There is a float in front of us shaped like a giant bathtub. There are women all along the top of the float, and you can tell that they’re bored. Some of them even put their elbows on the edge of the float and just look out at the crowd. The crowd has stopped paying attention, too. Everyone in the street is facing away from the parade and talking with friends or having a drink. The guys standing next to us are wearing jeans and fleece sweaters, and they have bottles of beer taped to their hands and are talking really loud.

All of a sudden, everyone gets really excited. We look up, and one of the women on top of the bathtub is holding up a glittery shoe and waving it in the air out to the people.

Uncle Adam laughs. “Is that a shoe?”

“Yeah,” I say. “It’s like the best thing you can catch at this parade.”

Everyone moves up toward the float and waves their hands in the air, and the woman throws it into the air. The shoe goes over everyone right next to the float and heads straight for me and Uncle Adam. A couple guys in front of us keep backing up, backing up, trying to catch the shoe, and we start getting squeezed together, and I have to lean backward into Uncle Adam.

The guy is about to fall on me, but Uncle Adam sticks out his arm over my head and bumps the guy on his shoulder before he does. The guy jerks backward and drops the shoe on the ground. I pick it up.
The guy turns around and looks at Uncle Adam. “What the fuck was that?” He has a green baseball cap on backward.

Then Uncle Adam says, “Watch the kid, man.”

“Fuck your kid, bro,” the guy says slowly. He puts his two hands together, and I can see that he still has duct tape around his right hand where he had the beer bottle taped to it before.

“You just cost me a shoe.”

I look down at the shoe. It’s a single high-heeled shoe, covered completely in glitter with a few designs in it, wrapped in a clear plastic bag closed with a gold tie at the top.

“Dude,” Uncle Adam says. “You almost crushed my nephew. Who cares about a goddamn shoe?”

The guy hits Uncle Adam in the face. Just once. Uncle Adam opens his mouth like he’s surprised and puts a hand to face like he’s not sure if his eye is still there or not. It’s not like in the movies where the person falls on the ground unconscious.

A few of the guy’s friends try to hold him back, but he slips out from their arms and goes at Uncle Adam again. Coleen suddenly appears. She steps up and puts her knee right in the guy’s balls. His face turns red like in the movies, and he falls on the ground. All his friends laugh at him.

“Grab your kid and let’s get out of here,” she says.

“He’s my sister’s kid,” Uncle Adam says. He still has one hand on his eye. Coleen takes him by the arm and starts to lead us out, but then Uncle Adam says, “Wait, where’s my camera?” and puts his hands on his chest. The camera strap is still there, but his big camera is gone.

***
Uncle Adam is sitting with his hands in his head in the back room of the bar where Coleen works. She was on her break and was coming to watch the parade with us. Uncle Adam’s red bandana is full of ice and he’s holding it to his face. A big tree stump is in the middle of the room. It’s wrinkled around the edges but flat on top, and that’s where our drinks are. I asked for a Coke.

“Diet,” she said before handing it to me. “That’ll be our compromise. It’s late.” She got Uncle Adam a shot of whiskey and a beer, but he hasn’t touched either of them.

Coleen’s pretty, I think, but her hair is a little weird, and I can’t stop looking at it. She doesn’t notice because she’s trying to get Uncle Adam’s camera to work again. I’m still too scared to look right at her boobs.

“It’s fucked,” Coleen says after a few minutes of playing with the camera. Her voice is muffled because she has a cigarette in her mouth. We found Uncle Adam’s camera on the ground in one piece, but apparently it’s broken. She’s been twisting the lens, playing with the back of the camera, taking out the battery and putting it back in, but she gives up and puts it on the tree stump, leans back in the chair, and takes the cigarette out of her mouth.

“Yeah,” Uncle Adam says without moving. “The lens is shattered.”

Coleen puts her cigarette in the ashtray, walks over to Uncle Adam, and sits on his lap. She flips her hair to one side, showing the shaved part, and takes one of his hands in hers. He still looks down. He might be crying, but I can’t tell because he’s not making any noise.

“Cheer up, you unlucky bastard,” Coleen says. “You can’t take a picture of this.” Then she squeezes one of her boobs with Uncle Adam’s hand, but Uncle Adam has no reaction at all. She winks at me, and I feel my face get warm.
“The lens still fits on the camera,” I say and take it off the table.

Uncle Adam takes the bandana ice pack off his eye and looks up. His eye is red, and there’s a big purple oval all around it. “Looks that way. Looks like it’s together, like it should work.” Then he tells me to take the lens off the camera. “Look through that.”

I hold it up to my eyes. Through the black plastic I see a circle blurry with the colors from the far wall. A crack zig zags through the glass from one side to the other.

“What about this part?” I point to the big black part of the camera in my other hand.

“Body’s broken, too. Won’t even turn on.”

I flip the power switch on and off a few times, hoping that I have the magic touch, that we can take pictures of the world with lightning bolts shot through everything, but nothing happens.

“At least you’ve got the pictures,” Coleen says.

“This is true,” Uncle Adam says. He puts the ice back on his eye. “Might be able to sell some of them.” Then he frowns. “Not enough for a new camera.”

“And you’ve got those pictures.” Coleen points at the camera around my neck.

“Also true.”

Uncle Adam looks back down. Coleen rubs the back of his neck. “How long are you in town for?”

“Shit,” Uncle Adam says. “I should probably leave tomorrow. I’ll just fucking hitch home.”

“Give it a chance. It’ll warm up to you. Hell, look at me. I’m not doing so bad.” Uncle Adam looks up, and Coleen squishes her cheeks together with her palms, moves one up and one down, and smiles—she knows it’s goofy and that makes her laugh.
But Uncle Adam is broken like the camera. He won’t turn back on for us. Some of Coleen’s hair has fallen down, so she flips it back up again, flashing the red. If this was a movie, this would be the part where they kiss, but Uncle Adam doesn’t kiss her. They just look at each other for a few seconds.

I wind Dad’s camera and take a picture of them with my last photo. The flash goes off, but they don’t notice it. Coleen has an arm around Uncle Adam’s neck.

“Artists gotta be like Cobra Kai—strike hard, strike first, no mercy,” Coleen says. “You gotta hit first next time.”

“Fuck art,” Uncle Adam says. Then he puts a finger on Coleen’s chest, right at the point where her two boobs meet in the middle. He has his finger on one of the tattooed words, and I feel like it gives me permission to finally read what it says. It says, “Stop Searching There’s Nothing To Find.”
Manuelito

I knew pride. Pride was “Floyd” stitched on my uniform. Pride was doing a bad job well, on time and without complaints. I knew affection, too. Affection was Steph and the way she kissed me on my forehead in the mornings, the way she shaped my pancakes into hearts even when she was angry, the way she didn’t mind dating an exterminator with no prospects. I thought that was all I needed, but deep down I started to feel that something was missing. That something was love. Love I did not know. I guess I thought I did, but I didn’t really know love until I met Manuelito. I guess you call it irony when something as small as a mosquito helps you figure out something as big as love.

***

Steph I met at the grocery store. She was wearing an apron, and her curly hair bloomed screw-like from her head. She was pimping samples of insect spray.

“Care to try some of this repellant?” she asked and held up an aerosol can. “It’s completely odorless, lasts for 24 hours, and—”

75
“Unless you shower,” I said. “In which case it’s gone in thirty seconds. Trust me. I’m in the business.” I tapped on the logo on my coveralls. Steph stepped out and sprayed a giant cloud of the stuff right in front of me. I was covered in it.

“Jerk,” she said.

Her manager came over and fired her on the spot. She undid her apron, threw it on the ground, and stomped out through the front. So I dropped my basket and chased her down in the parking lot. She slammed the door to her Impala and put her head on the steering wheel.

“Hey, lady,” I said and knocked on the glass. She sat there crying silently. “I’m an asshole. Let me take you out to coffee.”

She raised her head and tried to start the Impala, but it heaved like some giant, thirsty animal trying to breathe and was silent.

She was quiet in my car, but after I got some coffee in her she warmed up. She lived off the same street as me but closer to the university area, in a single shotgun house she rented from the neighbors. I was farther downtown on the crescent of New Orleans in a run down, second floor studio apartment. She was working three jobs. Part time barista, doggie daycare receptionist, and grocery clerk. “But I really want to work with animals,” she said. “I can’t have dogs in my place, so it’s nice to at least see them at work.” I could see an emptiness in her eyes behind her glasses. She touched my wrist when she mentioned this corgi she was in love with. She leaned toward me as she spoke. She raised an eyebrow and batted her lashes.

Sure enough, half an hour later we were mashing lips in my car and then humping in my apartment. When we finished, she lit up a cigarette and rested her forearm against her forehead. “So basically, you kill things,” she asked.

“Yup,” I said. “My name is Floyd, and I kill things.”
So Steph and I started dating. I went back to the grocery store and asked the manager to give her the job back, which he did begrudgingly. Life with Steph was good. We traded nights at each others’ places, had lots of energetic sex, and went on a couple of weekend trips here and there, once to see her aunt outside of Talahassee. When we got there, Steph stood with an arm around her aunt, and they both looked at me, like they were admiring me, which made me feel uncomfortable.

It was like a lot of relationships. For the first month or so, you ask yourself. Is this love? Is this love? And then you forget about it and either assume you have it or you’re the type who doesn’t mind not knowing. I guess I didn’t know.

Manuelito the mosquito snuck in at the end of July when summer was at its hottest and most humid. I left the door cracked whenever I brought in groceries so I didn’t have to use my hands to open it. I’m pretty sure that’s when she got in. Otherwise I was good about keeping the door shut.

After I’d put all the groceries away, I sat at the table eating a turkey sandwich, reading the newspaper, and noticed a nagging itch on the top of my foot. I reached down to scratch at it and went back to my sandwich. Later I felt the pain on the other foot.

Steph got home from work, we made pizza, and I forgot about the bites. Everything seemed fine until we went to sleep. That night I woke in the dark with Steph next to me and more bites on my neck, wrist, and ankles. It was one of those moments when you realize not only that you’re awake but that you’ve been awake and that thoughts have been passing over your
mind for hours without you even realizing it. I was going be exhausted the next day at work. I flung off the covers and stood up.

I held out my cell phone, and the light from the screen illuminated a small area. I walked around hoping I would bump into the bug.

“What are you doing?” Steph said. “Come back to bed.”

“It hasn’t gotten you?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“The goddamn mosquito,” I said. “Bit me like fifteen times.”

Steph laughed and fell back asleep. Manuelito didn’t want her at all for some reason. She only bit me. I hunted for her and eventually gave up and managed to fall back into a light sleep.

This continued the next few days. I cursed her in the darkness, rolled out of bed, and tried to hunt her down. But I could never find her. I checked all of the places I thought she might be—perched somewhere along the floorboards, burrowed in the piles of damp clothes that littered my apartment, enjoying the remnant heat on the surface of the light bulb in my desk lamp—but she managed to hide herself, and for weeks she tortured me and turned me into a sleepless zombie.

***

I was a wreck at work. I donned my coveralls and pesticide tank and walked the outlines of yards and homes, spraying the corners and the edges and the cracks. More and more often, I missed a room or the side of a yard and had to return to after we received complaints. I even fell asleep on the roof of a house as we were covering it with tarp to fog it. I leaned to one side, and when my
coworker called to me, I jerked in the opposite direction, lost my balance, and began to fall. I raked my hands along the shingles to stop myself.

I spent nights at Steph’s to make up for the lack of sleep. I had to wake up a half hour earlier to make the commute. It was worth it for the undisturbed sleep, but Steph was starting to press me.

“Why don’t you just move in?” she asked.

I grumbled some noncommittal answer. Everything had been so perfect till right then. I didn’t think about it at all, but Steph got me thinking. It’s funny how what you want something to be and what it actually is aren’t always the same. I guess that’s what the problem was here. Maybe it was because we slept together so quickly. There are always more surprises outside of the bedroom than there are inside, but we never really worked on finding them in each other, and instead they leapt out like crazy, jungle fighters trying to ambush some fascist occupying force. My habit of snorting drove her nuts, so I had to buy lots of Kleenex and blow my nose. I didn’t even realize I did that. One day she came home with a flute and decided she was going to start learning it. I had to put an end to that pretty quick, and she was hurt for a bit.

But neither of us could complain. I recognized that look of desperation in her eyes when we first had coffee because it felt like I was looking into a mirror. It’s just that what we each wanted us to be was different things, apparently, and reality wasn’t as good as either of the things we wanted.

And so now, with me spending more time at her place, Steph started thinking, How can I fill this hole?

“We could move into your place,” she said. “And get a dog,” she added quickly. “We can’t have a dog at my place.”
I just ignored her and rolled over. The next day she ignored me and stopped returning my texts. It looked like we were on the outs.

***

Eventually I caught up with Manuelito. I was forced back into my apartment, back into a sleep disturbed by pain and fear. I was ragged from overwork and lack of sleep, and Manuelito by then had grown fat on my blood and could no longer hide. One night I felt something brush against my ankle. I kicked at the furry sensation and hopped out of bed. I turned on the lights, and there she was on the floor.

At that point she was already the size of a golf ball. Her wings labored to carry her swollen body. Like the rotors of a helicopter going down, they buzzed and cut out for a moment, then buzzed desperately to a higher pitch and died out again. She seemed to bounce like a racquetball in slow motion as she hopped around the room with short flights. She stopped on the floor in the middle of the room, too tired to move any farther, and I approached her carefully.

I cupped my hands around her and picked her up. She was heavier than I expected. Her scaly wings and antennae brushed against my hands as she jerked in different directions, nervously exploring her surroundings.

You might think that I would’ve been eager to crush the little beast, to press her between my hands and then wipe her guts, filled with my own blood, onto my pajama pants: this is the thing that had ruined my life, and I was an exterminator. But there was irony at work that night. When I opened my hands, what I found wasn’t a pest, not a bug nor an insect. Of course she was
all those things, too, but when I opened my hands and peered in at Manuelito, I saw a little piece of life shivering, tired and confused.

***

If there’s one thing I’m not, it’s a wordsmith. I picked up that little bug and named it Manuelito then and there because it sounded right. Manuelito the mosquito. Probably should’ve realized that only female mosquitos bite, but Manuelito I’d dubbed her, and Manuelito she stayed.

I threw a piece of lettuce and a damp paper towel into an Asics box, set Manuelito inside, and then settled down into the first peaceful sleep I’d had in my place in two weeks. So peaceful that the next morning I slept through my alarm and had to jump into my coveralls without a shower, shove a Pop-Tart in my teeth, and tear off to work.

When I got home, I opened the box and looked inside. The setup looked ridiculous: Manuelito sat in my shoebox in between the lettuce and the paper towel. In my midnight stupor, I thought she might have wanted something to drink and something to eat, and that was always what I did when I was a kid and caught bugs in mason jars. She lay there not moving, but when I poked her, she fluttered her wings briefly. She was still alive.

My phone rang, and when I checked, it was Steph calling. I stared at the phone for a couple of rings and then picked up.

“I miss you,” Steph said.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Don’t you miss me?” she asked.
“Of course,” I said. “You’re only the only good thing I ever I had.” I don’t know why I felt compelled to say that, but that’s what I said. Probably true to a certain extent. I was just leaving out the buts and althoughs.

“I’m coming over,” she said.

“Wait, what?” I looked down at Manuelito.

“I gotta see you,” she said. “I’m coming over.” Then she hung up.

***

Half an hour later, I heard Steph walking up the stairs and opened the door to find her teary-eyed face.

“Why would you do this to me?” she asked.

“Do what?” I said.

“Just leave me like that. I’ve been waiting for you to call.”

“I texted.”

“You were supposed to call.”

“I thought you were angry.”

“I was.” Her arms were crossed. She walked across the apartment and stared out of the windows next to my bed. Then she turned and checked out the apartment, like she was trying to figure out if something had changed.

I’d put the shoebox under my desk and draped a towel over it, but ever since I poked her, Manuelito kept buzzing around and making a racket. She buzzed and plunked into the top of the
box and fell to the bottom. Then she repeated the whole thing: buzz, plunk, buzz, plunk. I hoped Steph wouldn’t notice.

She walked up to me and put her forehead into my chest. “Do you not want to be with me?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I mean, no, that’s not it.” I could hear Manuelito buzzing and plunking. “I don’t not want to be with you. I—shit, I want to be with you it’s just that—”

“Just what?” she said. “You just never commit to anything. You don’t want to move in, you don’t want a dog. There’s no sharing going on here.” She pressed a palm into my chest and then to her own. “I need sharing,” she said. “And what is that sound?” She got an angry look on her face and then walked toward my desk.

She kneeled, and I walked over. “That’s nothing,” I said. “It’s just this thing.”

She removed the towel from the box and held it in between two fingers.

“You want to see it,” I said. “Fine.” I grabbed the shoebox and took it to the kitchen counter. I couldn’t keep it away from her anymore. I lifted the edge of the box and picked up Manuelito and held her out to Steph.

She scrunched up her eyes and said, “What?” She reached out a hand, pulled it back for a second, and reached out again to touch Manuelito. Manuelito buzzed and resettled in my hands.

“What is this?” Slowly her eyes got wider. “Is this…for me?” She smiled. “For us?” She took Manuelito in her hands. “Oh. My. God. I love it!”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s for us.”

Steph made a high pitched sound and hugged me with one arm. “I love it. It’s beautiful!”

***
“What’s wrong with it?” Steph asked.

Manuelito did look terrible. After we put her back in the box, she fell to one side and heaved irregular breaths with the occasional flutter of her wings.

“What did you buy me a sick pet? Do something, Floyd.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“What is this lettuce?”

“I was trying to feed it.”

“Mosquitos eat blood,” Steph said and grabbed me by the arm. I looked at her hand grasping my forearm. She squeezed until the blood vessels popped out, and I knew what I had to do. I picked up Manuelito and placed her on my arm.

The moment her antennae brushed against my skin, I noticed a change in her demeanor. Her legs steadied beneath her, and her head moved forward. She placed her proboscis on my skin without any hesitation and firmly pressed it into my flesh.

“Oh my god,” Steph said.

I winced with the expectation of pain, but her blood sucker was so incredibly thin that I could barely feel it. Her head was pressed up against my arm, and she adjusted the proboscis by moving back and forth, searching for a source of blood. When she found one, I felt the strange sensation of my blood flowing into this small creature.

“Does it hurt?”

I shook my head, but after a few seconds, I started to feel an itchy sensation, so I pulled her off my arm and handed her to Steph. She held Manuelito in the air, and the bug fluttered her wings, clearly reenergized. Steph was mesmerized by the insect. She gently took her hands off
Manuelto and let her hover in midair. A smile floated over Steph’s face as she stared cross-eyed at Manuelito just in front of her face.

A half-dollar-sized welt swelled up on my forearm, and I pressed a cold can of beer from the fridge against it to relieve the itch.

***

So Steph moved in. We threw out my cube fridge and brought over her full-sized one. My studio apartment was packed with all our stuff, but lying in bed at night with Steph nestled into my hairy chest and Manuelito purring in her sleep wasn’t unpleasant.

We had a life, and we all lived it. Steph worked her jobs, I worked mine, and we came home and made dinner, watched TV, and took care of Manuelito. We bought her a cat perch at Petco. The perch was a balsa wood stand with hemp rope coiled around the columns and furry fabric stapled onto the landing. Manuelito sat on it and looked out the window, and whenever anyone walked by she got excited, buzzed in a circle around the room, and returned to the perch.

If Steph wasn’t around when I got home or if she had a night shift, Manuelito was always there, eager to see me. Even I had to admit it was nice to have the little bug around. She would cuddle up to me on the couch for warmth while I watched TV, and I could start to feel the differences between expectation and reality fade in my mind.

Manuelito got bigger and bigger. She went from golf ball to tennis ball to basketball in size. We alternated feeding her: my right arm, Steph’s right arm, my left arm, Steph’s left arm. The feedings got longer and longer, and Manuelito more and more agitated when she wasn’t full. We’d give her a minute or two worth of blood and then push her away, but she came buzzing
back a few minutes later. She nudged us on the couch, in the kitchen as we cooked, and even as we were trying to get to sleep. We were both starting to get short with each other because of the damn animal, and I started to wonder how sustainable the whole thing was.

“We gotta do something,” I told Steph one day.

“We could rob a blood bank,” she said.

“Are you nuts?”

“Or start our own fake blood bank.”

I stared at her.

“How else are we going to feed her?” Steph said and threw her hands in the air. “We can’t just go to the pet store. There’s no mosquito food there.”

“Well maybe we should just put her down,” I said.

Steph slapped me, rolled over in bed, and went to sleep.

Work was the same, but I had Steph in mind the whole time. Get Steph happy, get Steph happy. Get Manuelito happy, get Steph happy.

I got called to a house that had a nest of wasps under the awning of the garage. The customer’s kids watched through the windows as I approached in a beekeeper’s suit, smoked the wasps to sleep, and then submerged the delicate, papery nest in a large bucket of water. The kids ran outside celebrating when their mother told them that the wasps were gone for good, but I couldn’t share their joy. The lifeless bodies of the wasps floating up in the water reminded me only of Manuelito.

As I was cleaning up, the kids were still in the yard, and their cat came walking along the fence, hopped over onto a tree, and then settled into a spot in the grass. It crouched low and looked like it was going to pounce on something, but before it could, some kind of brown bird
came diving out of the sky. It must’ve pecked at the cat because the cat leapt a foot into the air out of surprise and without even trying batted at the bird. It got the bird between its two front paws and just sat on it, unsure of what it was supposed to do next. Whenever the bird struggled, the cat reestablished its grip.

That’s when I realized what I had to do.

At home, Steph was trying to keep Manuelito away from her. She was sitting at the computer, wearing long sleeves, and whenever she fluttered over, Steph batted her away in the air.

“I can’t take it anymore, Floyd,” she said when I walked in. “She’s too bad. We’ve got to do something.”

“Bring her into the bathroom,” I said.

Steph panicked. “What are you going to do?”

“Stop worrying. I’m not going to hurt her.”

Steph lured her over, and I upended the brown paper sack I’d used for my lunch that day. Two small rats fell out onto the floor and started scampering around. Steph screamed.

“Relax,” I said.

“Floyd, they’re rats.”

I shut the door.

“And now what happens?” Steph asked.

“We wait,” I said.

And wait we did. It took longer than we expected, so long that we had to borrow the bathroom at the Circle K and we both went to work without showering, but by the time we got
home the next day, the rats had both been drained, and the bathroom was splattered with evidence of the feeding.

***

Over the course of a few weeks, we weaned Manuelito off our blood and trained her to take the mice and rats that I could scrounge from work. She sat on my forearm, and whenever she pointed her proboscis toward my pasty white flesh, threatening to feed, I withdrew the animal I was holding. I petted her as she fed on the perch. Manuelito held down her meal with her legs, put her needle-like proboscis to its flesh, and then firmly inserted into the animal. When she hit a vein, I could see the blood pour into her translucent frame. I ran my fingers gently over her fuzzy head, scratching the area between the two antennae on the top, and then I traced a line down her thorax to her stomach, which slowly bloated as it filled with blood. Once her stomach had gone from a flat, pill shape to a bulging egg, she withdrew and flew off to the corner of the room.

Before long she was buzzing by the door as soon as she heard my car pull up outside, excited to see what kind of treat I’d managed to sneak out of work. She developed a special attachment to me since Steph refused to touch the vermin we fed her. At least she didn’t bother us so much anymore. About the same as any other pet does, I guess. So our lives went back to normal. Which is to say, mindless routine with Manuelito’s growth the only thing to help us mark the passage of time.

Her wings expanded until they swooped big and black and beat furiously enough to levitate the rest of her body. Her moltings fell onto the floor. They were these mysterious pieces of hardened plastic that seemed to have fallen from space. We saved them at first as mementos.
marking her growth, but after a few weeks, the collection threatened to overwhelm our tiny living space, so we stopped and instead swept them into a corner and gathered them into trash bags.

I was forced to bring home mammals that were increasingly difficult to fit in my lunch bag. I brought hamsters and ferrets whose owners had grown tired of them. I brought racoons and nutria that we chased out of attics and basements. I wrapped their snouts with chloroform and into the brown paper bag they went. Eventually I resorted to grocery bags. After a month, Manuelito was as large as a baby pig. She stopped growing after three months, her final size that of a fully grown St. Bernard.

***

And that’s when it all became such a big deal. We couldn’t coop her up inside all day, so I rigged a harness, and we walked her around the park. She strained at the leash and forced me to run faster to keep up with her, and the whole time everyone stared at us like we were some kind of freak show.

The cable news showed up later in the week, and we had to do an interview, and that led to the vet visits and the shots and assurances about the West Nile virus and domestication and appearances on morning shows. It was exhausting. Steph and I held hands as Manuelito buzzed around the set, exploring all the new people, floating over the audience, pecking at the cameras a little. It was like we were being recognized as decent people for being lucky enough to have a gifted child.
What we didn’t realize is that Manuelito was a thing—again, I’m not a wordsmith—some kind of thing that was between Steph and me. Sure, we were right there, spooned up against each other in bed or holding hands, but I constantly had the sense that there was something missing, and I could see in her eyes that she felt the same way.

And we still rubbed each other raw. I got hungry and ate a frozen dinner before Steph got home, and she looked at me like I was an idiot. Or Steph washed a pair of my jeans that still had a few good wears in them, and I would have to hold my breath until the anger went away. But then it was time to feed Manuelito or take her out, and we would look to each other, and everything else disappeared, and we dealt with it.

Here’s this thing—this bug—that enabled us to be decent toward each other and helped connect that gap between expectation and reality. It was a strange feeling.

***

They say you need some dumb luck as a parent, for those times when something unpredictable happens. It’s literally impossible to keep an eye on your kid every minute of every day, so when something does happen—the kid picks up a rusty nail on the playground, the kid wanders away from you at the mall, the kid steps out into the street without looking—you need luck on your side or blessing from the big guy, if that’s something you buy in to.

We did not have this luck. I’d picked up Steph after her work, and we were carrying groceries upstairs to my place. I left the door cracked as always, but this time Manuelito nuzzled her way outside. Before I could drop the bags, she was down the stairs and buzzing off. I ran after her.
One of the neighbors who was sitting on his porch said she looked excited. Once she got downstairs she hovered in place for just a second, went right, left in quick succession, like she wanted to go everywhere at once, and then flew right out into traffic. I heard the car screech, and when I got out to the street, Manuelito’s translucent body was pouring its contents onto the road through a gash in her side. The headlights of the car shot down the street. A man got out of the car. “Jesus,” he said. “What was that?”

Steph followed me down the stairs. “No, no, no, no!” she yelled.

“It’s our pet,” I said.

Manuelito squirmed and spasmed and made high-pitched sounds. Steph kneeled down and put a hand on her head. I rolled up my sleeves and offered my forearm, but soon she was still.

The guy who was driving wanted to give us money, but that didn’t make any sense. I just held Steph while she cried in the street, and the guy eventually drove off after apologizing. I carried Manuelito back to the house and buried her in the back yard, and I held Steph in the darkness.

Steph and I did fine, we’re doing fine, I guess. Things were quiet for a while. After a couple of months, I looked over at Steph one night and said, “We could get a dog?” She just said no.

Manuelito is gone. Steph and I are good, like I said, but it just isn’t what I expected. I feel like we buried love that night when Manuelito died.
Outrageous Fucking SUVs

The live oak trees outside Gabe Seifert’s second-floor classroom rustled in the wind, and afternoon sunlight cut in through the windows, warming the drafty wooden building. Outside he could see a few thin streaks of clouds painted high in the sky, but otherwise it was crisp and clear: perfect weather for the driving range. *Fuck yeah*, Seifert thought. He had the last period of the day free and had spent it grading a stack of AP Civics essays. Now he had only to finish the last one, and he would be free to make his escape and find oblivion at the range.

That November in New Orleans had been miserable—unseasonably hot and humid, and plastered with smelly rainstorms—but earlier in the week a cool wind had blown in from the north, dried out the air, and dropped the temperature into the 60s, reminding Seifert of the true autumns he was missing up in Massachusetts. He could hear his father’s commentary in his mind: “Gabe, what you’re doing is admirable, truly, but you need to start thinking long term: this is no fucking place to live.”

Seifert shook his head to dislodge the parental demons from his thoughts. Then he shook the tumbler on his desk, drained the final sip of coffee, and returned his attention to the last paper, which always seemed to take longer to grade than any of the others no matter how hard he forced himself to focus. He should have saved Andy Posada’s for last. It was always an easy
grade: carefully crafted sentences and content that was just short of original insight—a solid A-.

Katie Fucking Henderson’s essay, on the other hand, was a total shit show, an obvious partisan ode to the Second Amendment that didn’t really answer the question on the essay prompt. He marked errors in red pen and scribbled comments perhaps a little angrier than normal because of what seemed like willful ignorance on Katie’s part. As he marked up the essay, his father’s voice returned: “You can do more. You can go somewhere where someone will fucking appreciate the work you do, the time you put in.”

For a moment, Seifert entertained the doubt; he had wanted more at one time, more than being a role model, more than teaching teenagers across the country in the biggest small town in America. In high school he dreamed of going to law school, clerking for a judge, and somehow landing a SCOTUS appointment, although the steps between those last two positions were vague to him. In the middle of his second semester of law school, the mounting debts, sterile legal writing style, and surprising aloofness of the student body had convinced him that law school was not for him. He had, however, enjoyed the volunteer work he did at middle schools on Harvard Law’s annual service trip to New Orleans over winter break, so much so that the assistant principal of one of the schools, who had been impressed with Seifert’s energy in the classroom, told him that he had an open invitation to return. Seifert took him up on the offer and moved south but was surprised when the school ratcheted up its standards upon conversion to a state charter school a few years after Katrina, a move which ousted the assistant principal and ended any chance that Seifert had of finding work: no teaching qualification, no job.

After a week of grunt work and a good word from the former assistant principal, Seifert found work as a substitute teacher at a private high school. Substituting turned into a full-time
position the next fall. His parents visited, and he took them to crawfish boils and live music sets that were quiet enough and ended early enough for their tastes. His notoriously stodgy father even relaxed at a couple of points on the trip, like when the waiter at a restaurant coated their bread pudding with thick whiskey sauce. The bourbon vapors rose up from the warm dessert and coaxed a smile from his father. But his parents still did not fully approve.

After two years of teaching, his energy and dedication earned Seifert an AP Civics class, but even it was filled with insufferable students, most of whom were rich, coddled, and drove outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles. Seifert was trying to change things, to give these kids a different perspective from outside of New Orleans, outside the South, but he could also recognize that this sojourn in New Orleans was driven in part by a juvenile response to his parents’ disapproval.

Seifert finished his comments, shoved Katie’s paper in the manila folder along with the others, and stood sharply, throwing his arms out in relief. Now he could shoot off on his bike like a rocket leaving the atmosphere and find true peace, true focus at the City Park Driving Range. Just as he was about to step out of the classroom into the hall, Katie Fucking Henderson appeared in front of him and squeezed her way into the classroom.

“How can I help you, Ms. Henderson?” Seifert asked.

“What grade did you give me on that essay, Mr. Seifert?” Katie said, still facing the field.

“Katie, I feel like we’ve had this conversation before. I’ll return the papers—”
Katie wheeled around with a revolver in her hands, interrupting Seifert’s response, but he was equally quick on the draw and had a Glock out from his shoulder holster a moment later, before Katie could disable the safety. They stood pointing the guns at each other in the empty classroom.

Katie squinted at Seifert and pursed her lips, and he returned a calm stare, conscious to smooth his wrinkled brow and breathe as instructed in the firearms refresher course he’d taken the previous week.

“What the fuck is my grade, Mr. Seifert!” Katie shouted.

“Ms. Henderson,” Seifert said slowly. He could feel his heart beating rapidly. “I’m sure we can work this out, but you’ve got to lower the fucking weapon.”

“I’m not lowering the weapon!” Katie screamed. “What the fuck is my grade?”

“Katie,” Seifert said. He picked up the stack of papers with his left hand without taking his eyes off Katie. “Why don’t we go talk with Principal Nelson. I’m sure he’ll be able to help us work this out.” He took a few steps toward the door, still with a bead on Katie, and she followed.

As the pair moved into the hallway, passing students noticed the showdown and cautiously touched their hands to their own weapons, most of which were holstered on their hips. This wasn’t Seifert’s first rodeo. He’d been caught before with both students, fellow teachers, friends and family, and total strangers, although he had never been the kind to start any beef. He was handy with his Glock, enough to handle most business without any need to actually fire weapons. He’d also been audience to even more close encounters, none of which had resulted in bloodshed. Now that Seifert thought about it, not once in the fifteen years since he received his first gun at age thirteen had he seen anyone shot. Not in his hometown of Newton, not in college at USC, not in Boston during his flirtation with law school, and not in New Orleans. But Katie
worried him. She had an intense streak that seemed a little unpredictable at times. She might actually shoot him.

Seifert slowly walked backwards and led Katie through the halls, down a flight of stairs, and into the administrative offices where the secretary sat typing at the computer.

“Anne,” Seifert said, “Is Mr. Nelson in?”

“Sure,” she said without looking up. “Go on in. He just got out of a meeting.”

The two, still separated by five feet, stepped into the office where Nelson was sitting behind his desk, flipping through paperwork.

“Mr. Nelson?” Seifert said as he backed in the room. “Katie has some business to deal with.”

“All right,” Nelson said and stood. He was tall and lean with gray hair he buzzed to the skin and a small bald area crowning the top of his head. “What the fuck do we have here?” He opened the top drawer on his desk and pulled out a Smith and Wesson. He pulled back the chamber to load a round and then pointed the gun at Seifert and then at Katie. “All right, all right. Let’s just calm the fuck down. What the fuck is going on here?”

Katie clenched her jaw and squeezed her hands. “Mr. Seifert won’t tell me my fucking grade.”

Nelson pointed his gun at Seifert.

“And I tried to explain to Ms. Henderson,” Seifert said, “that I would return the paper to her with her grade when her class—”

“Can’t you just tell her the fucking grade, Gabe?” Nelson said.

Seifert felt a bead of sweat roll down his temple. Nelson was being a bastard again, picking on the non-native Seifert. His first year in New Orleans, the students had started calling
him “Yankee” after they heard the principal use the word once. It was enough that Nelson constantly called him by his first name in front of the students and that he’d earned him a meaningless nickname—Seifert wanted to believe that North and South weren’t all that different—but now his boss was trying to tell him how to do his job. Seifert could hear his father in his head again: “These people, they just don’t want any help, and you’ll fucking realize that at some point.”

Seifert pointed his gun back at Nelson. “No, I’m not going to.”

“But I fucking need to know!” Katie said and pointed her gun at Seifert. “And you said you’d have them back to us by fucking Friday.”

Seifert pointed his gun at Katie. “I said I’d try Katie. I only collected them two days ago.”

“But my parents are going to take away my fucking driver’s license if I don’t tell them the grade,” Katie said.

Nelson pointed his gun at Katie. “Calm the fuck down, Ms. Henderson. You driving is not the main concern here.”

“Yes it fucking is!” Katie shouted and pointed her gun at Nelson. “We’re going to our ranch in Texas this weekend, and I want to be able to fucking drive off road!”

Ah, the ranch. Seifert theorized that Katie’s distorted patriotism stemmed from the fact that she came from a wealthy, landed New Orleans family and that her father in particular had brainwashed her. Her family lived in an enormous house on a private road off St. Charles Avenue with a three-bay, two floor garage where they parked their armada of outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles. Like many wealthy, landed residents of Louisiana—the “Sportsman’s Paradise”—their narrative of the Second Amendment didn’t coincide with that of a sizable
section of the general population, at least the population where Seifert had grown up. Seifert hated how their views erased any nuance and compromise.

“Lower your fucking voice, young woman!” Nelson yelled and pointed his gun at Katie.

Katie pointed her gun back at the principal. “Fuck you, Mr. Nelson!”

“Fuck me?” Nelson said. His face turned red and his eyes bulged out in surprise. “No, Ms. Henderson, fuck you!”

“Fine,” Seifert yelled. “Jesus. Calm the fuck down, both of you. Here’s your fucking paper.” He pulled it from the folder with one hand and threw it toward Katie. The paper fluttered in the air and landed on the floor.

Katie picked it up, and as she did she let her aim soften. Seifert relaxed his trigger hand. Nelson did the same and let out a deep breath.

“What the fuck?” Katie yelled. She pointed her gun back at Seifert. “A B+? What the fuck did I do to deserve that?”

“Just a B+, Gabe?” Nelson asked and pointed his gun at Seifert.

Seifert put both hands on his gun and alternated pointing it at Nelson and Katie. He knew this would happen, and he had reached his limit. He’d spent weeks going over the Bill of Rights with the AP class, another few weeks reminding the class that their essays would have to be more than just an ode to their favorite amendment, a weekend responding to first drafts when he could’ve been out chasing tail, and now he was about to get fucking shot because he’d given Katie Fucking Henderson a B+ when it should have been apparent from his comments in the margins that a B+ was a very generous grade.

Katie began to cry silently and mash the grip of her pistol with her palms. Nelson mouthed the letters G-P-A. And Seifert knew—had known—that would be the issue. Katie was
competitive as a motherfucker, and Seifert respected that. She was hard-working, punctual with her assignments, participated in class, and some of her writing showed signs of potential future excellence. She captained the tennis team and carried her racket with her around school.

Everything about her annoyed Seifert—even the way her goddamn ponytail bobbed pertly as she walked—and he worked hard not to make teaching her a battle of egos. Her class had elected her president; thus, she naturally became interested in politics and law school. The same shit that Seifert had been interested in when he was in high school.

But for some reason, Katie turned into a complete ditz when it came to the Second Amendment. And Seifert wasn’t going to lower his standards. He didn’t agree completely with his parents’ pacifist views, but also knew they weren’t totally wrong in their thinking about the South. He was here in New Orleans to teach, and he wasn’t going to let the city or the students down, even if they were angry with him. He could fucking change things.

Seifert pointed his gun at Nelson and pulled out a piece of paper from the manila folder.

“At least look at the goddamn prompt.”

Nelson motioned for Seifert to give him the prompt and took it with his free hand. The principal shifted his aim to Katie and then quickly back to Seifert before letting his eyes drift down to the paper.
“Seems pretty straightforward,” Nelson said. He pointed his gun at Katie. “Which amendment did you write about?”

“The Second,” Katie said.

He motioned for her to give him the paper.
“Whoa, Katie,” Nelson said and let out a small laugh. “Your title could use some work.”

“What the fuck is wrong with that?” Katie asked and pointed her gun at the principal.

“Katie,” Nelson said and leveled his gun at her. “It’s pretty clear from the title that you’re focusing on the amendment itself and not the changing interpretations. I mean, the question doesn’t really ask for your fucking opinion of the amendment, which is effectively what your title is.”

Katie bit her lower lip.

Seifert breathed a sigh of relief. At least Nelson wasn’t going to side with Katie here; he wasn’t totally irrational, even if he did seem to enjoy picking on Seifert. Earlier that year, Seifert had chaperoned the senior class on a trip to Baton Rouge, the state capital, in an effort to connect the students to the history of the area. He, Nelson, and a handful of other teachers had packed up their long-haul bike packs and ridden the 80 miles to “the Red Stick.” The trip took two days by bike each way, and the kids weren’t all that impressed with anything at their age, but Seifert had enjoyed the sights. The imposing Art Deco-style State Capitol building, the tallest capitol building in the U.S, had been legitimately impressive. The tour guide took the group through the marble hallways into the congressional chamber and out into the gardens where Huey P. Long was buried. On the way out, the guide stopped in front of the building. A small area was cordoned off. He stepped over the guardrails and ran his hand along the white surface of the building which had a violent gash in its surface.

“This is where Governor Long was run down,” the guide said. “You can still see where the outrageous fucking sport utility vehicle made impact.”
He was right: the building was scarred.

Just inside the entrance, at a small exhibit covering the assassination, Long’s oversized suit jacket and pants were displayed behind glass. The chalk-like tire tracks along the back were still apparent seventy-five years after the killing.

“Jesus,” Seifert said, drawing stares from students and Nelson.

Seifert blanched when he realized he’d spoken aloud and hoped that no one would notice, but Nelson had heard. “Welcome to the South,” he said.

“You’d think they would restrict ownership after something so awful like that,” Seifert said quietly.

“Fuck no,” Nelson said. He drew his hand out over the students in front of them.

“They’ve all driven. On the eighth grade class trip, out at a ranch in Texas. If not before that with their families, hunting or for sport.”

“Have you ever driven an outrageous fucking sport utility vehicle, Gabe?” Nelson had asked, in front of all of the students.

“No,” he’d answered meekly. He had felt the attention of the class turn from the guide to him, and he hated Nelson ever since for doing that to him.

“So how the fuck do I fix this essay?” Katie said and pointed her gun at Seifert.

“Yeah,” Nelson said and raised his own gun.

“Well, it starts with your introduction, Katie,” Seifert said and pointed his gun at her. “It isn’t really a full fledged introduction to your argument.”
“You said the first paragraph could be short,” Katie said. “It’s on the paper you gave out.”

“Katie, I know what I fucking wrote.” In his mind, Seifert could see the class in their desks, some sending messages on their phones, some looking out the window, others looking directly at him with no sign that his words were even being processed, and there was Katie in the front row taking notes along with the other A students; she should’ve realized this. “I mentioned several times in class that I wanted you to look at the language of the amendment in the introduction. What’s the difference between ‘keep’ and ‘bear’? What about ‘militias’? Why did the Founders specify ‘outrageous fucking’ sport utility vehicles?”

“Mr. Seifert, ‘Fucking’ is my middle name,” Katie said defiantly.

Seifert frowned. In her campaign for class office, Katie had purposely drawn attention to her middle name and its ties to historic American rhetoric. We hold these truths to be fucking self-evident. Four score and seven fucking years ago. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this fucking wall. There were days when Seifert hated “fucking.” The school had been covered with posters with Katie’s face and the slogan “Let me be your fucking president.”
“Who gives a fuck what your name is, Katie?” Seifert said. “You didn’t fucking apply your knowledge of fucking in this essay.” Seifert adjusted his grip on his Glock. “This essay needs major work. I mean, ‘Washington Fording the Delaware in his Jeep Wrangler’ is not a historical event. That’s your biggest problem with the next paragraph.”

America was forged in the furnace of a heated revolution, and the fuel for the fire was outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles. The Americans were lead by the heroic George Washington, and one of the key battles was “Washington Fording the Delaware in his Jeep Wrangler.” After being driven into Pennsylvania by the British General Cornwallis and his army of Land Rovers, Washington regrouped and forded the Delaware River. It is easy to imagine General Washington in the driver’s seat of the Jeep, a cigar entrenched firmly between his teeth, as he fords the icy river. He and his men were no “sunshine patriots.” Without his army of outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles, the subsequent victory at Trenton, New Jersey would never have been possible. The Founding Fathers had this in mind; James Monroe, Alexander Hamilton, and John Marshall were all in Washington’s army, and the experience clearly informed their views when they composed the Second Amendment.

Over the course of history, the interpretation of the Second Amendment has largely remained

Katie lowered her revolver to her side and seemed to be lost in thought, like she was actually thinking about making changes to her paper. “But it counts as a document, right?” she said, without the intensity she’d had earlier. The conflict seemed to be over, or close to it.

“It could, but if you’re going to use it, you need to take into account who painted it, when, and why.” Seifert lowered his own weapon.

“This is interesting, though.” Nelson pointed to the essay. “Maybe you can do something with the fact that Monroe and Hamilton were all in the army with Washington. Mr. Seifert even marked it as interesting. He’s trying to help you here.” Nelson gritted his teeth. “But you have to
tell us how that informed their views,” he said. “Mr. Seifert’s right. I mean, so the fuck what? I think you’ve got the seed for something here. But how are you going to connect it with the rest of the essay.” Nelson too had lowered his gun. There was a momentary pause. Seifert checked his watch: 3:15. He was going to make it to the driving range on time.

“Just a little bit of work, Katie,” Nelson said. “That’s all it will take, and you’ll have your solid examination of the court’s defense of the Second Amendment.”

“Defense?” Seifert said and raised his gun at Nelson.

The principal raised an eyebrow and then held his gun up at Seifert. “Yeah,” he said. “Something wrong with that?”

“No, it’s just, I think Katie should revise without thinking about defending or attacking the Bill of Rights. I want their writing to be more objective, and—”

“It’s all there in the fucking conclusion, Gabe. Look.”

individual as well as the entire country. The Supreme Court recognized this in United States v. Miller.

Clearly the interpretation of the Second Amendment has not changed. Outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles were a critical element of the American Revolutionary war. The British Army at the time still drove rear-wheel drive vehicles in single file on the left side of the road. The Americans were able to surprise them by using revolutionary (ha-ha) guerilla tactics such as driving from off road positions in outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles. The founders were clearly informed by the ordeal of the war and wanted to protect their citizens from the possibility of future injustices, whether they came from the outside or the inside. The Supreme Court has upheld this interpretation of the Founders' in United States v. Miller, when they noted that the Second Amendment upheld the individual right to keep and bear arms. The Second Amendment truly is the greatest fucking amendment.
“I’ll tell you what Katie’s going to do,” Nelson said and stepped out from behind his desk. “She’s going to analyze the fucking language, just like you want. Then she’s going to write that the Founding Fathers knew first hand from their experience fighting in a motherfucking revolution and therefore respected the importance of outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles.”

He walked toward Seifert until the gun was just an inch from his nose; Seifert tried not to blink. “And that later, despite banning certain enhancements to outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles, courts used United States v. Miller to uphold the idea that militias were to be supplied by fucking individuals who had the right to keep and bear outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles.”

After a second, Katie said, “Ohhh. I see.”

The room was silent.

“Just a little bit of work, Katie,” Nelson said. “That’s all it will take.”

Katie stood up and took her paper. Seifert and Nelson were still pointing their guns at each other. “Thanks, Mr. Nelson. I’ll have the revisions to you next week, Mr. Seifert, and you can raise my grade.”

“Keep up the good work, Katie,” Nelson said.

After Katie left, Nelson finally lowered his gun. “Nice work, Gabe.” He slapped Seifert on the back. “I think Katie really learned something today.”

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After a few minutes sitting next to the football field and watching the players practice, Seifert regained his sanity and returned to his classroom where he gathered his stuff and left for the day.
There was a chance that he could repair himself enough to enjoy the weekend with the calm, meditative state the driving range always helped him acquire.

He donned his helmet and stepped onto his bike, taking the first few pedals in stride before sitting down. He stopped at the red light and watched the late afternoon traffic flow through the intersection: the street was full of cyclists moving forward at a steady pace. Slower riders kept to the right, letting faster people pass. Agile youngsters snaked through the crowd.

Seifert joined the flow of bicycles. As faster cyclists maneuvered through, the ends of their scarves dangled in the cool, dry air. Others had hoodies lifted up over their helmets, and some of the slower riders were even wearing wool sweaters. He detected the smell of mothballs as he passed an old man.

The weather did little to improve Seifert’s mood. He’d folded. His father still haunted him: “There is no possibility of progress here; even the liberals are conservative, and they don’t even fucking know it.” He wasn’t sure how to feel. He replayed the events in his mind—his comments on the paper, the showdown, the conversation with Nelson—as he rode under the oaks across the city.

The traffic stopped suddenly at an intersection, and Seifert bumped the person in front of him. It was an older woman on a full-sized tricycle. She stepped off her bike and pulled a gun, but Seifert had his out first. His bike fell to the street.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Seifert yelled. “You want to start something? Come at me!”

A few riders slowed to rubberneck the encounter, but most continued around them. The woman opened her eyes wide and lowered her gun.
“I had a bad fucking day, all right?” Seifert said. “I had a bad fucking day and my mind was somewhere else, so I bumped into you by accident. It was a fucking accident. Sit your ass on your tricycle and go the fuck home.”

The lady eyed Seifert as she mounted her trike and started peddling again. Seifert put his gun away and picked up his bike. He looked up at the oak trees, took a breath to try to rid himself of some of the anger that filled him, and then he kept going.

At the driving range, Seifert checked the straps on his driving helmet and buckled the seatbelt of the Mini Cooper he had rented for an hour. He pulled out from the garage and drove onto the course reserved for small sedans and sports cars. It was still before five, so only a couple other people were on the range, circling at the speed limit of thirty-five miles per hour. Seifert took his laps at twenty in the outermost lane with his hands firmly gripping the steering wheel. He turned up the volume of the radio station to drown out the sound of the outrageous fucking sport utility vehicles roaring around the neighboring course. As Seifert focused on the road, gradually the illicit thrill of driving wiped away all his worries. Katie and her essay disappeared. Principal Nelson disappeared. His drafty, Mid-City apartment disappeared. His parents and their stubborn pacifist views disappeared. All that remained was the road and the sound of Steppenwolf on the radio.
Vita

Daniel Morales is from New Orleans and studied at Isidore Newman School, Harvard University, and Waseda University. You can learn more about him at http://moralesdaniel.com, as long as the Internet still exists and he has paid his domain hosting.