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by

Robert Eversmann

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in

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Thesis Adviser

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Cube

You're at 7/11

"You're in the desert, then there's this cube," he says.

"Fuck you Jerry," I say. Bud handle's tearing. I'm in no mood to be fucked with about cubes.

The old man in front puts up a nickel, a dime.

"Is it a big cube?" Jerry asks me.

"Your fucking story, Jerry," I say.

Little bell at the door jingles. Rhino of a mother, four kids. Not rained and they're all dripping. Leave a trail from the front to the fridge for milk. They get in line. It's our turn. Jerry pays and we leave.

Jerry starts his shit car.

"The desert belongs to the cube," he says, "Is this good or bad to you?"

You're at Shari's

"You're in the desert, then there's this cube," Mike says. Mike has alopecia, I'm pretty sure.

I have my hands palms-up in his. Our eyes are closed. We were out walking tonight until he told me to stop. We stopped walking when he said he'd found a good spot. We sat on the curb in front of an old man's house. His lights were off and we kept pretty quiet.

"Ask the cube," he says. "Ask the cube, 'where it comes from?' 'What is its sex?'"

I met Mike for the first time at Shari's. I was there with my little brother. We were celebrating his birthday by splitting a s'mores pie. Mike came over to us and mussed my brother's hair. He said to me, "Started early, I guess," then to my brother, "Soccer player, sport?" And my brother didn't say anything. He's autistic. But he scooted over for Mike when Mike asked him.

“Celebrating?” Mike asked. He got himself a piece of pie. Our waitress came over to give Mike a water.

“Could we get a couple milkshakes please mam?” he asked. “Butterscotch for me.” Mike pointed at me. “Chocolate, I guess,” I said. He set his arm over my brother’s shoulders and waited. “He likes Oreo,” I said. Our waitress smiled and left. Mike picked up our bill and asked if he could get a ride home.

“The cube,” he says. He moved one hand up my arm and back down. “You are in the cube. Feel it. What is its emotion?”

I took my hands back and stood up. “Bye Mike,” I said.

“You can’t do that,” he said. “The cube is unsteady. You can’t leave like this.” He stands up. “The cube!” he yelled it again and again but never followed me and the old man never turned on his lights.

You’re at work

“You’re in the desert, then there’s this cube,” I say. “What do you do?”

All the men I work with look irritated. I read safety briefs first thing every morning.

“What do you do?” I ask. We’ve all got little cups of coffee, a few of us eating doughnuts.

David moves around and raises his hand. “Anything?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say.

“I’d fuck it.”

“You would?”

You’re at Arco

“You’re in the desert, then there’s this cube,” I say. “But you can’t do much about it.”

Burt doesn’t respond.

A gas station attendant shows up. “No gas,” he says.

Burt sticks his head out the window and stares at the attendant.

“Pumps resetting. Be a few minutes,” the attendant says and he starts washing our window.

“This is your fault,” Burt says.

He lights another cigarette and pulls a five out of his pocket. “Buy yourself some M&Ms.”

The shelves behind the counter are full mostly of guns. I grab some M&Ms in the candy aisle. I hear footsteps. The attendant pushes the door open and starts walking to the counter.

“Like puzzles?” he asks. I nod and he waves me over. He pulls a little box out from under some guns and sets it on the counter.

“Open it,” he says.

Burt’s yelling something about the car. The attendant and I look in his direction.

“Look,” he says, “you like puzzles or no?”

He pulls the box back across the counter and makes to open it.

“Where about you boys from?”

“In the desert—”

He turns over the box.

“Station’s been around good three generations,” he says. “Granddaddy built back oh—say 1966. Nasty place. Real Indian country. You know, imagine couple fifty Roanoke spilling down the hills cut open like beans from a bag. And granddaddy, boy a son of a gun—”

Burt yells more outside. The attendant looks at him out the window. He looks at me and says, “Better see what you can help your old man you think?”

Outside, Burt's got out and leaning against the car.

"Pump's runnin," he says.

I give him back the money.

Burt stares at me. "No?" he asks, clicks the pump down, shoves the nozzle in. He goes in to see about paying.

Some people with some shit car pull up.

"Hey you." I go to the driver's side. "Got ten bucks. Do what that get's me."

I pull the nozzle down and ask if they'll unlatch their tank. I unscrew the cap and get the nozzle in and pull the handle. It starts pumping. I get out my M&Ms and pop some in my mouth. Burt comes back out and he and the driver start talking.

"Hot one," Burt says.

The driver ashes, smiles at Burt.

Burt pats his chest. "Don't think I could bum one."

The driver gets a smoke from his pocket. He lights it off his own then gives it to Burt.

The passenger smacks the glove box. Burt looks at him. They both look at Burt. The passenger folds his hands a few ways. The driver nods and leans out the window. "Cube," he says.

Nozzle clicks—I take it out and tuck it under my arm and get a couple more M&Ms. Burt runs his hand down the roof of the car. Before I hang the nozzle back up I pour the rest of the bag into their gas tank and close it. The man in the passenger sees. He kicks his door open and falls out.

“The fuck you doing?” he asks. He leaves his door hang and doesn’t bother to get up. He starts rolling his body toward me kicking up dust. I get around to the other side. He pulls himself up the trunk and stables himself. He slips and rolls past the car.

Burt laughs and folds his arms. The passenger tries to get up again and Burt claps. The driver gets out and leans against his open door. We watch the passenger roll away.

“Oh boy,” Bert says.

“You’re in the desert,” I says.

“You shut the fuck up,” Burt says.

“No,” I say. Burt hits me. I fall onto the ground. He’s busted my lip open.

“It’s true,” I say. I stand up before the guy on the ground can roll over me.

“Fuck you,” Burt says and he slaps my ear and it starts to bleed like my mouth. This time I stay down.

“There’s this cube,” I say. But I can’t talk very good because my mouth is pretty sore and then Bert kicks my back kind of in my tailbone.

“Shut up!” Burt says. He steps at me, not kicking at me as much as knocking my legs around with his heel.

“You’re in the desert, then there’s this cube,” I say and Burt bends over and lifts me up part way by my shirt. He punches my eye. He spits on the ground and stares at me. His face gets looking like a big red balloon.

“Fuck you,” Burt says and then the attendant comes out of the mart and shoots Burt in the head, which rips pretty well right off. The attendant asks me if he should call an ambulance but I’ve got blood in my eyes and I ask him, “Give me your shirt?”

Oregon Trail

I was washing dishes after I'd made Tom and the boys breakfast. There was a young man dressed up like a cowboy outside our kitchen window. He was leaned up against the big pine that shades the grass between our back fence and the side of the elementary school.

A few classrooms open up to the grass there and sometimes we hear it when the kids get rowdy. Today though the blinds were closed. Regular class wasn't in session. It wasn't any old day. It was Oregon Trail Day!

He had it all set up. Skillets out and twigs stacked like kindling—looked like a real cowpoke dinner. But it was the cutest thing, *I saw right through him*, he'd left all his candy wrappers on the other side of the tree.

It's been such a joy, scenes like these, a real joy and, even if it's sometimes noisy, really, a blessing.

The wind changed. Something was on its way. The cowboy straightened up. Two, oh, sixth grade? girls, pulling a radio flyer with a butcher-paper canopy, rolled up to the young man.

I couldn't help but open the window.

"Listen up," he said. He pushed off from the tree and walked over like the Duke himself (wicker cowboy hat, hands in pockets—even picked a twig up and let it hang out his mouth).

"You've got two options," he said. "To my left, the town. To my right, the tundra."

The smaller girl's smile split wide open and she dropped her face into her friend's shoulder.

"What's it gonna be?" he said.

The girls giggled. "Just a minute!" the taller girl said.

I put down the sponge and looked at my boys. “Tom,” I whispered. I motioned toward the school. He got up from the table and came over to me. He put his hand on my back.

“They’re all dressed up, aren’t they,” he said. He squinted and leaned closer to the window. “Are those sneakers?” he said.

“Oh!”

It was so funny I had to put my arm over my mouth and turn away.

“You’re right,” I whispered. “They’ve got their wounded in the wagon.”

“Dysentery, I’ll bet,” he said. He got himself water from the faucet and sat back down.

I saw that Ben was only pushing bits of his frittata around and Thomas had already left the table to play on the floor. Collecting their plates I told them, “Fifteen minutes. Then time to tackle those fractions.” Not a word. I sprayed their dishes and opened the dishwasher. The cowboy cleared his throat.

“People get lost in the tundra and wander around for days,” he said. “That is—unless they hire a guide.”

“The tundra! The tundra!” the smaller girl said.

“But we’ll be the last ones back to the homestead!” said the tall one, this receiving rather a dramatic glare from her companion.

“Plenty more gold, the other side of the tundra,” the cowboy said. “And tell you what, I’ll give you a deal. Charged the last few families all ten coins each. I’ll get you home for five.”

“We’ve only got three left!”

“We’ll get more, we’ll owe you,” the little one said. “Here,” she said and she handed them over. He unwrapped one and bit into it.

“Alright. Follow me!”

He moved around the tree in wide circles and the girls followed pulling the wagon. The wagon wheels didn't give much, bumping over all the pinecones (I worried the little boy inside might hurt his little head).

"Over there's buffalo bill's own heard," said the cowboy.

"I don't see anything," the girls said.

"Way out, way, way out. Can you see them?"

"I see them! I see them!" came from the wagon.

"And there! You see the plains?" he said. He stopped walking. "Did you hear that?" he said. He dove to the ground, yelled, "Indians!" and scooped up pinecones to throw at our fence. The little girls screamed and ducked behind the tree.

The little boy with dysentery hopped out of the wagon and came running. "It's a miracle! I'm alive!" he yelled. He grabbed all the pinecones he could find and threw them every which way. The cowboy tossed one last one at high arc careening over our fence. It struck our window. I stopped scrubbing.

"What was that?" Tom said.

"Just a pinecone," I said.

The boys stopped throwing pinecones and reconvened with the girls by the tree.

"Gotta watch out for Indians," the little boy said. He wiped his throwing hand on his pants to get the sap off. "Well. So, where are we now?"

"Looks there like we're along the Snake River," the taller girl said. The short one hadn't said anything in awhile. She just stared at the cowboy. How could she not? He was sure cute in his little outfit.

“You all did pretty well,” said the cowboy. “But—well you do have me. Nobody makes it out alive without me.”

But he could see the taller girl was not impressed. He ran at her.

“Look out!” he yelled. He was making like an arrow was coming at her and pulled her to the ground. They rolled once in the pine needles and stopped so she was on top of him. “*We’re safe,*” he said.

“*Tom,*” I whispered. I waved at him to come over.

He looked at me and then got up from the table and looked out the window. He made a noise between his mouth and nose. He put his hand on his mouth and pushed on the counter.

“Shit,” he barely said it but I could tell our boys had heard. I turned around and told them, “Time’s up. Books out.” They groaned. “Fractions, *now.*”

The little girl and little boy stood silent. The other girl and the cowboy weren’t moving. Tom was about ready to bang on the window when they finally got up.

The cowboy started dusting the pine needles off them both. “Deadly,” he explained. “Surprise attacks.” I could see how red his face was. And *hers.*

“Tom,” I whispered. “Call the school.”

“*What?*” he said in shock. We ducked down a little lower in case they could hear us outside.

“We have to tell them,” I said.

Tom nodded. He was having a hard time breathing but managed to step over the lid of the dishwasher and make his way to the telephone. He dialed. I checked on the boys. They knew by now. Both had climbed under the table and gotten in safe positions.

I stood back up to see outside. The cowboy had a hand rifling in one pocket. He stilled it and started to pull something out: Marlboros (I could see red in the packaging). He slid one out and

found a lighter in his other pocket and lit two cigarettes, handing one to the taller girl. She took a big breath of it and fell to her knees. I tried still to be quiet.

“Principal Gardner,” Tom said into the phone. “Big problem, a situation behind the kindergarten—yes—*worse*—yes—just outside.” He hung up.

The cowboy was touching her. I reacted so Tom ran and crashed into dishwasher. Outside they didn’t notice. My sons were moaning.

The cowboy touched her again. They started walking.

I yelled. I banged my hand against the window. The little girl and boy left behind heard me and saw me. The older girl with the cowboy turned to look but he took her under his arm and kept her walking. She hugged onto him.

Tom was yelling and banging the glass so hard I thought it would break. I turned around when I heard vomiting and saw it was little Ben balled up retching on the carpet. I banged and banged on the window but they were getting too far around the fence. I craned my neck to see but was fogging the window yelling, had to move my face up and down the glass to keep sight of them.

And then they were gone. The little boy with dysentery and the other little girl stayed behind, stunned. I felt my chest and I felt Tom trembling. He’d bent into the sink holding on for dear life. Devastated, our boys wept. I slid to the floor. We’d never felt so totally helpless.

Returns

“What’re you in for?” the big man asked me. We stood in line together waiting to see the returns woman. I had a box. He had a box.

“Wife’s toaster no good,” I said. He laughed.

“Honey-do list—that it?” He grinned with his mouth wide open and eyes squinted. He looked over both shoulders then shifted his weight around. He started turning his box toward me. At first all I saw was a big white box with black picture-symbols and Chinese. Now he stood there, beaming, showing me his box’s front: a vacuum’s black outline.

“Same boat, partner,” he said.

Some other guy got in line behind me and the big man turned his vacuum away. He bumped my elbow with his and nodded for me to look at the guy. He mouthed, ‘*bag*,’ then winked and rolled up on his toes and back down. The man had his bag’s handles up to his shoulders, looking in.

The big man swung an arm out from his box and smacked my back. “George,” he said. “Aint it a bitch our wives sending us out to fix their mistakes. Breaking our backs carrying these *damn boxes*.”

The guy at the counter left. The returns woman called next.

It was the big man’s turn. He made like he was starting to say something but closed his mouth and smiled. He slid his vacuum onto the counter.

“Yep, just not what we were lookin for,” he said.

She worked the credit machine while he tried his hands patting around his pants and jacket. He found a receipt in his back pocket and handed it over. He turned around and smiled a quick kind of “I guess” smile. She printed a returns receipt and had him sign it.

“You’re all set,” she said.

The big man stepped aside. I set my box on the counter.

“George,” the big man said, crinkling the new receipt. “See you for a pretzel.” He walked away. I finished up and got my receipt and went over to concessions.

The big man was there with a couple cups and a pretzel.

“Frosty? Got you a red. Red’s the best. Now,” he said. He patted the seat beside him and swiveled it out for me. “Little conventional wisdom, George.”

I sat down and took up my Icee.

“Hell. I know you’re no *George*,” he said. He peeled pretzel, popped it in his mouth and slid me the plate. He looked at the bag man. “Poor bastard’s never see light of day again.”

The returns woman had the bag handles spread open bending in to look. The big man’s sipping was outdoing the popcorn machine. Finally the returns woman let the handles fall collapse and started back at the machine.

“Get a good look?” the big man asked.

“While I was over there? No,” I said.

I sipped my Icee.

The bag man was pulling all kinds of receipts from his coat.

The big man hung his head and sighed. “No—” he said.

And then the bag man slouched away, into the store, gripping his in-store exchange receipt.

“Never *ever* accept store credit. Let that be a lesson.” He sipped his Icee empty. He got out of the table and stood up. “Show’s over George,” he said.

We shook hands. He tossed out his cup and left.

Car Sale

Super Bowl Sunday—Bob had one more before he had quota. The boys left the game on—rigged the display TVs to stream NBC—and waited for customers. Nobody of course came before it was over, as they never did. But managers think sports camaraderie around sports makes for sales bumps.

Bob was on the prowl. He checked his watch. He moved like a tiger stalking high cliffs, scoping out prey. Bob had the plan, just needed to follow it. Meet the quota get the bonus; get the bonus get the Bowflex; Bowflex, get the girl—already have the girl, get the Bowflex kick the heart condition; kick the heart condition live and be ‘Grandpa Bob.’

Bob caught sight of two fatsos. He made his way from behind the sedans but there was Fat Jerry hot on the trail.

Bob regrouped. Down in the jungle by Ape Andy, the inflatable gorilla. Old Ben walked a nice Italian-maybe couple by the Cavaliers, when they stopped. The wife was tall. The husband kicked at tires, and pushed at tops to see how they rocked.

A 2006 Blazer pulled into the main lot—nobody on it yet—Bob checked his peripheries—and, passing a good omen (some balloons getting hell), knew it was his that this was it. He threw the last of his coffee to the back of his throat and messed with his tie. Promise in these people.

They pulled around. Bob at your service front and center.

“Bob Pirot. Hi folks. What a game,” he said. “*Gooo* Seahawks, ha ha ha.”

The wife shook his hand first.

“Just browsing today,” she said.

“Sure. Don’t see you’d need anything new,” Bob said. He kicked their right rear tire. “Bout how many miles?”

The man, patting above the taillight, said, “Been around all right, been a great little car.”

“Bet so. Hell, great deals today folks. Best sale we do all year—zero percent APR, fifty-five month financing—*you just can’t beat that.*”

“We’re more scoping things out, see how it all works,” the wife said.

“Best time to buy. The economy dives, dealers gotta keep pace, right?”

The couple turned toward each other.

“Test drive it. If you want.”

“Thanks, I think we better pass for today,” she said. She checked the highway behind her.

“Got to get back on the road.”

Bob stood and watched them drive off.

Jerry’d failed too. He brought Bob a coffee.

“Nothing you either Jerry? Nice little couple.”

Jerry tucked his chin to his chest a moment. “No bites.”

“Great time to buy a car.”

Jerry sighed. “Think we’re out to pasture, Bob.”

“Yeah.” But Bob sipped his coffee.

“Jerry. Get out your phone give your brother a call—maybe.”

“Yeah? OK Bob.”

And Bob took out his own phone, switching his cup to his left, and dialed his buddy Ron.

Just discipline—bonus, Bowflex, heart healthy, Bowflex—

“Hey a Ron!”

“Bob Bruiser you old cocksucker!”

Bob stepped a few cars away from Jerry so to not interrupt him. “Say what’s new?”

“God damn time, shoot. Hey shit, how’s the kids Bobby? Jen doin?”

“Fine, fine, you know—”

“*Hell—Bob. Bruiser.*”

“Ha ha ha.”

“You busting your balls out at Bruce Chevrolet? You still out there? Hell of a game today.”

“Well, yeah Ron, you know and we’re doing a big event out here today.”

Aside: “No shit—Bobby Bruiser!”

Response from other voices: “*Bruiser! Bruiser!*”

“Doing a big event, and say I was calling—your wife was thinking of a Tahoe, hell, sure has been a few.”

“Yeah Bob, well we settled up something with a brother-in-law, you know, had one looking to get rid of, worked out pretty ok, not bad tooling around.”

“Oh yeah. Well great Ron.”

“Yeah.”

“*Ha Ha Ha!* But what about Ronald and Ron junior, you need a fleet, I’ve, we’ve got TrailBlazers up the yin-yang Ron, I’m!”

“Don’t need any Blazers Bob.”

“OK Ron.”

“Yeah Bob.”

“Be seeing you.”

Bob hung up and reconnoitered with Jerry.

“What the fuck you got Jerry?”

“Jeez, Bob. Nothing I guess.”

Bob thought his plan. He didn't throw his phone but put it back in his pocket. He drew his hand back up rubbed it around his face. “It's over Jerry.”

Back inside by the coffee carafe and display roadsters—get the girl, need the Bowflex—he checked his watch—need the bonus. The sun was setting. It was extended hours. A couple hours left. Average, about three serious customers come in every twenty every sales event. And biggest event of the year twenty percent more, six sales-associates—Bob had maybe two really decent shots left.

Another twenty minutes passed. The floor remained empty. Wind had picked up and Ape Andy was wailing like crazy; Bob about ready to stab the inflatable son of a bitch straight to hell.

Bowflex was mortgage, was code, paid off, mortgage would do his heart best—but bad to dwell on. Empty time and empty space. Bob pounded coffees, crushing Styrofoam cups to bits like everybody else—trashcan by the carafe taken a beating.

Associates tried jokes that all fell away. Bob watched that compulsive fat bastard Jerry sit and pick scabs from his head. Old Ben was maybe off dead somewhere. And the younger associates played with their phones. Taken NBC off the display TVs hours ago. It was adds and specs for the roadsters and the super sale ad they'd used old Ben on.

Not one car on the main road. The younger associates found out there'd been an accident. Major collision. Three exits closed. They all went out to look: emergency lights what seemed the length of the highway.

Bob walked down by all the balloon-strapped Chevy's. He stopped at the sidewalk and looked up and down the street. Nobody. He stayed out there until the associates gave up and closed down. Jerry came out to get him.

“Need a ride Bob?” he asked.

“Thanks Jerry, wife'll be here a couple minutes.” Bob kept his eyes on the road. “See you mañana.”

Sauna

In the sauna, where I've been living, the walls, aspen, the floor and the ceiling, whitest cedar. Tall, the boards entire trees. Straightened, planed, but full as full-grown and ancient. I propped myself upright so my body rubbed unvarnished hemlock, the perfect bench. The walls breathe. The steam heaves down my neck.

Someone spits and white clouds eat me up. I fall flat. The beast rushes me and I remember. And I'm a dead man in a heck of a spot. Two tickets to Heart I can't *give* away, what I *need* to give away, to make good on my part, the next trade, and if in TradeUp, which I am in, if I don't trade these tickets I'll have lost completely—no souls, not one. Nobody cares. They're all too taken with the hanging maples and waterfalls, the frothing saunascape.

I lie down on the bench above two Finns. They talk about baseball. Steam glides rich along my chest—I become a wild horse.

One Finn says, "Hey no, but he's a pretty good batter though, I mean, if you think about it?"

The other Finn makes a raspberry.

I have the ticket in a Ziploc bag on a lanyard. I try lower it down beside them. They catch me. My attempt embarrasses me. I have to put the lanyard back around my neck and climb down to spit in the rocks. I dip low into the steam and wade away so my mistake can blow over.

I walk a little ways down the sauna and park it by some Japanese.

"Hearto, rock-and-roll."

"Ah, so, so so. Baracuda, baracuda."

"Yeah, want to go?" I ask.

One of them waves his hands back and forth and says, "Business, business."

“That's alright,” I say. “Mind if I?”

They rearrange and one lays out a towel for me. He gestures at the bench above them. I count my blessings. I slip the *Icelander Daily* from the bench above and pull it over my eyes.

I wake up from a bad nightmare, the newspaper stuck to my face. I try and shake it off. I peel at it.

The Japanese had left and left their towels with a paper crane. There's a new guy now, very tattooed. Maybe he'll sympathize. I slide down off my bench down to his level.

“That your hog out there?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“You're a rough kind of guy.”

“Yeah.”

“You like Heart?”

“Get lost.”

I hop down feeling guilty about my health. I take off my towel to do jumping jacks. I notice bits of abalone like stars inlaid in the ceiling. I gaze and follow them.

The steam gets thick and low to the ground. Like in a marsh. Like moors. I grip my ticket. The Ziploc wheezes. I scramble to reseal it.

I sit and a father and son sit beside me. I scheme and drift around them.

“Crazy on you,” I begin. “Let me go crazy on *you*. I'mma go *crazy* on you.”

But they wear towels and I do not. The father harrumphs and his boy rubs his eyes. I leave them there to rot and die, to miss a real opportunity.

little party

But out of the blue, Pastor Nathan last Sunday: “Who will host our Easter dinner this year?”

On account of the flood our church basement was out of commission. I stood right up and I said, “I’d love to.”

I volunteered to make fruit salad. Me, the host, inviting the whole of the congregation to tromp around my yard all afternoon and me, *I* volunteer to also make my mother’s famed fruit salad.

I bought *big* pineapples, three of them. A little green but they ripened magnificently. And bananas, six bunches of bananas. Kiwis, a sack from—I don’t really remember where, off a truck somewhere. And strawberries, by happenstance, a lovely little fruit stand off highway 9.

What a heck of a time I had, working my good knives in those pineapple rinds. I thought by grace a God the GD universe’d align and things’d work, any normal knife might do the trick. No. *No way* Jorge—not at all! Ruined. Kaput. Tyr steak knives—zilch! But, g-o-d the sound they made, every try: horrendous rattlings, crackling trains screaming of tracks. The serration? Their little teeth jackhammered. Metal everywhere.

I looked elsewhere. I borrowed Mr. Butcher’s cleaver. He lives next door to the right. It was fine that he leant it to me, he said. It was his day off. He offered to help but I politely declined.

And the cleaver... *great enough to cut down a bear!* Had to weigh five pounds; long as my forearm, twice as wide as a hand. I wondered how mother might start... *She* was salads. I put it out of my mind and went on, *slice-slice*, perfection!

I don't know what I did then... Perhaps I watered the plants. But *shoooh* something crawled up in that salad and *died*. Never have I smelled something that bad. Couldn't believe. Tried a bite to see—I nearly fell over. What disappointment. I got out mother's old Tupperware and took my failure out back. Piece-by-piece I'd bury it and be done.

I took the time—breaking a sweat—digging the proper hole. My kitty helped me. He curled meager scraps in his cotton paws and hobbled little deliveries across the lawn to the hole.

Our neighborhood blackbirds, bless their birdie hearts, sauntering they'd come and politely they'd indulge and caw their delight, their delight in rancid fruit.

It was together we came to know the 'job well done.' I loaded over the rot with the dirt I'd dug up.

Mr. Butcher called to me from out front, shouting, "Hello! Hello!" When he found he'd got my attention he reminded me: "*A good neighbor returns!*" He wore his silly little hat, with his hands on his hips.

A good neighbor... I realized, *Oh no*, I buried his cleaver by mistake.

"*The greatest virtue is to give!* Good lender, help this borrower live?" I shouted back. "I'm gardening now! I lent your knife to Mrs. Baker, as she needed it so desperately!"

Around he turned and marched away, up and across the street to Mrs. Baker's driveway. On her porch he rang her bell. A few moments and there she appeared, dear Baker.

Butcher flung his flabby arm to indicate me and my house. Mrs. Baker locked onto me. So did Butcher. I waved. He shook his head. Butcher and Baker talked, Baker looking concerned. Pulling her hand closed, she touched fingernails to lips. She nodded—bouncing, sobbing—*obediently* she stepped back inside and one-by-one shut her blinds.

Butcher wandered further on down the road. To the two-story house, our *only* two-story house, a great white monster cordoned, headquarters for our Neighborly Watch, where Nick, Police Officer Peters lived.

Butcher knocked. Nick leaned out his office window. He peered down at Mr. Butcher and acknowledged him. Nick stood and left the window.

Stepping halfway out to address Mr. Butcher, Nick saw me. He waved. He wasn't in uniform. He wore a white undershirt and fine pressed navy chinos. He smoothed his slicked black hair. He rolled smokes from out of his sleeve, whacked them twice in his palm. I smiled. He slipped one out, lit it by match and refocused on Butcher.

We were running out of time before the potluck!

I hadn't decorated, there were no tables out, and *me*, I, the hostess, in rags, un-festive filthy rags of dead fruit! I turned, startled, our mound, covered in black birds. I heard my gate. I turned around again. There, Nick and Butcher, waiting beside my fence.

Nick greeted me waving his cigarette hand. I bowed.

"I've got some questions about our butcher here's personal property," he began. "May we come in?"

"Certainly," I said. I didn't see kitty anywhere. I came over and unlatched the gate.

Nick noticed our morning's project. "Got a lot of crows there," he said.

"Yes. Just, gardening," I said.

"Now," Nick said. "There's a little misunderstanding I'd like cleared up, uh."

"Oh heavens, what's, what that might be?"

"Bob here leant you his cleaver..."

"Mm."

“Seems you’re a little reluctant getting it back—that right Bob?”

“Oh my no,” I jumped in. “As I explained to Bob already. It’s the hair-dresser down the road, it’s, she’s been—”

Bob jumped in, “You just told me it was Mrs—”

Nick jumped in, “Hold it there folks.” Nick cooled hot-tempered Bob. “All a misunderstanding.”

Bob and I kept our eyes on our toes. Exhaling Nick nodded and told us, “Here’s what we’ll do. Bob, everybody knows you adore Kay’s mamma’s cooking. Her momma’s gone off but Kay here’s just as good, look at her.”

I curtsied to show them. Bob coughed on his hand.

“Kay, what about you make something like your mama used, and you write a big old ‘Bob’ on it. Or, a ‘For Bob,’ or. OK?”

We agreed. Bob left. Nick and I set about sticking flamingoes in the yard and setting up badminton. Nick stretched out in the hammock. Bob came back over and brought with him a pig and pineapples. We wrapped the pig in banana leaves out back.

“Bob?” I asked. “Ever get tired of butchery?”

Bob looked around the yard, considering the azaleas, the flamingoes, the gathering blackbirds. “Well Kay, never seen much beyond it. Fact is, I’m a butcher and a good neighbor, first and second.” He looked peaceful.

We dug a new hole together, far from my mistake, and filled it with briquettes. I brought gasoline out from the garage to get them going.

“Stand back Bob!”

A satisfying whoosh—the briquettes orange and ready. We dumped in the pig and covered it over with more banana leaves and smooth stones. Beautiful shedding limbs of smoke arose, and within minutes the smell of roast pig, mesmerizing. I mixed Bob and myself each a Mai Tai. We put on grass skirts.

Then out in the distance a choir, “*Glory, Glory Hallelujah,*” our congregation coming up the street, “*Glory, Glory Hallelujah.*” I rushed to the gate to allow them in, many with lighted Tiki-torches, most bright shirts and woven hats.

There was Pastor Nathan. He thanked me personally, taking my hands in his, he said, “Kay, you dear, dear saint of a woman. All that you have done. And in my heart I know for sure: The Lord *doth love a luau!*”

A Coming of Age Story

Randall Radar, Professor of English, sought respite in some northwestern reserve. Clear skies, Randall reclined under ash and oak and dreamt words. Birds skipped along leaves, singing to Radar.

“Flight! My friends, oh, yet what man cannot attain, I faithfully tickle with my interested fingers,” said Radar, swaying in admiration. “Join me?”

Radar ripped his baguette to throw out crumbs. The sparrows joined and thanked him.

A minivan pulled in a few spots down from Radar’s car. Three people got out.

“You rapiers—Americana, Rockwellian specters!” said Radar. He calmed down in the wind. He relaxed and stretched and straightened his blanket. He entwined his fingers under his head.

“You pass-enter-relieve, pass and enter, you American air, you cliffhanger consciences. You piss and scoff and rub your noses. Our scouts, nature’s stewards, you leave here alone without mothers. Little gargoyles they become, scowling dejected they peddle their cookies.” Randy stood up. “But see me? Still a pulse, still breathing?”

A crowd-call, “*Oh!*”

A crowd gathered under a power line—powering the restroom lights and coffee cabin—began shuffling for a better view of some battle above.

“Poor creature!” cried Randy. He parted the crowd and stood under. A gray ball, a cat or koala, rolling along the cable, gliding nearly off and jiggling, it caught its claws, it sprouted wings. White cheese fell from its cavity, wet hail over the spectators. Randy recognized a beak, fearing eyes, a pigeon.

“Poor thing is poisoned, not drunk,” Randy said.

It fell to the ground, a half-hearted bounce and pop of white spray. Rice. Randy approached the bird.

“Will I die?”

“Yes.”

“Will I reach heaven?”

“The spirit Chechewa will carry you there,” said Randy.

The pigeon let much life out in one cough. “You idiot, there is no Spirit Chechewa. We’re between human shit and a golf course.” The pigeon’s eyes lost life and slumped. Randy killed the bird with his hands, squeezing its last life out. He was devastated. In the silence he heard the irritating multitude of sipping and crunching. The spectators left and went about relieving themselves. Randy felt little was worth living.

“I will buy the Samos and eat them in private,” Randy said. He went to the Girl Scouts with their table near the coffee hut. “Please, two boxes. One shortbread; one Samos. I see your merit badges—conservancy?”

“What? No, that’s a target. Merit for killing,” said a Girl Scout, red pigtailed and hat.

“And you, archery?”

“Skullfucking,” she popped bubblegum, “Twenty bucks,” blonde straight hair and a sash maybe more for guns than badges. She laughed, but yelled before, and Randy saw her rows of gold teeth.

He handed over the twenty and took his cookies. “Thanks,” he said. He walked away and felt dead. “I’m far away in the future,” he said. “I could dig into the ground.” He lay down beside his car. On his blanket. Opened his cookies—ate all the shortbread? Yes and fell asleep.

Cars pulled in and pulled out. People crawled out, lit cigarettes, bought cookies, couldn't find coffee, pulled away. Randy awoke.

“Smoke. Ah, pollution. Indian Americans,” said Radar rubbing his eyes.

Slithy snake slithered-slid Randy's blanket, so as over-through skulls, or over-under a camel's back.

“Who's this? *-ha-ha-ha!* Mine chalice bearer, *oh*, poisonous friend? Lend me your nectar—”

The snake bit the shit out Randy. He yelled and shook his becoming blue hand flying his snake air-eating, gilded, fluttering, you koinobori, and flap float around—Randy breaking his wrist in the grass so letting his friend flit off. “Suck my ass,” the snake said. It disappeared its scales away in the soft sodden blades of grass.

Shocked, shriveled, unproud, Randy felt, under his blanket curling, like a spider huffing Raid. He pulled his finger to his mouth; shut his eyes, his body pounded, and, hyperventilating, gulped dirt and blanket.

“*Woe is me*,” he said. He rolled around. “Woe betide woe betide. I am its captor: that man and beast be yet beyond reconciliation, woe is me.”

Our still great chasm, Randy thought. Maw: his love; maw: my hand. Will it eat me too and spread?

“No, there's towels in the car,” he slunk sideways, listing in storm, stray shiv, Randy held his arms out like airplane—attitude on horizon slipping. Randy got his door open, fell inside, wrapped towel around his hand—woke back up. In a dream an owl laughed and scratched Randy's feet.

“The coffee man,” Randy asked—he had gone away. More Girl Scouts had arrived and grown a bigger table. “I am feeling altered,” said Randy. “Bloody. Run in with ‘~~~~~.’ In the woods, an elk. A deer? Let us go.” Randy slithered with what little muscle that would. *A moose loose, loose moose.* Randy’s legs slowed dipping underground, swimming a moment under quicksand. The moose waited. Randy recovered.

“Great Spirit of Refuge, I am Randy Radar, Professor. Explain to me this divide.”

The forest inverted, light pulsed in pinwheel—the moose flew onto Randy like kite tail. Radar shook. He blinked. The moose again became gray. What were like tumors clung on the moose’s body.

“Oh,” said Radar. He felt a panic. “Great Spirit let me take that pain upon myself. Slough off your body’s horns and I will rake them up, stick them to my own body,” he pleaded, dropping to the leaves.

The moose ran off. It’s growths flapped like loose teeth. In his head, the moose said to Radar, “Leave me alone, forever.”

Randy walked back to the bathrooms. He went to buy a coffee from the Girl Scouts. They cooed feeling sorry, his arm, his body, all horrible. They disinfected and bandaged him. He got out his wallet.

“Our coffee we flavored with Thin Mints,” said one with braids.

“It is *so* good,” this one, a little one with glasses, she fell onto the table from her excitement.

Randy asked, “Money—for rafting? Are you going rafting this summer?”

Loud blasts. Glass skittering the ground. Everybody turned. The little blonde girl with gold teeth. She held a pistol aimed at a fence. She shot again, shattering bottles, two raining away like glitter, soft to the touch. She blew on the muzzle.

“You girls go rafting?”

Moths come down on Radar. He twirled and batted his eyes for butterfly kisses, holding out his hands like Shiva. The girls, with their backs turned, kept sorting boxes. Radar and the moths went elsewhere, onto the lawn, by his blanket, starting anew.

“Are you here? How much can you tell me and when will I go with you?”

The moths flew away in the sun and gray clouds replaced them. It became dark and the sky rained on Radar.

A weight, a hawk, a talons—his chest. Radar gripped at the grass under his blanket.

“My! *You truly are beauty*,” he gasped.

The hawk, an eye closed and cocked neck, stared into Radar. Rain poured down its beak into Radar’s nose. Throwing its wings it flexed large and yelled,

“*I got the blue bird—it might die—*”

Rustling wings a whirlwind, water peeled off the hawk. It gurgled its throat and flexed. It leaned close. “I put *right-now*, between your legs.”

The hawk whorled away in the rain, its wings a moment shelter.

“But I’m still alive. I’ll eat soggy bread and my blanket is wet, but what nature...” Randy passed his hand above the grass. He left his blanket soak and went to his car. His hand to the handle then, but in the bathrooms—strange sound.

“Sinister?”

Radar stepped slow feet sideways in the grass.

“Girls?” he asked.

He kept on his way.

“Bats?” he asked.

Would bats go for help if he asked?

“Girls. Girls, it is you?”

A bat bumped him, flew in his jacket, “Bat!” he yelled—flew off.

He calmed himself. *Bats, night’s creatures, I need now your help.* They remained impassioned for the black, not for Radar. “You are *scaring* me.”

Fireflies on Radar rescue. “Guide me, little gods.” Onward, off grass, on pavement, at the bathroom: coarse horrible sound. “Girls?”

The danger-riddled blonde girl toting the gun, she stepped out and let the door fall back. “Charging. Whatt’you on you?”

“What—like—money?”

“We’re a charity?” She stepped behind her to let the door swing but Radar jammed an open hand in.

“I’m checking in whether you’re ok. Where are your mothers?”

“No. None of this. Remind you,” she flashed her shooter. “Is it cookies? What like more Samos old ass? Somebody grab me box of Samos, box of Sandies. Forty bucks oldie.”

“But? I paid ten this afternoon.”

“Night prices.”

Radar heard her hammer peel back. He stepped, let the door swing away. He left. Walked to his spot to get his blanket. The rain had stopped. Radar looked up to watch the clouds sift

away. He looked there to his car—a bear, black bear, seated, the front bumper made to kiss pavement.

“Randy,” said the bear. The bear sparked his Bic and lit up. He tip-tapped one hand’s claws along Radar’s hood. He winked an eye and bobbed his head to convince him to sit. Radar complied. The bear lit another cigarette. He held it, bending his great hairy neck, wrinkling up his face to plead. Radar complied.

“I just want the plants and animals to like me.”

The bear rubbed Radar’s back. “You can’t—not everybody will be your friend, Randy.” The bear inhaled and put his paws behind his back. He peered up, last wisping grey stretching gone so the stars could come out. He exhaled. “You got *bit* bucko, bit to hell.”

“Yeah...”

“Wasn’t nice was it?”

Radar’s lips and nose faltered.

The bear pulled on Radar’s far shoulder. “That’s what’s the matter, Randy,” said the bear. “You’ve got too much trust in dangerous animals. Me, I mean even. I’d eat your car if I wanted.” He held his smoking hand out and rolled his nose around. “That’s scary! But,” he shrugged, “here we sit.”

“I always trusted I could be a connection. That I could come out to a place like this, could stretch my body like a bridge, close the gap, *I—*”

“There’s no Spirit Chechewa, Randy.”

Randy fell asleep in the bear’s arms.

When he awoke he was still on his hood tucked in a new blanket, a quilt of bear hair. The border, celestial bodies. The squares, his favorite animals.

Inscribed on the back in the corner:

To Randy,

I love you very much.

Your greatest friend,

The bear.

Dentist

I'd plotted killing her but we were so often in public.

Instead, I moved. A landslide breakup via Twitter. A new chapter. I am a young professional in Akron, Ohio.

It was her uncle who married us. The wedding we held inside, simple, all within a Dayton Best Western. Her brother was our best man.

It is spring; I am a dentist, i.e. cancellations and missed appointments. I've been calling patients all day, most of them vacationing in cities outside Akron.

We received our fluoride order this morning: strawberry, cherry, bubblegum and, something new and exciting, something cinnamon called Mystery Mouth.

I receive a notification on Instagram, an update from her trip in Tijuana. She is taking shots. There's a man spinning poi behind her. I am tagged. My brother is tagged.

I had the four panels above my office's dental chair switched out for a 4-panel equivalent, fluorescent-backed, sea scene with turtles. I invite her to Facetime. I look out the window. I notice our gardeners.

A patient who had cancelled shows up. I ask him to wait. We do a cleaning. He asks if we need doing any x-rays. We do some. He asks if he can take the sunglasses with him. He's vacationing in Dayton tomorrow. We laugh. We schedule next year's appointment.

I pass an hour in the lobby. I use my mouth mirrors and headlamp trying to light fire to company fish. I know they are not ants.

She invites me to Facetime. I accept. She is on a boat in Tijuana, taking shots. She says, ‘wooooooh!’ Two brawny jet-skiers whiz by behind her. Everybody’s skin is perfect. I frown into my phone and turn it off.

I meditate—I will not share my mantra. What I think of escapes me. I snuck 1mg of midazolam this morning. I’ve never been a violent person. It was mostly, what perked my interest, was spam promising I could *get* her.

I anesthetize my gums and administer myself cinnamon fluoride. It’s an odd sneaking-away feeling. Do I perform any easy operation? No. I consider where the turtles are headed: rough rocks ahead, or the Sydney opera house? I turn on my phone.

I hope she dies in Tijuana. I hope she dies far away.

She’d text me pictures after we broke up, often of her bathing or of her changing clothes.

I got to know her family.

Her brother started coming over. He and I’d drink beer and talk. He was a fisherman. We’d sit on the couch and look at the calendar. He remembered the dates of everything he’d ever seen. I’d point to March the 5th 2013: dolphin dead in some underwater cave in Japan. May the 5th 2013: no fish, oil spill, black Velveeta spread as far as the eye could see. We’d lean back and shake our heads.

I invite the next patient in. Routine fillings per bad hygiene. Post-appointment he was off to Gracewood, 9-holer with aquamarine grass, medded-out caddies. I’m to send a postcard to remind him of his next appointment.

I met a man outside Dayton. His older brother owned a NAPA out in the country. He ran his own business after hours inside the Dutch Brothers there in his brother’s parking lot. We met when the sun had gone way done, when the stars had come out. I pulled up to the drive-thru. As

instructed I flashed my brights. The service window slid open. He leaned out and shined a flashlight on me.

-Pictures?

-Right here. You sure you got this?

-Don't know yet do I.

-Right. Take your time. Moved to a friend's, out by Greenhill, not in any rush.

-Greenhill? Hell, nice little girl lives out there. What'd you say your name was?

-Thought we weren't doing that.

-Right.

He slid a picture out of the envelope and put his flashlight on it.

-Shit, I know this girl.

-

-Yeah, Richie's sister, right? Shit, me and Richie went to high school together. Hell I've been to her house, seen this girl changing her clothes.

He put his hand over his mouth and looked at the sky.

-You're Richie's brother and law—*how is* Richie?

-Fine, fine. Shipped off for Thailand, coast there out by Bangkok.

-Some kind a ancient treasure, I'll guess, ha. Hell...

His eyes lit up and he thrust his arm out pointing at the sky.

-What's that?

-Fire?

-Yeah, guess. Well. Can't think I should do the job.

-Yeah. What would u do in my position?

-In your position?

-Say if you'd had her.

-Hell I don't even own a car jackass. I live and work same tiny standing-room fucking building.

-

-Know what I do when it's open? Made to leave and wander the fields reeking like coffee till they close up for the night. *Fuck*. My position.

He turned off his flashlight and slid his window closed.

I started my car. Hoped he'd have had something more like, What was it like?

Next morning when I pulled up to the office before my 6am, there was a big white truck idling caddywhompus in two spots. I parked a ways a way. The truck bounced and the driver door opened and a man fell out, slammed it shut and came around front yelling. I locked my door and thought I'd pull out. I saw pale blood and spit pooled in his shirt—severe inflammation and abscesses, I'd done three root canals on this man three days before, eleven more over last month. He slapped my car, steadying his arms, he looked dazed. He bared his teeth—letting out wet blood, somehow white-flecked—and knocked my window with his knuckles. He tried the handle, smiling, leaning his face on his arm leaned against my car. He frowned and stumbled back and pulled at his lips with his hands to peel his mouth open.

“*You done, what have you done,*” he shouted. Jutting out they looked like calcified white mushrooms. “*This, on, you did this to me.*”

He flung his arm down out from his mouth to my window and fell. He lay there huffing and puffing so his cheeks swelled and leaked.

I grabbed the morphine I keep in my door. I hopped over to get out on the other side so there'd be no chance he'd grab my legs. I ran around. He seemed out cold. I gave him the morphine. I dragged him inside and put him behind an operating curtain. I administered him midazolam. I'd found his keys. I'd toss him back in the truck, drive outside another county and push him back into the driver's seat. I'd take a bus home, pack up, leave and leave the office to run itself. I'd skip town.

I sat on the floor beside him and draped my arm over his chair. I receive an update on LinkedIn. She has endorsed me, that I know Microsoft Word.

:’(~cheese~ :’(

Had it been clear a disease or scabs and not necrotic, not red gurgles gasping, not curling, I’d be maybe happy. I, me, Banny wouldn't have had to have used so many trays, all the spilling, three too many, more I wanted, more what I couldn’t afford.

“Hey! Cheese Broke!” I said.

Nachos eating up all my pizza money. He didn’t want as much ground beef, what already came on a cowboy (ground beef, mushroom, olive, pepperoni, sausage, cheese), already getting a cowboy.

Mammy was at home tapping her fingers, destroying Banny’s things, shaking around room to room, until he came home the pizza, what she sent him for. Mark would come over and fix the sink. Mammy hadn’t done laundry or vacuumed. It—an *order*—*Banny*.

All was left was wet peppers and wet olives. Everything good got ruined. Banny dug out beans, thought he found a diamond ring? Beans—called quits, took his trays to check out.

“The fuck with the cheese?” asked the manager.

Banny left the trays on the counter and went for gum.

No *~Lebron’s~Lemonade~* Banny would meet Lebron if could get cancer, if he spread out on dad’s asphalt this summer or—maybe eat enough of the arthropodal cheese... Maybe tip the man? Kind of a philanthropy? I tip him, he dotes on, donates to Banny? Banny peeled his mom’s twenty out to pay his one-way “Spend Summer in Miami.” He paid, got change: could still afford? –tallying— ...one medium cowboy.

Banny pushed the door open and the evil fucking bell *clambering ! screaming !* got down and chased Banny around and kicked his balls and beat his little ass. Banny winced and fell out the door at the sidewalk.

Outside three older kids were playing on his skateboard, kicking it around. One would get it going then hop off—spilling corn nuts—and flip it over with his hand then jump back on foot-by-foot. His buddy, ripping pepsi 2-litres, wore earphones loud enough his boys could listen. JNCO-ass bastard.

Banny stood up to them: “Hey! *I have that back.*”

Banny looked like a milkmaid or Muk, trays coming out of him like polluted wildlife. The corn-nuts handling boy made Banny’s board hardflip. Banny’s trays, he fixed the trays, and cry-yelled, “*Heyyy*” again.

“No. Faggot”

Manual.

“Oh”

Darkslide.

Something like poisoned crystals they forced into Banny, racing through him javelins and arrowheads.

Banny thought up escapes: no go over them, no go around them, gotta go through them and call 911 but the Mexican, smoking, in the bolero, already had his hands on the payphone, doing I.T., recording commercials.

Banny walked to them in to put his face in his tore it, his face, out. *Hurts*. The boys stood there and there were more coming, skateboard-and-corn-nut swellings in.

Can't.

Banny cracked. Rubbed it down curdling his own shirt clump-scabbing his shoes, after-grease thick cancer, he scraped it everywhere through his clothes, put his face down and started hitting it on the asphalt in a parking space. His bullies got scared and left. *Lebron...*

Banny got up. No skateboard, bought a pizza (Papa Murphy's!) cowboy-fucking cowboy, fucking god *order*— waited sopped wet, orange hot milk coagulant. Got hot red heads made it. I left, me, Banny, I walked, got home.

Forgot change for mother, either could be less happy.

Mark never made it.

Dice

“My mom?”

“She’s a counter.”

Side-side, side-side, coast clear.

“She’s a ‘counter,’” and, thinking, I caught up to how that meant: “a kind—with numbers, like you bounce your fingers, what you kind of rattle and crush in your mouth, cracked racket numbers like, you—she can *number and order them*—she’s in charge of all this shit *I can’t fucking handle*, but she’s my mom you know? Ok, so—” I held my fingers out by, “1,2,3,4,1,2,3,1,1,2,3,4,1,1,” -thumb—thumb- “1,” -thumb— “I guess that’s it’s what she does. And just All day, sliding, “1, 1” side to side and out, you know, totally out from time.”

I’m like, “*wait*,” and I’m like *disregarded* by Jason, who gets up, who goes over—and I get up to go over.

Jason becomes red, he shouts, “*Listen! Sleepy! Man!*” he gets up and goes yelling in its ear, yelling and yelling and yelling: “Get Up! Wake Up!” I shake my hands to back-forth—to see if it stops. And Jason’s sucked down the hillside into the town in a few seconds, his face glitched, kind of an air of it still lingering above where he beat the old man and, before it’s totally gone, I clomp down with my foot on his shadow so it snags and pulls longer and longer, stretched with him a mile when I let off it and it snaps back into the next town. I wait; the report; the obliterative crack.

Dark birds around town lift off like soot from vents. I breathe. I see the dust cloud where Jason's shadow caused the felling of three or more facades. I wonder, the atomic cloud, whether it will cause black out.

Here's Bishop—coming up the hill—

"I've!" he says, struggling, panting. "The key! I've the key! The key!" he says.

"Ok. So hand it over," I say.

"Ok." He gives me the key. 'Castle Keeper,' Bishop's title. He is robed.

Bishop is keeper of the castle, the one to which we are headed, and to which we owe our reason behind occupying this hill this afternoon.

"Ok, ok, ok," he says. "Go to the apple," he says. He shimmies his chin. "Fuck," he pulls his face with his hand. "An apple, I mean, here, take it it's yours, I mean. I don't 'get' apples."

He's a kind of a forest green cerulean tunic kind of guy, practical, impartial, and keeps birds with him. Usually new ones preened and well trained. When we met his arms were burned, he'd failed an ordeal, and, having had failed, was impelled to leave with halberded men who abandoned him.

"Those aqueducts," Bishop says. He makes eye contact and points at the sky and guides my eyes down his arm, which he jolts mildly to emphasize the target. "Right down there, I slid down those in my inner tube."

"Did?"

"Sure did. Right down them. About from there," he moves his arm, "down to there." He sticks his tongue back in his mouth.

"Say," he says. He looks at my legs. "Why you wear your pants like that you think?"

I look at my pants, which I'd rolled up to the knee.

He blinks with an eye closed and wipes his mouth. "OK," he says.

I watch the power plant. I work there tomorrow. I frown and imagine it's blown up.

Bishop breathes with his hands in his pockets.

"What a land we live in? Think of the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Just a week ago it must seem to the soil here," he says.

The bird switches shoulders. It caws.

"What do I have the map don't I?" I say.

"Map? No..."

"So..."

"I have the *map*..."

"Ok."

"So, here we go?"

I squint. "What's your castle, *really*?"

"You know." He moves his hands around. He says, "*Castle*. Big Bopper. *Castle*. You know what I mean." He smooths an oval around his crotch.

I bend over to pick a flower. I thrust it and hit his mouth so it goes in. He turns away to spit and rubs his mouth.

We wait a while: 1. 3. 3. 3.

"Look," I say. He looks at me. I look at his bird. "I know you're not from here," I say.

He bounces, like he's sobbing, and his bird, staring at me, bobs with him. I dig my heel in the ground and step forward. I put my hand over his mouth and bend him down. He repositions his knees in the dirt. I take his eyelid between my fingers and begin peeling him apart. Birds fly over. His bird joins them.

Alt.

“staunch! staunch! staunch!”

Staunch I was, *Staunch was I!* Kings: nannies! Castles: playthings! Beasts, monsters, abominations: soothers in my lips! I am ‘what-a-man!’ And what a man I am!” he said. He laughed until his voice trailed away. I straightened the bottom of my tunic. “But,” he said. “There is a shadow looming along the castle.” He opened a large compass then put it away. “Here we go,” he said. We walked. He scratched his beard skin. “A *cowerable, incorrigible* one. Something what’s always given me trouble forever.”

I cleaned the apple from my pocket, rubbing away the gross he’d got on it. We stepped our way down a formidable hill, toward the castle, onward and downward, a million ice poppies, what we passed through and iced air.

“It’s cold today,” I said.

“Brr,” he said. He jingled some change. “Nice coat,” he said. He checked each watch in either pocket then found a small Swiss Army and began cleaning his fingernails.

“Still,” I said.

He took out a thermometer from his sleeve. “50 below,” he said.

“Wow.”

He looked into his hands, his thin zippered gloves.

“Hey, what?” I asked and pointed.

“This? Well. This *key*—my good man, or woman, man, whatever, *whatever the case may be*, haha, as they say—our key here, clear as the day, as the day is fresh, our ‘*sleeping*’ man, is our key here.”

“No but,” I said.

“Yes! We’ve *fires and farthings* to catch, to unlock gold gates to gold cities. Our sleeping man.” He loosened his belt, stopping to wrestle the buckle open. He breathed out and said, “To clip and clip the world, the high-winged phoenix, and lay flat on our backs to nibble its moltings.”

“No-no.” I said, wringing my hands.

“Oh sure,” he said. “Sleeping man, our great man, our giant in the water, a troll man, the man to lift us onto an above our highest hopes on *ruby peaks*—from which we might roll and clink through red coins.”

From cracked crystal caves, the sleeping man heaving, waiting to catch our heels in his breath, to hoist us—just then Bishop was flung into the sky by something unforeseen. His pockets stretched like renaissance tents as he sailed above ground, shooting up the side of another hill (atop which I spied a little yellow tower).

“Hark!” I snapped but my voice broke.

I ran up the hill houghing, when I too began to lift. I tripped and folded over my own toes, flipping so my ear scraped terrain. The watch in my left pocket zipped off and clanged. The hold on me shifted but remained soft. My foot dragged in the ground as I was pulled.

“*Bishop!*” I called.

I worked unclasping pockets to help things on their way. My right foot floated up. The boot knife struck out ripping my leg and through my coat. My coat tore apart and lashed around me. I became like something swaddled like meat or like young. Whatever the tower had its grasp on seemed now caught in the back of my coat, near my neck where I couldn’t reach.

“Bishop! Bishop!”

I sweated horribly. Like flotsam—caught in some bad sportsman’s line, swaying and drifting and reeling in—my body mangled, bleeding small waves in the grass as I dragged up the hill. I stopped, my foot stuck in the roots of a felled tree. I hovered still tethered. I worked at my coat swinging my elbows—*side-side* fast—only tightening my coat’s rich fabric like an asylum jacket. I wondered what was next, if I would starve or be ripped apart.

[Hyperrealimagic Mountain]

The fitter, better bugs woke up to work out and to stretch, 1 and 2 and 1-bird and 2-bird [danger, dig back under] when the big fat slob glowed over the earth, sweating out light, lighting the hill, their tall well maintained green hill.

Elly [only one eye], tucked in tight in her room, bedecked with “Princess-Joelly Bed & Canopy,” breaks—boom! —\ahh\ a daisy cutter crunchies, rubs her temples to see stars—and flash! /awake/ —white life crackling out from her eyes and she, an electric wind, pulsed up and out, out her house, bursting all doors out of her way—Elly turned to yell over the hill, “Bishop!” still in her pajamas, waiting, the sun dragging ass crawling over her house. “*Bishop. The Hill at High Noon.*”

Bishop [only one parent] in his bed, as Elly’s hard command rushed to him, shooting up the hill and swooping down, but its ferocity dwindled and, when it finally hit him, became no longer a roar, but more a little flick on the back of his ear. He brushed and groaned and turned over.

[Position of house in relation to hill, east and west, and to sunshine—Elly’s: first light; Bishop’s: last]

“I smell victory,” said Elly. “That will be, father: one juice and one milk, two Mickey-cakes goodly fruited and two eggs poached.” Elly at the breakfast table, hands fork and knife, communicated a moment internally, ‘*Colonel*, you have displeased me. Your work in the jungles...’

‘But Elly,’ so the colonel, ‘We were terribly outmatched and undersupplied.’

Elly cut Mickey down the middle, butter melting like blood. The colonel, crossing his heart, fell dead.

At his usual hour, Bishop gets out of bed. He sneaks to his kitchen to the coffeemaker. Pre-heating a mug before filling and bringing it, creamed and sugared, to his mother's door.

Elly explained over breakfast, "Today: I am The Lord of Death, a Knight of the Order of Hell. Bishop will test me. I will tear his limbs to strap on my back. He will hold my books and pencils in his teeth when I walk over the hill every morning to school." The eggs were burnt. Elly pushed her plates away and asked to be excused.

"Who's that sleepy bear in there?" Bishop asked of his mother, in her room snoring. They'd made it another night having survived her terrors. Bishop carried on in his duties while, in her own bedroom, Elly dressed herself for war:

"I pull on my armor, hot skins off gas planets, and my chainmail, its milky links the threads of galaxy, and my helmet, encrusted with dust of eldest star, now deceased, darkest crimson." Elly got under her bed. "My sword," she said. "Forged of first light, Light Itself of our very beginning." She stood tall and held her sword to challenge a full-length mirror by her dresser. "*Bishop*," she said. "These your last hours—who do you fear more, death, or, Elly?"

Bishop fed his cats [Puddles, Tommy, Matsumoto]. In the utility room he smashed together components to WMDs to dress himself. "Today," he said. "I clean empty this box. I place it on my head. I become the all-powerful and smart." Bishop began his dark assent.

From halfway her house is gingerbread. Further still, a toy and, passing through the mountain's crown, from the very top, she peers past clouds and haze, her house, "An ant? A gumdrop?"

Clinking behind her coming up the hill. Elly cleared her throat and raised her broadsword.

“I am Sea and Stone,” yelled Bishop. “Fury! I chew and bite titanic ships! I am Typhoon, EL Niño.”

“Galactus,” said Elly, “is my little sister. What is missing, when atoms vanish, please blame me your culprit. Bishop, sure, you ‘the darkest depths.’ But *I*, I am matter’s capacity for absence.”

They paced through the mountain’s daisies, its crown. Brandishing their weapons, they kept their eyes locked on one another. But Bishop noticed the sky.

“Birds,” he said.

Elly nodded, thinking, ‘Let a thousand or more come and carry you to Hell.’ Elly charged Bishop and their swords popped sparks and they bounced back through the air.

Elly spat. She said, “May my father the lightning hurler strike you from life. I’ll have you skewered and eat your flesh like pork belly.”

Bishop looked exhausted. He sat and untied his shoes. “I don’t feel like we’re getting anywhere, like our relationship isn’t growing one little bit.” He held his hand above his eyes to look at Elly under the sun.

“Well anyway a different game,” said Elly. She threw down her sword and ripped apart her armor to make a stethoscope and oblong clipboard. “Here now, I am a doctor, you are my patient: a drunk recluse, automotive suicide. I hold your delicate last hours like silk in my soft fingers.”

Bishop stripped his armor to comply and stretched out in the hill’s daisies. He made choking noises and kicked his legs like a seizure.

Elly pushed her thumb to Bishop’s wrist. “Not good,” she said. “Your pulse stringing pearls, still I hold your final moments above the abyss, draped over the hospital floor, the maw [not

swept for weeks] here you are. Your final rattle: three little beeps on the machine. I crumple your fabric in the gurney and push you off for the morgue.” She stood up. “Guess I win again.”

Elly shrugged. Bishop thought he felt like he could cry.

Elly said, “OK. A new game: I am Churchill and the British Royal Navy. You are Nazi Germany. Ready?”

PRACTICE FOR DISCOVERY AS A WRITER IN MINNEAPOLIS

We were swingers except for the girl we found. The one we kidnapped though, she was a swinger now all right. Just the one we found in Minneapolis this morning on a sweep through Minneapolis, her, *she* wasn't a swinger.

Way we found her she wasn't much of anything. Didn't take a lot to begin to work on her. Man's a mechanic, expert. Rupert. I was lucky enough to jump under Rupert's wing and stay under it.

^hit-hit-hit^ —in my bones, nice family, but little bouts, strong discipline and loyalty—nice little way we had together when a neighbor upstairs came down to see about my any needing buying any bracelet for something pretty I might know. Offered him in, checked with Rupert, offered him eggs:

-The fuck's h?

-No, —*eggs*.

-What?

-Cook them up— *//eggs/*

-What the fuck you think I need eggs for, like I can't afford *eggs*?

-All we got is what I'm saying.

We had a nice breakfast here and there together, on the porch, suite 201, our favorite cheap hotel— Sudden 'bad' up in our 'road.' Little Minneapolis gal—see it by the way I'm at my leg, way she had glass and grabbed at me and got it in, and hard grabbing legs flying the ground out the door over rails when your leg's spilling over the ground through the door— *^hit^hit^hit^*

Took her out to the baseball diamond. Some of Rupert's old friends were to meet us. Hot one. Rupert lined me up for a pitch. Three fingers up, corkscrew down. Struck everybody out, no overtime. Our trustworthy gal came up to bat: thumb up, right, down, corkscrew up// —walk.

In the van we rent Rupert gave us victory snacks. I risked looks at our traitor at stoplights. She blinked at every car that passed. I thought they'd run us off the road. One flexed arm out of a white truck sent me close to never wanting back on solid ground. Wouldn't take his eyes off us. Rupert turned where we didn't need and waved to the man.

Got a deal had a deal we had a deal with the hotel and in 201. They never cleaned the top where we were, our crow's nest, where we kept an eye on the van. Pop-up games any minute, couldn't let our only means squeal away out under our noses. Between one, two, three, four, one at a time, we'd watch the van from the porch: “//Don't touch/ tha/t\”

If she tried again to get away. I was best for the job. Every way necessary I checked out as candidate *el primo, ichiban*. Deft with a rope. Rupert pressed my shoulder after a game, “Deft with a bat.”

In the kitchen in the morning:

-Morgan. What's your name? I asked and clicked off the burner. She looked at me with the spatula.

-What? Morgan.

I clicked back the burner.

That day our game got rained out. The food we brought spoiled, the buns set out growing over the table. All that you sacrifice in hailstorms.

-That's the risk of food and feeding people, I guess, I said.

Natalia, not Morgan, twirled in the hail, her lace dress laced to the clouds. I asked her if she'd play catch. She spun out slowing over to me. She held a newspaper over her head.

At meetings later on at our neighborhood watch:

-You really meant so much to our family, I said.

Old woman. She pulled her body, not away but to bring me in, praising our Lord with her body, breathing open unto Him.

-Charlie. Let God grace the earth with more boys like you, she said.

Back out later I needed maybe a milkshake. It was awhile before any place opened up.

SELF DISCOVERY WRONGED-DOING WRITING

Why she ever showed up around was another story. Days of nothing. When she was back I guess we let her: her red coat K-Mart ripped torn up muddied—came in from the porch very late hot night—I hunched out to her from my chair at the TV, I held to her my arms out.

-Who are *you*, I said.

Rupert shut me down (I get revved up). Rupert came out with his hand on my shoulder. There was awhile. She teetered at the door on the porch. She was back *~traipsing in~* as if on ants, or as if on roaches, big, big ants.



Angel

MINNEAPOLIS: PRACTICE

I pushed the door, raining, bell chimed. I sat with Rupert.

-*You can't come in here*, said Rupert.

-Gee Rupert.

I held my hands up to receive alms, my poor mouth, my sad eyes.

Rupert looked at the weather. He looked at the waitress playing with straws. He stamped his foot.

-Rupert...

-What you're missing jackass: somebody came in this morning, into 201. I went over and found a bunch of hair coming off M.

I brought my napkin closer to me. He waved his hand to get me to leave. I crossed the street to the Coin Laundry. Everywhere was raining :(

ROUTING WIRELESS

I got a phone prepaid in original box on the porch when Natalia was sunbathing.

-Do you like my hair? Today I shaved it, she said.

-What's this?

-Box for you.

-This a phone?

-Yeah must be.

-OK. Says here, 'Mutherfukker u ded'

-Yeah a bunch of girls with skateboards brought that. Pretty silly day, huh.

RE-ROUTING

I made a list. I was going to be rational.

The list:

- Rupert.
- Life threatened.
- Morgan—*bad*.
- Natalia.
- M, —*bald*.
- Natalia—*bald*.
- Natalia, home.
- Phone: Mutherfukker u ded.

I bought an RC cola and sat by the pool. My new phone had cute doodads.

The paper:

-*Assault on Pine, Culprits? Viet-Femme, "Raucous Chapter"*

Kids came to the pool. I felt a lot of power go away from me. Bees and ants had found my cola. I couldn't pick it up. I dialed Natalia. My phone doesn't call out.

It buzzed:

-we kill u 2niht

I abandoned the RC. In 201 Natalia and Morgan sat together. Neither would look at me.

-Why? Natalia asked me.

-Hasn't happened yet, I said.

Morgan closed her eyes, brought her wrist to her mouth, turned away. I tried to shower. I sort of did. I got dressed in Rupert's clothes in front of M and Natalia.

-The hell's Rupert?

-We figured with you, said Natalia.

-No.

I shaved my face, wiping the razor in Rupert's sleeve.

-Does this mean we have to leave? asked Natalia.

-No.

M sobbed. I cleared phlegm in my throat and spit in the toilet. I turned on the TV.

The TV:

-*h* and where to get it, *heat waves*, thunderstorms, what's the matter with the Parks

Department? And *new retail that will get you hooked*, all tonight—

I muted it. I noticed the girls.

-M.

-

-M, what's your name?

-

Natalia hugged onto M.

RE:ROUTING

Rupert had a heart condition. We paid him a visit at the hospital. Natalia and M brought him flowers we stole at John's. I took Rupert's bankcard and told the girls we're moving.

The phone:

-mutherfukker... dont fink we forget ;D

Rupert recognized faces. We got in the van and left the parking lot.

//// ////////////////

201 had got erased.

-Our things, M or N said.

-Rupert.

-I see nothing of me left in you. You're a danger and I want you out.

I took away from the jams, slipped my fingers in my pockets.

-If I say do it, said Rupert. If you can't do it, I'll do it. I'll move on it.

Rupert punched the duvet.

-*Where is it?* he screamed.

-Rupert, I don't know that.

He'd got cowboy boots, was stomping, was jumping on and off the bed. He ripped out stuffing then foam. I started leaving.

-Bye Rupert.

Rupert ripping the bedsprings, shouting.



-2 daz ;/

I'd rejoin the church. Work under the Protector, under God.

-Morning mam. [at church]

-Charlie! Boy! [woman at church]

-How? [pew at church at service [whisper] *How've you been Mrs. B?* You look great—

-Charlie. You, *boy*, bless your heart.

-*Oh oh.*

-I heard what happened to those twin girls—such a *shame*.

-Oh?

-bang <3

Now late, we sit, we hold on, we tickle ourselves talking of Mr. B. We chew my madeleines, what I'm afraid I've destroyed by glazing. I open up, I tell Mrs. B.

-You open up. What's that?

-Nothing I know, I say, your will be done.

-Oh, Oh. What a boy, what a good green earth this is.

She leans back to rock in her chair. She leans over to look onto me. I lean back. We take in the cornfields, the day gone past and Mr. B's last breaths.

-u ded 8=D~~ o':\

I'm happy to help my community. My favorite headstone, small plaster cross, where every night I pour over leftovers, I love: **HERE BE " LITTLE JAKE " / BROTHER & SON / FRIEND & COUSIN / FAVORED BY GOD / ~~~ /**

Take my hoe along my dirt and pulling along, a long row and longer column, day's work and a night's. A new cultivation—newer and farther out, though I'm careful, avoiding pulling over bodies' lines, leavening them alone, unmolested, I'm no defiler, an honest undertaker.

Job worth doing. Put my hand to my hip, survey all I have done and fixed up. A beautiful church and sun. Our beautiful wall –skateboards–giggles–shouts—

Caught blind pain in behind my knee, on, pulled tongue out down, rolled, my whole frame pulled snapping, now all over my shoulder, mouth and down. I want to pull and stand up. All the mud, nowhere to grab, and now my pocket, the phone—



on Trapping.

clangclangclangclangclangclangclangclangclang,

He clanged white bone around inside the grey grime Rustoleum© dome. Inside, the plaque:

THIS DOME WAS AN EAGLE SCOUT PROJECT FOR THE LOVE OF FUTURE GENERATIONS.

FOREVER WITH LOVE, RANDY RADAR, EAGLE SCOUT.

I am not a part of the “Lame-Mary Violence Club.” I am here on summer vacation. The dome, this playground, looked fun and safe. *It has been hot.* I wanted some place to hang out.

His name is “Vicious.” He’s making fun of my clothes, pacing the dome, spitting at me.

“What makes *you* so smart?” I ask.

“Fun game,” he says.

“Why’s this dome so cruddy?” I ask.

“You’re an idiot, you know. Look at your stupid pants you idiot,” he says.

He threatens me with his bones. He gets a bag out.

“What’s that?”

“Come in here.”

He peels the bag, growing its mouth open as big as the dome. He steps toward me with it.

“Meet the bag. Here you go.”

on Tracking.

You've lost the skin off your face. Feel it, there's just nothing there anymore, just muscle. It's sensitive. *Ow, pffh*. Blood drips little drops sometimes onto your shirt.

But where *is* your face? Better retrace your steps in the city. No blood on the street, can't have lost it here...

The pizza parlor. There was a great deal on, remember? There. The cheese. What's that? *Hey-uh-slice of cheese?* They've spread your nose, your ears, your eyeballs—*Your Face* all cut up—your personality reduced to pizza. The pizza man sells you to some unknown kook! *No that's my face!* Never mind, no! It's pizza, just pizza! Get out of there!

At the bookstore? *That man there*, holding a sign, what's he whispering... "Faces, *faces*—page 383, Computers, Gold Room, Rubies..."

On second thought this lead is bogus, keep walking, where were you before that?

Cross the street again, go to the movies, go check the theater—you dropped your face into a *martini!* But seems everyone here's got beer. No gin in sight. Foiled again...

But you're here. Buy a ticket. Take a break. *One please—9.99?!*— That's ok. Life's been rough. Buy some popcorn, a cola. Now have a seat in the theater. Get comfortable now.

That overture is familiar though. And, wait, these credits—what's? What's? And—No! This can't be! No! No way! There it is! In celluloid! You can't believe! Your face! Your face on the big screen! It's huge! You're bigger than the MGM Lion! You've gone Hollywood Baby! A Star Baby! A Real Star!

on Sitting.

Listen at me learn something boy. Sit down there. There that stump. The woods. The Juniper? The Pine? Just fresh as fresh come.

OK. And your jeans there... That little nip-tug? Never knew you had hair there, did you. Hair'll catch the denim—especially if you up a late night on somebody's couch. Couch? Guess not. Maybe come the future. Stick with stumps now I guess. *I guess!* Ha, having a hell old time, aint you chubby.

Back ok, run your hand there behind along these, what's a love handles, here. See? And back? Well that's a back! Simple. Down below that's ass—*don't*, like that too much do we boy?

But—

—the narrator yawned—

That's about that. Can't get too much of a good thing, '*work*' to be done. Stand up. Tomorrow we'll get sitting again. Do the body it's little good. -Oh no—

—he bent to help to pick the boy up—

Little spill's nobody's fault. We'll get about it again next morning. You know, I just thought, you never felt back there before. You must of thought you were all front didn't you—*Haaa!* That slays me boy!

on Spilling.

Not Arthurian knights per se. More errant phantoms that materialize whenever I need/really don't want them.

I eat at Subway. I like the foot-long Meatball Sub© olives, pepper jack, olive oil, pepper, all on Parmesan-Oregano©. I sit by the window—I sit *by* the window *every* week.

I unwrap it—noisy, embarrassing. I watch girls go by. I bought chips. I open my chips. I scoop chips in the marinara on my wax sandwich wrappings. Boring, I grow *tired* of chips. I take on my sandwich. It's weighty, so are meatballs. Look at me, I bite my sandwich.

One huge meatball rockets out and splats the window. All my breath stops. I grip both sides of my table. Everything's wrong with my throat. I hear it: a clip-clopping horse. A knight-errant riding his clop-clipping horse. My throat is worse. I go purple, blue. I grip harder.

I gotta lotta napkins, OK, thank god. I get them. I use napkins wiping the window. God's-looks girls go by, so *many*, like fly swarms, like—I *ghulll*, swallow my tongue.

I wipe fast. I wipe and get meat sauce in high corners, on my arms, these napkins do shit but curl shit everywhere.

I look up, distant but there: the glint of steel—well polished, reflective. I wipe more fast. I try to scream but my tongue's back there, like a waddle, feel like a turkey.

The manager helps me. He brings out a mop. We're working as fast as we can.

I see their banners. They're holding up traffic. I never asked for this.

The manager entreats customers to help. Many come over. They throw soft drinks at the window. Gradually the meaty film gristles down. The window's looking clean—horses *galloping*, knights seconds away, swords out.

We step back. Everything's clean. The knights are screaming. We scramble—what's missing? I see my sleeves. The crowd locks onto me. *There's King Arthur!* I cower, a coat is thrown over me, I become invisible—no sound, silence. No clapping, no clipping, no knights.

about the Author.

Old Bob passed on at the club. Tony whacked his face to see.

“Bob?”

We propped him up in a chair Tony found outside in the cold.

“Young Bob,” said Tony. “Could you say a word regarding old Bob. He was a friend.”

The bartender called the EMTs and turned down the music. I gathered Bob’s palls around. I squeezed behind and rubbed old Bob’s shoulders.

“Bob,” I said. “Bob what a old man. Peace be with Bob.”

The chair popped. Bob hit the dance floor, slumping back over.

“Heave ho Bob,” said Tony.

We hoisted him out to the street and waved the EMTs over. They wrapped Bob up.

I said to the fireman, “Could I ride in the ladder? Legally I have custody.”

The music inside pulsed back up. We started the fire engine and emergency lights. Pulling away I called out, “Goodbye Tony! Goodbye boys!”

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