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## If It Wasn't This: Collected Short Stories

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If It Wasn't This  
Collected Short Stories

by

Kevin Dorn

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and

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2014

If It Wasn't This  
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## The Sound of a Year

Words look a certain way on the mouth, but to actually hear them, well it's a different thing altogether. I had a lot of trouble with the i-n-g words at first. Those have a sound from the nose that you can't really see. A good portion of English words have invisible endings. Now, beginnings, those are easy. Balloon, walrus, paper. You can see it from the start, right off the lips. But the endings happen somewhere behind the teeth or at the back of the mouth. Endings are hard.

When the sound first entered my ears, I tried to duck. The swishing of fabric as I moved my head on the pillow, a steady hiss from somewhere in the room, the uneven bleeps of machines outside in the hallway, traffic on the road below. All of it unfamiliar and frightening, washing over me like a bright light. The very air in the room giving the walls their shape, the ceiling its height. So large did the world grow, so quickly, that I felt overtaken by a sudden violence of space. Everything had felt so much smaller in the quiet.

I hadn't really understood how difficult it would be to talk to people. I mean actually speak with and listen to another hearing person. I don't know what I was expecting, but when I first heard the doctor's voice, perceived the sound of his speech through my own ears, I couldn't understand a word. I had to stay with the lips.

Those first few weeks were spent in taxis, crisscrossing Heidelberg, going from my hotel to the clinic and back again. When I didn't have appointments, I stayed in my room for the most part, jumping each time a door slammed in the hallway. The city outside was a constant storm of noise, even with the windows shut. I ate room service every night, wondering what the hotel staff thought might be wrong with me, wondering how much weight I'd put on before returning home to San Francisco.

It turned out I was a lot noisier than I had imagined. Sniffling and chewing sounds were the worst. And my laugh was pretty embarrassing. Some people have nice round laughs, like a hillside. Mine sounded clumsy to me at first, sharp and uneven. I found some videos on the Internet of people laughing and I practiced. I wanted to laugh like a hillside.

I came home at the end of September. From the plane, I could barely make out the Bay Bridge through the fog, stretching quietly across the water as it always had. For a moment I felt as if I were just coming back from another assignment. Looking out the bright little window, I sensed a hint of the familiar dread that I hadn't gotten any decent shots, the whispered fear of mediocrity. But coming home from Germany, I had no photos for the magazine. I'd only made one photograph the

entire trip, a shot from my hotel window of the city at night, all that noise in the darkness. As the plane fell through the fog, the whole thing groaning and rattling to pieces, I thought we'd all die for sure. A roar filled the cabin, tearing through the recycled air, the ground beneath whipping by in bleary ribbons of green and black. I closed my eyes and covered my head with my arms, felt the plane lurch on impact, and suddenly, the roaring stopped. A note rang out and everyone around me calmly unclasped the metal buckles of their seatbelts.

Walking down the street was difficult. I would jump and start at each new noise, feeling the sharp pinpricks of surprise travel up my back and buzz in my ears. A dog barked, a child screamed, and I flinched. On Guerrero Street, a bus came up behind me and the blinding *pfaff* of its airbrake put me in tears. I preferred walking in the park, under the trees, away from the cars and trucks. But even in the park, there were birds and children, creatures of noise. Every time I left my apartment, I was on edge. Those first few weeks, I couldn't manage to stay outside for more than an hour or two at a time. I had to keep my hair pulled back because of the hiss it made against my ears and I stopped wearing earrings all together. Even at home, things were difficult. I would lie awake at night with the clicking refrigerator and the coarse rattle of breath through my nose. Doing the dishes took twice as long as before, setting each dish into the sink like a bathing newborn, afraid that I no longer knew my own strength with the unfamiliar clatter.

I didn't know what to do with my hands when speaking, so I ended up buying a jacket with pockets in the front. I was embarrassed about my own voice, couldn't

always make out everything I was doing wrong but knew that I sounded different. I practiced constantly. Listening to a word or sentence for hours, I'd record myself repeating it and search for the mistakes. There are patterns, notes, timing. When I stopped in at the Bi-Rite, the checker asked me if I was enjoying my visit to the US. I nodded yes and left with my tomatoes.

Vasilli came to see me the same day I finally responded to his messages. After nearly four years of signing with him, hearing his voice for the first time was like meeting a stranger. It was beautiful, his voice, like running a hand over the surface of unpainted pine.

"No blinking lights?" he said, studying me, still signing the words as he spoke. "No antennas? I am a little disappointed. It's not one of those cochlear ones? I thought there was a little thing on the outside."

"It's a new design." Signing was so different. I could hear the soft claps and hushes of my hands rubbing together. "Something new they developed. Completely internal. Processor and all. Battery will last ten years and I will live forever."

"I thought maybe it would at least keep you from wearing hats or something but I can't see any difference really."

"It's all in here," I signed, tapping the side of my head.

"Are you happy, Lauren? Is this what you wanted?"

"Everything is different now."

He gave a short nod. "I know what we'll do, but we must hurry." He looked at his watch.

"I was thinking we might stick around here tonight. You could cook me something."

"No, we must go," he signed, shaking his head and smiling. "Peter thought I should take you. Made me promise before I left the house. He sends his love, by the way. Come. You will like this I think."

Vasilli took me to a big stone church near Pacific Heights. He liked to go there sometimes; I'd been with him once before. The ceilings felt so much higher with the noise. Something about the sound of the room gave it a different shape than I remembered, made it feel as if the air were thinner, gravity's pull weaker. That kind of quiet has a sound, actually. It's a big, hollow sound, different than the quiet in the forest, different than a bedroom. It feels like breathing, enormous and expanding, like standing in the wind.

A group of men wearing white robes entered the sanctuary in a line, taking their seats out of sight in one of the alcoves. Vasilli tapped my knee and signed for me to listen. When they began their vespers, I didn't recognize what I was hearing to be voices, didn't realize where it was coming from. The stones of the church rang out and I felt myself falling away in all directions, the sound coming from everywhere at once. They sang like the redwoods.



Music is lovely. All of it. My mother kept an old upright in our living room and as a child I would press my chin against its smooth wooden cheek to the left of the keyboard while she played. There was a chair beside the piano for me to stand on and look down into the wooden box as the tightly wound strings blurred into life. Watching her fingers move across the keys, feeling the gentle shudder of each note, I would try to imagine what my mother could hear.

A few weeks into November, while out for a drink with Vasilli and Karen, one of the editors from the magazine, I watched a small man walk up to a piano against the wall and begin to play. The first chords of a song I couldn't know cut through the din of the bar and I thought I might cry, and did a little. As he played on, I began to laugh quietly to myself. I sat there, looking like a mess, and listened. After years of watching my mother play, imagining the rest, for the first time I could actually hear a piano. It sounds like cold water running through your fingers. The small man played three songs and then walked away. No one else in the bar seemed to notice. Looking around at all the people, the air in the room thick with a dozen different voices, I kept silent, trying to follow the rapid conversations of strangers. I went home and ate most of a jar of maraschino cherries before going to bed.

I had always imagined that the ocean would sound heavier. More boom and less hiss. Half Moon Bay was banked in June fog but the air was warm. As we drove along the shoreline, Vasilli and Peter rode in the front holding hands with the windows down, and I sat beside Karen in the back, looking out at the fog. When we got out of the car, the wind picked up and wrapped itself around me, leaving grit on my skin. I could hear the steady breath of the sea, exhaling as each wave fell upon

the sand.

"Seagulls," Peter said, noticing that I was looking around for the source of the cries. "We should take you to the Pier sometime. It's deafening."

Peter and I waded into the frigid water, our muscles tense and aching, while Vasilli stayed on shore with Karen and the sandwiches. I let a wave take my weight and pushed off with my feet. Plunging my head beneath the surface for the first time and hearing the seawater rush in on me was terrifying. The sounds of the beach dissolved into a muffled blackness and I felt as if I were disappearing, losing my place in the world. Another wave came and I was once again above water, gasping in the shock of the cold. There was so much size around me, the air bright and crackling with noise.

When we were in the field on assignment, Vasilli would carry a little penlight to get my attention from across a room. I'd be making a photograph or jotting down notes and then a sudden glimmer would enter into my periphery, Vasilli's light, causing me to look up and find him. Standing out there with all that sound, the hardened cold of the ocean at my chest, it was difficult to pick out any one note in the dazzling brightness. Even our voices seemed to be carried off into the wind, mingled with the quarreling gulls. I ducked below the water once more and swam toward the shore.

The city was riotous during Pride Week. Market Street pulsed with costumed people and colored banners. I had photographed Pride before but still wasn't prepared for the sheer volume of it all. There was music everywhere. I felt it in my

chest. As I made my way through the crowd near the main stage, the churning clamor enveloped me. Hands in the air and lips moving rapidly. All around, the streets were spinning and laughing and shouting, and in the center of everything I found myself, a part of it.

Wonderful as it was, I felt its force pressing in on me like the sea. The music, the people, the sunlight, all crowding out my thoughts. Hurrying through the mass of bodies and noise, escaping to the perimeter, I took a few wide shots and then walked home. The constant noise around me had brought with it such heat. The night sounds, the city, another person's breathing, all of it warmer than it ever had been before, as if the sound had caused the temperature of everything to rise a few degrees. I missed the quiet sometimes, its cool, silver stillness.

I drove up to the campground at Lake Siskiyou that weekend. The back seat of my car was packed with a tent, a lantern, and three bottles of wine. It was dark when I arrived but I went straight to the rocky beach on the southwest shore and set out a blanket. I wanted to hear the night sky. Lying there on my back, looking up at the gauzy ribbon of Milky Way that cut across the darkness, I realized the stars were just as quiet, just as still, as they'd always been. The stars sounded the same.

Vasilli invited me to a party for the Fourth. Some friends of his were having a barbeque on Telegraph Hill and I made a flavorless potato salad. The place was enormous. Big and white and pleased with itself. The building was full of architects and lawyers. I stepped out onto the rooftop and all the sunlight and white clothing immediately made me feel underdressed. My nice jeans were suddenly not so nice

and my sleeveless poplin shirt felt cheap and ill-fitting. I set my bowl down on a table full of exotic dishes made to impress, and looked around desperately for a familiar face. I saw Peter talking to an architect or a lawyer and found Vasilli standing near the coolers by himself. He handed me a beer, putting his own in his chest pocket to free his hands for signing.

"You made it," he signed.

"Remember, I can hear you now," I said.

"I know," he said, "but I miss being able to have our secrets. We're going to get in trouble if we start making fun at people out loud."

A woman walked onto the rooftop wearing a red and white cocktail dress with blue sequined heels and Vasilli shot me a look. We watched her cross the terrace and join a group of lawyers talking about architecture.

"How have you been?" Vasilli said, turning to face me. "Feel like I haven't seen you in weeks."

"I've been keeping busy," I said. "Speech three days a week still and," I studied the condensation on my beer, "I've been on a few terrible dates lately. Well—two, really."

"Learning quickly. You're getting pretty good, I think. Anything promising? With these terrible dates?"

"One guy kept telling me how interesting he thought my accent was. Kept asking what country I was from. I told him I grew up in Oslo and that we didn't have any decent Mexican food there. He said he'd always loved Sweden."

Vasilli laughed and took a drink of his beer. "Well, my darling, the dating

world can be a big, confusing place. Was he at least good-looking?"

"He wasn't bad-looking," I said. "But listen though, seriously. I wanted to tell you, I'm going on a trip. An assignment." I blew a note across the top of my bottle, not looking at him.

"And you want to go without me," Vasilli said.

"No. Well—I want to go on my own. I don't know—I need to do something. And when I called Karen, she said they could use somebody and—"

"Where?" Vasilli said. "Where do they want to send you?"

"I wanted to go. Back to Burma, well—Myanmar. They're doing a piece—"

"Myanmar? It's shit over there right now. You can't—"

"That's why I want to go," I said. "On my own. I can't just sit around here. Shoot some baseball games, museum openings. I need to be out there again. It's time."

"Jesus, Lauren. You must watch yourself. Who do they have for you over there? Where are you going? Magway?"

"Kachin. They've got a fixer. Local guy. Karen said they've used him before. I'll be fine. I just wanted to tell you. It'll be weird without you but I think it's what I need to do. Cover the displacement, hopefully meet with some people. Write my own captions for a change. I leave beginning of September."

"Are they doing a story?" Vasilli asked, squinting into the mouth of his bottle.

"Just my photos, I think. Karen set it up for me—as a sort of favor—I don't know."

"Some favor. Well, you must be careful. And for god's sake don't eat any of

those bat kebabs. Disgusting. Unless maybe you don't mind to be getting their little wings stuck in your teeth." Vasilli was always good about advice.

Each time a man walked into the restaurant, I tried to catch his eye. My contact was half an hour late and I had to pee. I fidgeted with the beer bottle in front of me, making quarter turns on the table. I sat trying to remember the route back to my hotel as the stereo pounded out Burmese pop songs loud enough to drown the street noises.

My father had kept a large stereo in the living room when I was a child, and he used to play records while grading term papers. I loved flipping through his LPs, pouring over the photographs of long-haired men and women on the covers, breathing in their attic smell, cleaning the dust from the grooves with his horse-hair brush. In an effort to help me experience the music, he brought home a light box the size and shape of his other speakers with a cable running out the back that connected to the receiver. The light box was supposed to react somehow to the rhythm of the music coming through the stereo, and the tiny colored lights would shift in wild patterns behind a plastic diffuser. It worked, to a certain extent, and in this way, I could see the music he was listening to. The effect of the flashing colored lights was like watching a Christmas tree take a shower, but because I knew how excited he was about the box, I simply told him it was beautiful.

As I was trying to get the bartender's attention, a man walked into the restaurant and glanced quickly around the room before heading my way.

"You are Lauren Perry?" he said, leaning slightly forward and raising his

eyebrows. "I am Ohnmar Han. I am very late."

"Thank you for meeting me, Amar," I said, half shouting over the music. "I haven't been waiting long. No worries." He stayed standing in front of me with a tight-lipped smile. I forced an awkward grin and looked around for the bartender again. "Well, Amar. Would you like a drink or anything?"

"I am fine without one. Thank you. You may call me Ohnmar." He said his name slowly, exaggerating the *O* with his lips.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Ohnmar. It's so loud in here isn't it? Okay, well let me just pay the check then and we can go somewhere else if you like." I wasn't sure if he had planned to have dinner with me, or if the meeting was just intended to be an introduction.

"Here is better," he said, and grabbed a stool at the bar, leaving an empty seat between us.

"Okay, great. So I guess I should show you this." I pulled out a sheet of paper and set it on the bar in front of him. "It's a list of a few of the villages and townships I was hoping to cover. I thought you would know better than I would of course. It's just a—"

"We cannot go here," he said, pointing to a name on the list. "Mansi is held by the KIA now but the government will take it back soon. The people have all left. It is not safe."

"What about these others? Can we see any of these? I'd like to speak with some of the people, photograph them. Not the soldiers, just the villagers. I'd like to leave tomorrow morning. First thing, if we can."

"The soldiers will not speak to you. We will go to a Shan village tomorrow, it is a long drive. There is a woman there who will speak to us. I know her. There it is safe." He sat straighter on the stool and held his tight-lipped smile. The music pounded through the thick air like a fist.

The next morning, Ohnmar was waiting for me in the lobby. He introduced himself to me again as if we hadn't met the day before and offered to take my bag. I hadn't slept very well. The corduroy drone of motorcycles outside and the discomfort of sweat-soaked sheets in my room kept me up most of the night.

We climbed into a small pickup truck and sped off through the city. The engine noises only slightly louder during the daylight hours than they had seemed the night before.

The village was comprised of a handful of bamboo structures strung along the dirt road that cut through its center. A man came to the window of the truck as we pulled up and Ohnmar said something to him. The man bent down to look at me in the passenger seat for a moment before pointing farther down the road ahead of us and saying something to Ohnmar, waving both his hands in front of his chest.

We parked behind one of the buildings and Ohnmar asked me to wait in the truck for a moment. He grabbed a small parcel wrapped in cloth from the back. The house was elevated off of the ground several feet and skirted with bamboo staves. Ohnmar darted up the little staircase and disappeared from my sight. A constant trilling fizz of insects and birds hung over the village. It sounded like walking barefoot over wet sand.



"Come, please," said Ohnmar, leaning out from the small porch. "It is safe. Come."

A thin woman about my age stood in the doorway, wearing an orange and purple checked scarf wrapped loosely around her head. She smiled, but only faintly.

"This woman is called Thiri," Ohnmar said. "This is her home. She will speak with us."

I nodded my head and smiled, lifting my camera, like a question.

"It is okay," Ohnmar said. "You may picture her."

I stepped back and shot the house, its corrugated steel roof held up by a bamboo and coconut wood frame skinned with woven strips of bamboo. A red curtain fluttered in and out of a window but I couldn't feel a breeze. The woman spoke to Ohnmar.

"Please," he said to me, "we must go inside now."

I walked up the steps and shot back toward the village from the porch. A hen stepped out proudly into the road. There were no children.

The house was darker than I had expected and I was a little worried about the light. The three of us stood just inside the doorway for a moment not looking at each other.

"How long have you lived in the village?" I asked.

Ohnmar translated my question, gesturing around with his hands. The woman spoke in a thin, reedy voice. Ohnmar nodded, saying, "Her husband bring her here, but he is missing now."

I took a photograph of her, lit only by the light from the doorway, half her

face in shadow, her folded hands like little brown birds. It was so dark inside. Thiri unwrapped the parcel Ohnmar had brought and set it gingerly onto the table, opening it to reveal a small pile of dark colored spheres covered in grains of sugar. Putting one in her mouth, she motioned for me to take one as well.

"Plum candy," Ohnmar said. "I have brought it for her. A gift."

"Good," Thiri said to me in English, nodding her head.

I smiled back and set one on my tongue. It was sour and earthy, like a date or a dried fig.

"Good," I said.

"Food is hard to get now," said Ohnmar. "The soldiers come and they take."

I stood across from Thiri, looking around the two-room house. "Have any people from the NGOs tried to come through yet? With supplies or food?"

While Ohnmar translated my question for her, he held his hands in front of his chest as if he were carrying a delicate gift. The steady thrum of the insects added another layer of heat to the swollen afternoon. Thiri began to say something when a sharp cracking sound split the air outside. Then engine noises came from somewhere nearby. Her face tightened and she ran past me to peek through the red curtain hanging over the window. She turned back to us and looked around the room, speaking quickly to Ohnmar.

"Men are coming," he said, his voice low and steady. "Soldiers. We must hide now."

I couldn't speak. More cracks rang out and a woman screamed. Ohnmar said something to Thiri and they both looked at me. Thiri spoke again and pointed to the

floor. Then more screaming outside, and the sound of men shouting. Thiri grabbed a glass bottle from the shelf and went into the front room, taking long, elegant steps on tiptoe.

Ohnmar grabbed me gently by the arm and pulled me to the floor behind a small table. He lifted up a piece of the bamboo mat, sliding several boards aside to reveal a dark crawl space under the floor and motioned for me to duck beneath. I heard a man's voice from the front porch as Ohnmar climbed in beside me and gently slid the floor panel over our heads. Thiri was speaking quickly and then she let out a tight scream. I looked back at Ohnmar and he shook his head, keeping a hand lightly on my shoulder.

Boots crossed overhead and Thiri cried out, her bare feet sliding across the floor as the soldier dragged her around the room. He stood directly above us, speaking rapid Burmese, and Ohnmar's grip tightened. Thiri said something and then gasped as the soldier hit her. She cried out and he threw her against the shelf. Dishes crashed to the floor and grains of rice rained down through the cracks. Thiri coughed hoarsely. The insect sounds rose in pitch and seemed to pulse in dizzying waves. My body began to tremble with such force that I worried the soldier might hear. I ducked tighter into my crouch, hugging my knees to my face, feeling the dirt from the ground stick to the tears wetting my cheek.

I didn't want to help Thiri. When I realized this, I felt sick and more afraid. Crouched there under the floor in the darkness, sweating and trying to slow my breathing, I wanted only to run away. I couldn't see her or the soldier through the cracks in the floorboards, only the red curtain in the window. After a moment, he

dragged Thiri back into the other room and I could hear her crying. The boards shook as something slammed to the floor. Thiri let out two short staccato screams and then the flat sound of something heavy striking her made Ohnmar jump slightly, his hand still on my shoulder. Thiri groaned, coughed, then was silent.

The soldier kept repeating the same phrase but I couldn't understand him. Three times, he said the words, three times a flat thud and Thiri's soft groan. I covered my mouth with my hand, breath still smelling faintly of plum. The soldier laughed. Then he said something else and I heard the metallic clatter of his belt buckle hitting the floor. I closed my eyes in the darkness and my ears filled with the steady whirring of the insects outside and Thiri's muffled cries from the other room.

After I don't know how long, the whirring seemed to stop. The dull thudding of fists resonated through the house in a steady rhythm but I could no longer hear Thiri's voice. I opened my eyes and looked up through the crack at the red curtain hanging in the window. Ohnmar's body shook behind me as he wept. The rhythm of the thuds slowed until only the soldier's laughter carried through the floorboards. He laughed like a hillside.

We stayed crouched in the dirt below the floor until the soldiers had left, their truck engines thin in the distance. Ohnmar covered Thiri's body with the checkered scarf and stepped outside into the heat. The house was quiet. The plum candy was gone. I stood above her in the front room with my camera in my hand. Thiri's was not the first dead body I had photographed. There must've been dozens before her. Vasilli and I had covered North Korean refugees escaping the famine into China, all those people starving, their skin like thin paper, each bone casting a

shadow. I saw a policeman shot to death on the street in Thaksin a few weeks before the coup. A boy who'd been standing on the sidewalk was hit in the stomach. I took their silent pictures like anything else. Watched as the boy bled out through my lens.

Standing over Thiri, a swath of sunlight spilling onto the floor like a piece of yellow cloth, I could still hear the soldier's laughter ringing in my ears. Over the thrumming insects, over Thiri's silence, I could hear him laughing. I took only one picture. Feeling dizzy, and suddenly sick, I ran out of the house and down the steps into the dirt road and the heat. Ohnmar tried to speak to me but I didn't want to hear him. I didn't want to hear anything. I needed the quiet, needed its cool, silver stillness.

Henry

Henry sat there, unmoving, trying to hold on to the hour, feeling it slip away like smoke. If he could only just—but then, like that, it was altogether in the wind. Lost to him. He looked at the younger man sitting in the chair, a jacket draped over one knee. "Yes?" Henry said. "Yes? Go on then. What can I do for you, sir?"

The younger man moved his mouth into a thin, polite line and exhaled through his nose. His hair was very dark and a scar ran diagonally across his chin. He might've been in his fifties or so. Perhaps a little older. He shifted in the chair, looking at Henry, almost seeming to squint. "Okay," the man said, rubbing both hands down his face and taking another long breath. "I'll come back next week. We can talk more then." He stood up from the chair and put his hand on Henry's shoulder for just a moment before moving toward the door.

"Yes," said Henry, not getting up, "very well. Next week." He felt tired. Next week would be better; he'd have more time then. The younger man said something

Henry didn't quite catch and walked out.

Henry sat alone in the room, the pale winter light coming through the window. Snow outside. He watched the flakes rollick through the air, landing perfectly white and singular on the window before suddenly fading into nothing, as if their sharp little forms had never landed on the glass at all. Henry noticed a book in his lap, covered in black leatherette with his name printed in gold letters on the front. *Henry*. He opened it and saw that its pages were filled with his own handwriting.

*You are Henry Paul Grant. You live at White Birch Home 225 SE Fordham Street Saint Paul, Minnesota. You forget things. If you are lost, call 612-824-9100 and ask for Michael.*

Henry ran his fingers over the writing. He damn well knew his own name. Flipping through the pages of the book, he stopped at a photograph of a dark-haired man. *Michael: Son. Born May 14, 1961*. Henry thought him a handsome man, except for a scar on his chin, and felt a vague sense of pride. A second photograph showed another man, this one heavy in the face, with thinning blonde hair. *Danny: Nurse. White Birch Home.*

Snow fell outside making everything soft and white, not a sharp edge to be seen. Someone's shoes click-clacked down the hallway past his door. Thinking it might be Elizabeth, Henry made to call for her but then decided otherwise. He felt the dull panic of being adrift and noticed a book open in his lap.

The sky was dark, the streets blue and cold with snow. Henry took a drink from a coffee cup sitting on the table beside his chair. It was cool, but he drank it

anyway. A low shelf held two stacks of oversized photography books. Beside the books were several boxes of jigsaw puzzles and a small brass airplane missing its propeller. A plain-faced clock hung beside the window. *4:45*. Photographs were pinned to a cork panel on the wall, and on a white board by the door was written in blue ink, *Breakfast 8:30. Michael coming for lunch*. A calendar hung beside the white board. *February 2*. There was a small bed against the wall with a blue quilt and a single pillow. He drank the rest of the cold coffee.

A black book was tucked into the cushion of his chair with his name on the cover.

*You are Henry Paul Grant. You live at White Birch Home 225 SE Fordham Street Saint Paul, Minnesota. You forget things. If you are lost, call 612-824-9100 and ask for Michael.*

There were pictures of people, notes written in his handwriting. He stopped at a page near the middle with a corner folded over. *It's not all bad, you know. On the bright side, you're constantly meeting new people*. He couldn't remember what he'd meant by that. How funny. *And to think, you were the only one who knew where to find Jimmy Hoffa*. Henry sneezed and readjusted his glasses. *Knock, Knock. Who's there? I forget.*

The sound of voices came from the hallway. Putting on a pilly sweater he found hanging from a hook, Henry opened the door and stepped out onto the oaken floorboards. A young woman smiled and walked toward him. Several white-haired people were making their way down a flight of stairs at the end of the hallway.

"Hello, Mr. Grant," the young woman said. "My name is Katherine. We're all



heading downstairs for some dinner right about now. How'd you like to join us?"

"Ah—well, I'm not sure," said Henry. "Perhaps I'd better not—I have an awful lot of work to do—just there, in the room—never enough hours in the day."

"Yes, Henry, but maybe some dinner first? I'm sure you'll have time for your work after getting a little something to eat. It'll be there when you come back. We're having spaghetti if I'm not mistaken." The woman took him gently by the elbow and began walking toward the stairwell.

"Of course," he said.

Downstairs, Henry sat at a long table with another old man across from him and two old women sitting near the end. An empty glass stood next to salt and pepper. Henry began to get up to take the glass to the dish bin, still feeling a little hungry.

"Here you are, Henry," said a woman's voice behind him. She put her hand on his shoulder and set a plate of pasta and red sauce on the table. Henry sat back down with a fork in his hand. "Oh, and here's a spoon for ya, in case you wanna twirl." The woman smiled at him. They had met in the hallway. "Henry, this is Gordon Mayhew," the woman said, indicating the old man across the table. "You two may have met before. Gordon is a resident here with us as well." The man gave a curt smile and nod. He had a mustache and close-cropped hair parted on the side. The woman from the hallway walked off toward another table of old people.

"Pleasure," said Henry. "Though I'd better warn you now, friend, I'm liable to forget we've spoken at some point. Don't fret too much about offending me. I haven't been able to hold a grudge in I don't know how long."

The man gave a short, polite chuckle.

"And—and what is it that you do?" asked Henry, turning his fork in the plate of spaghetti.

"Not much of anything lately," said the man.

"Ah—I see. Well, it gets like that. Me, I'm in architecture. A structural engineer actually. With same outfit for—god, long time now—long time. You know the Foster building, just downtown? That's one of ours." Henry ate a bite of spaghetti. The other man looked down at his own plate. "Did the Benson Insurance Building too, matter of fact. That was a big project. And the Northern State Bank. Some of the best buildings in Minneapolis. So tell me," said Henry, picking at his plate, "how long have you been living here?"

"Long time," said the man.

"I see," said Henry. "Well—have you met my wife? Elizabeth. She must be—well, you've probably met her." Henry couldn't think where his wife might be. He looked around the room at the other people eating. A woman two tables over had a red streak of marinara running down her chin. "Tell me, have you ever happened to live in Montana by any chance? I lived there as a boy." The man shook his head that he had not. "It was my brother and I, we moved with our parents to right around Glacier, absolutely miniature little town called Babb. Moved there with the CCC. Building the parks and the roads and all of that. My parents dragged us all over the country back in those days. It was really something for a while."

The man coughed violently into his hand. He drank some water and seemed a little angry for a moment but then looked up at Henry with an expectant

steadiness.

"Wonderful over there in Montana," Henry continued. "My brother Jonathan and I would camp quite a lot. Had a tent and our backpacks and all that land around. Jonathan was a few years ahead of me. We had a dog—wonderfully big German Pointer—named Buck. Well Jonathan would go off sometimes, on his own—with just Buck for company. Once, he walked from Babb all the way out around Yellow Mountain and back, carrying all the food for him and Buck in a backpack. Took him about a week, I think. The problem was old Buck, walking over all that rough stone—poor animal—the pads of his feet were worn raw. My brother tried carrying him for a while but he was so heavy—he was a wonderfully big pointer, you see. Well, because my brother couldn't carry him all that way, and because he felt so bad seeing poor old Buck like that, my brother made him walk behind. He couldn't stand to watch that dog limp his way across the stone. My brother walked out all right, and there was old Buck, ten feet behind him the whole way back. He was a fine dog."

The man across the table might've smiled beneath his mustache. He didn't speak. Outside, snow was falling.

A woman led Henry down a hallway and stopped in front of a door. *207*. "Here we are," she said in a singsong voice. On the wall was a small placard with his name written out in capital letters. The woman led Henry by the elbow into the room. "Just can't believe how late it got," she said. "Did you enjoy the movie, Henry? That Gene Kelly—"

Henry remembered Gene Kelly, and nodded in half-attentive agreement. The woman pulled back the covers on a small bed in the corner, smoothed the sheet, and

smiled at Henry. The clock on the wall showed 8:40. "So, why don't you take off your shoes, Henry. You should get yourself some rest now. We'll talk to you again soon." She erased something written on a white board before Henry had the chance to read it. "Danny will see you in the morning. If you don't need anything else, I'll say good night, Henry."

"Yes," Henry said. "Good night then." The woman closed the door, and Henry settled in the chair to slip off his shoes. He sat looking out the window at the snow, rushing sodium-orange in the streetlamp.

Henry climbed into bed with his clothes on. His leg was hurting, and Elizabeth wasn't home. The radiator ticked off the seconds as he lay there with the lights glaring, his eyes closed, listening to his own shallow breaths.

A knock at the door woke Henry and he felt along the edge of the nightstand for his eyeglasses. The door opened before he could get up.

"Good morning, Henry," said a man's voice. "How we doing?"

Henry found his glasses. A fat man was bent over by the door, picking up something on the floor. Henry groped for the man's name. He thought it should be Danny. Danny worked at the home.

"How we doing today, Henry? It's Danny. You sleep okay?" He came over to the window and opened the blinds. Outside was grey and bright.

Henry sat up in bed, squinting into the new daylight. "Good morning, Danny. We're doing fine I suppose."

"Still a lot of snow on the ground out there," said Danny. "Heck of a drive coming in today." He walked over and tore off a page of the calendar, crumpling it

up and tossing it in the wastebasket. *February 5.*

"Well, it gets like that I suppose." Henry felt stiff from the bed. He wondered if Michael's school would be cancelled with the weather. Though, perhaps not.

Danny walked to the chair and picked up a small, leather-bound journal. "Here's your book, Henry. I'm going to stop by Mrs. Anderson's across the hall real quick. Be back in a few."

The black journal had Henry's name printed in gold letters across the cover.

*You are Henry Paul Grant.*

He flipped to the back pages. Empty. He flipped to the front. A picture of Michael. *Michael: Son. Born May 14, 1961.* School wouldn't need to be cancelled. A white board on the wall near the door was smeared blank.

Henry went to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror for a good while but didn't shave. There was no razor. A picture book of the national parks sat on the back of the toilet.

Danny came back in without knocking. "Feel like getting cleaned up a little, Henry? Before we go downstairs?"

Henry sat naked and ashamed on the shower chair, looking straight ahead at the tile as Danny washed his body. He didn't speak while Danny went about scrubbing his armpits and chest. Just so long as Elizabeth didn't come in to see him like that. She might be at her sister's, in Madison. After rinsing, Danny handed him a towel and then washed his own hands in the sink.

"You feel like some breakfast, Henry?"

"Let me get some pants on," Henry said. He glanced at a clock hanging beside

the window. 7:50.

Danny stood in front of the white board with a piece of paper in his hand. He wrote several things on the board before going into the bathroom and coming out with a glass of water. Henry sat on the end of the bed, buttoning his shirt. Danny placed several different-sized pills on the nightstand along with the water. He nodded at Henry, raising his eyebrows. Henry took all the pills in one swallow and looked over at the white board.

*BFAST MEDS TAKEN 8am*

*BFAST 8:30am*

*LUNCH 12pm*

*REPORTER COMES AFTER LUNCHTIME 1:30pm*

"You've got a visitor coming today, Henry," Danny said. "Guy from a magazine wants to ask you about one of your buildings. Think that'd be alright? Feeling up for a visit?"

"Fine," said Henry. "A reporter. Well, we'll have to just make sure they get my good side for the cover. A magazine; well."

"I think it's an architecture magazine—not sure. But they want to ask you about one of your buildings. Michael said it would be alright if you were feeling up to it. You don't have to if—"

"Danny," Henry said, standing up. "I'm not a child. If I get confused sometimes—well, then it gets that way sometimes. But I'm not a damn cub scout, mind you." He straightened his shirt and cleared his throat. "Now, what say we have some breakfast already."

Outside Henry's window the sun was just cutting through a grey block of clouds. He had a good portion of a puzzle put together on the table. Most of Mount Rushmore was looking back at him with only Roosevelt still scattered in pieces. Danny came to the door with a man wearing a heavy black coat and knit cap.

"Come on in, Danny," Henry said. "Have I met your friend?"

"Henry, this is Joshua Glover. He's a writer for a magazine."

"Pleasure," said Henry, setting a piece of presidential forehead down. He stood and the two men shook hands.

"Hello, Mr. Grant. It's nice to meet you."

"Call me Henry."

The man pulled a chair out for himself. A clock on the wall read *1:40*.

Danny leaned on the doorframe. "Mr. Glover was hoping to interview you about one of your buildings, Henry."

"Fine. Fine," said Henry, sitting back down. "Which one you hoping to grill me about?"

"We're doing a piece for the fiftieth anniversary of the Benson Insurance Building. We've been trying to track down some of the folks who worked on it and—well—" The reporter looked down at his shoes.

"Not too many of us still breathing, eh? Well—now don't worry too much about offending me, mister. I know damn well that I'm old. I'm liable to forget we've spoken sooner or later. Haven't been able to hold a grudge in who knows how long. Anyhow, we'd better get on with it. Time's short these days."

The man gave a quiet laugh and brought out a small recorder and a black

notebook.

"So I'm to be famous, am I? Well—fine. Fine. And you write about buildings—how exciting. You must get out to see some nice ones then I'd imagine."

"I've stood in some pretty incredible places, yes. I interviewed Gehry when the Disney Concert Hall finally opened in LA."

"Ah—haven't seen it," Henry said. "I met him once. Frank Gehry. Smart man—though I think he thought so too. Had quite a head about himself by then. Now, his shapes really were something, they really were, but I never cared for all that metal. My wife, Elizabeth is—well—" She should be around someplace. But then, perhaps not. He placed both hands on his knees, feeling the curve of his bones. "Well. I'm sorry." He felt flushed. Picking up a piece of blue sky, he turned it in his hand, flipping back and forth from bright blue to raw chipboard.

"Mr. Grant, if this is too much, or—well, I can come back another time if—"

Henry waved his hand in the air. "My mind can't be counted on these days is all. But I know what I've built. I remember every goddamn stair and doorjamb. Now, if you don't mind, mister, I'd like to keep on. Which building was it? The Benson, you said?"

"The Benson," the reporter nodded.

"Well this would be back in sixty-three, sixty-four. Man named Yamasaki drew up that building. Course you probably know that. Japanese. Very smart man." Henry watched as the reporter wrote something in his notebook. "It's the portico that everyone will remember. Really, that's what you think of—that portico. He wanted it to feel like standing in a forest, you see." Henry put his hands in the air.



"White trees." He looked up toward the canopy of his fingers. "And it was really wonderful, those quartz columns. Wonderful height. Course, sorting out all the stresses was a bear. They were damned heavy things, but Mr. Yamasaki wanted them to feel light. They had to be slender—delicate. But I think it all turned out nicely. It's a beautiful building. Really beautiful."

"Yes, it is. What got you started in the structural side of things? Did you ever have any interest in your own architectural design?"

Henry shook his head. "Oh, I never had the right imagination for all that. For me, it's a numbers thing. Scientific. But most of those men—the great ones—they could really see." He rubbed his hands back and forth on his knees and looked out the window for a moment. "You show me a wall, and I can tell you if it will hold or not. But those other fellas, like Yamasaki, they can tell you if it should be there at all. They can tell you the *Why* of a building." Outside, a car made its way slowly down the street, bright red against the snow.

"So at what point did you come into the Benson project?" said the man in front of Henry. "Were you there from the beginning?"

Henry blinked at him, then looked down at an unfinished puzzle on the table. "Oh," he said. He glanced back at the man with the notebook and then at the fatter man sitting behind him, searching for some recognition. If he could just place one of them, he might find his bearings. He took a long breath, picking at the rough pills in his sweater, and looked out the window. Snow was melting in bare rectangular patches on the rooftops. "Well—ah. We moved around a lot. With the CCC. That's the Civilian Conservation Corps." The two men didn't respond, so Henry continued.

"My brother and I would camp quite a lot. Montana. We lived just outside of Glacier in an absolutely miniature little town called Babb, and—" The man with the notebook looked back at the fatter man and Henry knew he might be confused. He groped for a reason that the men would be visiting, but couldn't get a hold.

"Henry," said the fatter man, "this is Mr. Glover—he writes for an architecture magazine." Mr. Glover smiled. "They're doing a story about a building you worked on."

"Oh?" said Henry. He felt his ears rush with blood. "A building? What goddamn building? My mind—it—it slips, you see. Goddamned—" Henry looked down toward his knees, shaking his head.

"That's alright, Mr. Grant." The man smiled. "It's alright. We were talking about the Benson Insurance building. Maybe I could ask you a few more questions?"

"Yes," said Henry, feeling flushed. He pulled at a pill in his sweater. "But I can't just sit around all day answering a bunch of goddamned questions. I have a lot of work here, you see."

"Oh—of course, Mr. Grant." He exchanged another look with the fat man. "Maybe I'll come back some other time and we can talk more?" The man smiled again and Henry felt embarrassed.

Outside there was snow on the ground. A clock by the window showed, *2:10*. Henry frowned at a nearly completed puzzle of Mount Rushmore on the table. A piece of the sky was missing.

At some point the sun had disappeared and Henry sat in the dark, flipping through a hardbound book of nature photographs. A shaft of orange from the

streetlamp cut across the wall; a clock said, 4:45. Henry turned the page of the book and ran his fingers over the image of a hillside covered with bright, changing trees.

It looked like a place he'd been once.

"Henry?" said a man's voice. The door opened, letting in light from the hallway. "You awake? It's Danny. And I've brought Doc Jansen with me."

Henry cleared his throat. "Yes. Who is it? I'm awake. Come in. Come in."

A fat man switched on the overhead light and came in with an older man behind him. Henry closed his eyes for a moment at the brightness.

"It's Danny, Henry. How you feeling? Dark in here." He walked toward Henry and switched on the lamp sitting beside his chair. "I was just walking with Doc Jansen and he wanted to stop by and check in. Feel like having some visitors for a bit?"

"Hello," said the older man, wearing a white coat over a pair of sweat pants with elastic at the ankles, blue house slippers on his feet. "How are we this afternoon? Looking well, I think." His eyes were small and grey behind wire-rimmed eyeglasses.

"Can't speak to how I'm looking, Doc," said Henry, "but I feel well enough."

"Good. Good. That's very good." The doctor sat down in the chair across from Henry. "So, any complaints? Sleeping alright? How have you been sleeping lately?"

A young woman came to the doorway and stood with her hands in her pockets. Danny waved her in, saying, "Henry, this is Amanda. She's just starting here today, so you'd better be nice. Amanda, this is Henry Grant."

"Hello, young lady," said Henry. "Please—please come in. We're having a party, it seems. You're right on time." He straightened up in his chair and smoothed his pant legs, wiping invisible crumbs away.

The woman smiled and came to stand beside Danny.

"Mr. Henry?" said the doctor. "Have you been sleeping? Any troubles?"

"No. No. Been sleeping fine, Doc. Can't remember a damn thing sometimes but I sleep like a baby."

"Well, that's very good to hear," said the doctor. "How about your stomach? Anything troubling you?"

Danny and the woman began talking to each other in hushed voices and Henry thumbed the edge of his photography book. He leaned a little forward, but couldn't quite make out their conversation. The doctor didn't seem to notice.

"Isn't that right, Doc?" Danny said. "You had your practice for what—forty years or so?"

"Oh, ages," said the doctor without looking up. "Ages and ages."

Danny and the woman went back to speaking quietly to each other. Henry flipped through photographs of rivers and mountains. He looked at the doctor across from him. Sitting there in that white coat, the white of a piece of paper reflected in his glasses, he seemed as if he'd forgotten anyone else was there in the room with him. He sat very still, just staring at the folder in his hands and humming to himself.

"Well," the doctor said suddenly. "Suppose I should be off to the next one." He stood up with careful precision and adjusted his coat. "You keep an eye on your

salts now," he said, looking over the rims of his glasses at Henry and offering a handshake. "Those'll get you every time." He winked. "We'll see you soon." The doctor nodded at Danny and Amanda, almost doffing an invisible hat, and walked out of the room in his slippers.

"Henry," Danny said, walking toward the white board. "Do you need anything before dinner? The bathroom, or anything?"

Henry glanced over at the young woman standing a few feet behind Danny, and felt his face flush warm. "No. Thank you, I'm fine."

"Alright," Danny said. "Dinner is at five-thirty. And later they're playing a John Wayne movie. You like those old cowboy movies right?"

The young woman smiled expectantly.

"I like them fine," he said. "Elizabeth likes movies. More than I, anyway." He tried to think which movie they'd seen last.

"Henry," Danny said. "Katherine will come by in a bit to take you for dinner. Here's your book." He and the young woman left down the hallway. Henry set aside his photography book and opened the little black journal Danny had given him.

*You are Henry Paul Grant. You live at White Birch Home 225 SE Fordham Street Saint Paul, Minnesota. You forget things.*

Small pictures of children filled several pages. *Lily Grant: Michael's daughter. Born: October 23, 1990.* A little girl with long blonde hair and a slightly upturned nose. In a larger photograph, a young woman, a brunette. *Lily: Michael's daughter.* Same upturned nose. On the opposite page, a boy smiling, gap-toothed and spiked hair. *Hank: Michael's son. Born: July 3, 1994.* Henry looked at their faces and tried to

think of a time when he had known them. He could picture Michael as a boy, wearing his hockey pads and looking slightly out of proportion. Henry tried to remember the sound of the boy's voice.

There were people in the hallway. Doors opened and closed. Henry took one last look at the faces of the children and then set the journal on the table. 5:15. A woman came to the door and took him downstairs to dinner.

Henry awoke to the sound of knocking. "Morning, Henry," said a man's voice. "It's Danny. How'd you sleep?"

"Like a baby," said Henry, clearing his throat.

Danny brought a glass of water and an assortment of pills. He helped Henry undress and then washed him in the shower. Afterward, Danny shaved him with an electric razor, leaving a faint stubble. Henry struggled with a sock while Danny wrote on the white board by the door.

*BFAST MEDS TAKEN 8am*

*BFAST 8:30am*

*LUNCH 12pm*

Danny tore a page from the calendar and crumpled it into a ball, dropping it in the wastebasket. *February 7*. Henry pulled his other sock on and Danny set shoes in front of him.

"Feel like pancakes?" asked Danny.

"Fine," Henry said, pushing himself to his feet. Snow was on the ground outside.

After breakfast, Henry sat alone in his chair sorting through a pile of jigsaw

pieces on the table, searching for the edges. *The 50 States and Their Capitals 500 pieces.*

3:00. It was late in the afternoon and Henry felt stiff. He stood up slowly and made a small lap around the room, running his hand along the wall just in case. When he reached the white board, he looked down at the wastebasket. Inside, he saw dozens of tightly crumpled pieces of paper, nothing else. He dropped to one knee, his joints rusted and aching. Henry pulled a single piece out and smoothed it in his hands. *February 2.*

Fishing out several other pieces, Henry arranged them in a line on the floor, unfolding all the days he could not remember. *January 24. February 3. January 30. January 27. Elizabeth's birthday. January 27.* He'd missed it.

"Mr. Grant?" said a woman's voice behind him. "Mr. Grant, are you alright?"

Henry looked up to see a young woman standing in the doorway.

"Is everything okay? Should I call someone?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said Henry. "No, I was just getting organized. I'm fine. Fine."

Henry slid the wrinkled pieces of paper into a stack and let the young woman help him to his feet. "I'm afraid I'm in trouble, however. It seems that I've missed my Elizabeth's birthday. Just plum forgot."

"Oh," said the woman. "Well I'm sure she'll understand. Those things happen." She helped Henry over to his chair, though he could have made it just fine on his own.

"Don't ever grow old, my dear. Things just go to pieces at a certain point and you begin to forget how they ever went together in the first place."

"Are you sure you're okay, Mr. Grant? I can get Danny if you like."

"I'm fine, miss. Really. As you can see here, I've got plenty of work to do."

"Yes. Okay—well, someone should come by in a couple hours to take you for dinner," the woman said. "Stroganoff tonight. And a movie later, I think." She lingered for a moment more, then gave a strange smile and walked out. Henry began piecing together parts of Florida and Georgia.

When he looked up from the Great Lakes, he wondered how long it had been snowing outside. It was morning. A clock on the wall showed 10:30. He felt full and knew he must have eaten breakfast. Henry walked into the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. He might need a shave, but there was no razor. Elizabeth could pick one up at the drugstore. Henry turned the faucet on and let the water run.

He walked out of the bathroom past a calendar on the wall. *February 9*. Someone had made a list on the white board.

*MEDS TAKEN 8am*

*BFAST 8:30am*

*MICHAEL COMING FOR LUNCH 12PM*

Henry noticed a puzzle on the table. He looked down at half the country, most of the west coast still in a pile. A small black book was wedged in the cushion of the chair. He sat down and opened it.

*You are Henry Paul Grant. You live at White Birch Home 225 SE Fordham Street Saint Paul, Minnesota. You forget things. If you are lost, call 612-824-9100 and ask for Michael.*



His own handwriting. A photograph of a dark-haired man. Pages of other photographs, his handwriting. He flattened the book on his lap and turned to a page with a photograph of Elizabeth taped at the corners. *Elizabeth: wife*. Tapping his finger twice on the photograph, he looked at the page opposite. His own writing. Henry put a palm over the page and tried to keep his hand from shaking, steadying it with the other. An anger rose up inside him. He felt his eyes grow hot and watched the skin on his knuckles turn thin and white, as his hands became fists.

*Elizabeth: Wife. Born January 27, 1931.*

*Died September 9, 2008.*

He took quick, shallow breaths. *Died September. Elizabeth. Elizabeth.* He'd missed it. The book lay open on his lap, the record of a life he could only recall in dim flashes. He read and reread the words until they blurred.

Henry slowly tore the page from the book along a clean line, his hand shaking only a little. He folded it into quarters and creased the edges. Setting it on the table over a section of New England, he tried to calm himself. He flipped through the book, looking for any other mention of Elizabeth. *Knock, Knock. Who's there? I forget.* A photograph of a little girl. Henry stopped at a picture of himself as a young man, wearing a suit, Elizabeth smiling beside him with one hand raised into the air, her hair pinned up in bright curls. Their wedding day. In the photograph, they stood beaming in front of a black car. The car would have been his brother's.

With a black notebook open in his lap, Henry sat alone in a little room, drawing a finger back and forth across his dry lower lip. He was looking at a photo of his wife on their wedding day. There beside him was Elizabeth, smiling and

beautiful. There was Elizabeth.

It was Cheyenne, Wyoming that he couldn't find. Montana had been easy but Colorado and Wyoming were both so damned square. Henry noticed a dark-haired man standing in the doorway, watching him. He nodded and returned his attention to the puzzle.

"Hello, Pop," said the man.

"Hello," said Henry, setting a piece in place before looking up.

"It's Michael, Pop. How is everything? Is your sink running?" He came in from the hall and turned the bathroom faucet off.

"Hello, Michael. Doing fine, I suppose. Just fine." Henry knew the man. Michael was his son. The man had Michael's scar on his chin. He'd gotten it in a bicycle wreck as a boy. Split it wide open. Twenty-something stitches and a scar for life.

"That's good," Michael said. "How's the week been? Staying out of trouble?"

"Been keeping busy. Your mother is out, I think. Visiting your Aunt Barbara."

"No, Pop—"

"Should be back soon, I expect. Any time, really." Though, that might not be right. He didn't look at Michael.

"No, Pop. Mom is not at Aunt Barb's." Michael sat down on the arm of Henry's chair. "Remember? Mom died. She passed a while ago, Pop."

"Well," said Henry, feeling himself growing angry. "I'm not—"

"Where's your book, Pop? Here." Michael picked up a leather-bound journal and began flipping through pages.

Henry ran his hands over his knees to keep them steady.

"You listen to me, son," said Henry.

"Why are there pages missing? Pop—did you—" Michael reached across the table and picked up a folded piece of paper.

"Goddammit. I know. I know damn well where I am." He looked at his hands, his frail and powerless his fists.

"Dad. The doctors say it's important for you to keep this book. So you don't get confused." Michael rose from the arm of the chair and stood holding the torn piece of paper in his hand.

Henry looked out the window for a moment at the snow before turning to face Michael. "Listen to me, son. I forget things sometimes. I know it. I know I'll probably lose everything eventually, right? Those goddamned doctors know it. Eventually it all goes away." He looked up into his son's face, a man's face. He felt the heat of tears beginning to form and he continued in a low, steady voice, "Well, you tell them I'm keeping her." He nodded his head slowly up and down. "You tell them, I'm keeping your mother."

He's Having a Good Day Today

From his chair, Joshua could see the tops of the changing trees as his head swayed back and forth, chasing bright streaks of color. He wished his mother could've seen how wonderful the leaves looked like this, all blurred and burning. He wished that she could've seen them from his window, but she had already left for work. Nurse Emily wiped his mouth with a red handkerchief, pulling down her sleeve to cover the wide bruise purpling her left wrist. His mother worked most weeknights at the hospital, and Nurse Emily took care of him while she was away. Joshua could tell that Nurse Emily was sad about something today. Her face didn't carry its usual brightness. She'd been quiet all afternoon, her voice less musical. These things were sometimes lost on him, but he was having a good day. He knew this because Nurse Emily told his mother so when she came to check on him before leaving for her night rotation at the hospital. She didn't say this every day.

Nurse Emily turned his chair away from the window and pushed him toward the front door. His tongue lolled and his eyes fixed on a dark spot on the ceiling of the apartment as she dressed him to go outside. He wanted desperately to look out the window again. There had been a bird walking along the railing a moment ago. Nurse Emily checked the peephole in the front door before opening it, and wheeled him into the dim hallway.

Joshua didn't like the mirrored walls of the elevator. He saw his own reflection so infrequently that on the rare occasions that he did see himself, he felt strange, and looked at the reflected image with detached curiosity. A small boy with short brown hair sat in a wheelchair drooling back at him. His eyes transited about the large elevator, meeting his own gaze only for brief instants as his head described elaborate looping patterns in the air.

It was cold outside. Nurse Emily had put a heavy grey coat on him and the wool blanket from the closet covered his legs, so that only the tips of his shoes were showing. Mittens kept his hands warm and were easier to manage than gloves. They didn't usually go outside in the afternoons and Joshua assumed that this was a kind of reward for his good day. He hoped they weren't headed to one of the specialists. He knew their names sometimes and most had only ever said his when explaining to Nurse Emily, or his mother, the nature of this test or that.

As she pushed him down the street, the trees overhead displayed their leaves like proud birds, their bright feathers loud and chattering against the white sky. They crossed one street and waited at the corner for the light to change before

crossing another. Joshua liked the way his breath hung in the air about his head, obscuring the faces of the people on the sidewalk, masking their stares and attention. His head rolled to his shoulder and he met a child's eyes as she clutched her mother's hand. Joshua groaned and the child ducked behind the folds of her mother's jacket, hiding from the sound that had just escaped his lips in a thin cloud of steam.

Nurse Emily seemed to be in a hurry. The cold dribble on Joshua's face began to run down his collar and he wished that she would bend down and look at him. They stopped just inside the entrance to the park near the ducks. He wanted to go closer to the water to see the birds more clearly and moaned a little, but the cold wind brushed across the back of his neck and he could tell that Nurse Emily was no longer behind him. He fixed on a small line of ducks paddling over the surface of the pond, and wondered when the doctors would put him in the pool again. He longed for the weightlessness. He longed for the feeling of the water, like a thousand soft hands beneath him in the pool, keeping afloat a body that had only ever betrayed him.

When Nurse Emily came back, she was with a man in a red jacket. She was sad about something, her eyes wide and searching. They spoke sharply to each other and the man was angry. He held his face very close to Nurse Emily's. His hands shook. Children splashed in the water across the pond wearing knee-high rubber boots and Nurse Emily told the man that she didn't have any money to give him. Joshua's head swung left and then back and he saw the man grabbing her by the arm. He liked the way the light bounced off of the blade the man held to her

cheek, like a Christmas ornament. He began breathing heavily as spittle traveled down his chin in slow, southerly rivulets.

“You know I can find you Em.” The man said quickly, leaning in close to Nurse Emily. “You know I can cut that face up. C’mon now. Make everything easy and get me that money Em so I don’t have to hurt you no more.” His hand shook and he pressed his face against hers. “Maybe you think I need to hurt your little *freak*.”

“I’m not doing this anymore Miles,” she said, her voice quavering, “*I left*, and we’re *done*. There’s no more.”

Nurse Emily grabbed her face as the man threw her to the ground, his bright knife flashing. Joshua felt his chair lurch and they began rolling toward the water, the man pushing behind him. The children across the pond stood at the water’s edge setting plastic bottles adrift in the shallows, ankle-deep mariners captaining their tiny ships while the angry man pushed Joshua closer still. Nurse Emily cried out and Joshua felt afraid as his chair sped across the uneven ground, bouncing and jostling. The man stopped the chair at the edge of the pond and spoke in a low voice. He whispered unintelligibly into Joshua’s ear and pointed toward the dark water. Joshua wondered what the cold would feel like as it crept up through his body. His chin dropped to his chest and he could hear Nurse Emily running up behind him just as the line of ducks paddled past a few yards ahead.

She stepped in front of Joshua and put both hands on his chair, her feet in the water. He trained his eyes on the purple scarf that had fallen into the pond and was wrapping itself around her ankles. His head bobbed quickly, forward and back, and he began moaning softly.

“Alright, alright,” Nurse Emily said, “shhhh, Joshy it’s okay—I said *alright!* I’ll get the money.” Three tears and a drop of blood fell to his lap and Joshua knew she was crying.

“You’ll get the money *today*,” said the man, “or I’ll come over to that nice apartment—I’ll come visit that nice doctor lady you work for.”

“Just leave. *Please*. Just leave. I’ll bring it tonight—the money.”

“I didn’t want to do this Em. You know I’m sorry, now be *smart*. I don’t want to have to hurt you again, you know that.”

“Miles, goddamn you, just go. *Please*,” Nurse Emily said softly.

“You know where I’ll be. You bring it tonight or I’ll come back for this little *freak*.” As he said this he leaned over the back of the chair and Joshua could feel the warmth of the man’s body as he brought his face close to Joshua’s right cheek. He smelled bad, like burning plastic, his breath acrid and metallic. Joshua’s eyes rolled upward to the left as he heard the man spit and walk off.

Nurse Emily wrapped her arms around Joshua, her hair sticking to his face, her breath hot on his neck. She squeezed him, shushing and saying he was okay, that she was sorry, but Joshua didn’t like to be touched like this. He flailed his hand and grunted, jerking his head left, over and over. Nurse Emily shushed him softly and let go. She went behind the chair and pulled him backward from the water’s edge. The man was gone. On the paved walkway again, she bent in front of him to adjust his coat and the wool blanket from the closet. She wiped some of the blood from the thin cut running down her cheek with the sleeve of her jacket. “I’m sorry, Joshy. He’s gone now. It’s okay. I won’t let him hurt you. You’re all I got now, right?”



You, me, and the ducks right? It's okay now." She sniffled and breathed out of her mouth heavily, looking at Joshua, trying to align her face with his and look into his eyes. A plastic bag was caught in a tree limb above her, waving politely in the cold wind.

There were too many people on the subway. The car was filled with leather jackets and the smell of cigarettes. Joshua didn't like the din of people and music and steel rails, the muffled announcements coming through the speakers like angry prayers. He moaned loudly in a long pattern of threes and hoped that their ride would be over soon. Nurse Emily stood in front of him to keep the other passengers from crowding in, shushing and telling him that he was okay.

They got off after four stops, taking the elevator up to the street and headed past a man with no shoelaces cooking something that smelled like meat. There were no trees on the street and Joshua didn't recognize any of the windows above him as they made their way along the sidewalk. Nurse Emily stopped in front of a grey cement building and brought out a set of keys from her bag. Inside, Joshua fixed on a stack of thick yellow books piled in the corner while they waited for the lift to chime. On the fifth floor, Nurse Emily went into a door, leaving Joshua in the hallway. He could see a glowing fish tank through the open doorway and several pairs of shoes on the linoleum. After a few minutes, Nurse Emily came out wearing a dark red scarf and hat. As she bent down to wipe his nose and chin, Joshua noticed a bandage taped to her cheek.

They left the building and passed the man cooking on the street again before turning left toward a glowing mass of neon signs. Joshua didn't like this street; there were too many people and the air smelled like wet cigarettes. Garbage lined the narrow sidewalk like dirty flowers and everyone stared. Nurse Emily paused and looked through the barred windows of several shops before finally stopping at one with a glowing blue sign in the shape of a diamond. Bicycles and guitars hung in the windows and there were two men standing behind glass cases inside. A bell rang as they entered. Nurse Emily wheeled Joshua in front of a shelf of televisions and walked over to one of the counters. Joshua liked the televisions. Each was silently playing a different channel and he could almost feel the warmth coming from their bright screens.

Nurse Emily was speaking with one of the men at the counter but Joshua was only able to hear some of their conversation. "Look, this was my mother's *wedding ring*," she said to the man.

"And I'm tellin' you this is the best you're gonna do today," He said, tapping his finger on the glass case.

Joshua swung his head back and forth between the glow of the televisions and Nurse Emily talking to the man at the counter.

"Yes, I have to have it today. It has to be today," she said, shaking her head.

"Lady, for what you're askin' this is what we can do *today*." He tapped his finger on the glass again. "I'm not even supposed to do this ya know."

"Okay, alright, thank you. I'll take what I can get then."

An astronaut floated across one of the televisions and Joshua began humming softly, his tongue wetting his lower lip.

“You sure you know what you’re doing lady?” The man said, writing on a piece of paper and placing it in the register.

Nurse Emily nodded as she wrapped her red scarf around something and stuffed it into her purse. “Thank you,” she said, collecting Joshua and pushing him toward the door.

Even in the cold air, Joshua could smell strange foods cooking as they passed small restaurants with photos of dishes taped to their foggy windows. The streetlamps had begun to spill onto the sidewalks in pale yellow pools of light, and Joshua was hungry. He hoped they were headed home to eat. Nurse Emily sometimes made spaghetti when his mother worked nights and he hoped that they would eat soon because he was having a good day. They passed piles of garbage and people smoking on the sidewalk. Thick pillars of steam came up out of the storm drains like the ghosts of great trees haunting the city streets. There were a few lazy pigeons bumbling around, flapping their wings in short bursts when people came too close. Joshua wondered why they didn’t fly away. He wondered why they would choose to walk around on the dirty pavement, amidst all the people, instead of flying through the air. He imagined it must be very quiet above the city. Joshua closed his eyes and his head rolled back, the bright neon signs passing across his face in clouds of light.

He awoke with the heavy air of the subway rushing toward him. They stood on the platform waiting for the next train and Joshua fixed on an old man reading the newspaper on a bench. Nurse Emily adjusted his jacket and smoothed his hair. The sharp staccato of the train approaching sounded like firecrackers and Joshua began to hum. They boarded a nearly empty car and the old man sat a few seats away, looking at Joshua over the top of his paper. The old man got off after several stops, leaving only the two of them and one other passenger, a bearded man, grumbling in the back of the car. Joshua could see his own reflection in the glass as they went through the dark tunnels, and with each stop he felt himself disappear in the bright lights of the platform until the train passed into darkness again. They got off at an empty stop and took the elevator up to a street with tall fences lining the sidewalk and a few blackened buildings. A light rain gave shape to the streetlamps as Nurse Emily wheeled Joshua down the sidewalk.

After a few blocks they stepped under a doorway that smelled like urine. Joshua could see a building down the street with neon signs in the windows and a man smoking outside. Standing in the darkened doorway, Nurse Emily wiped the drool from Joshua's chin and adjusted the wool blanket from the closet, wrapping it tightly around his legs as the raindrops glimmered on his lap. A single streetlamp lit the sidewalk in front of them like a stage. Several people came out of the building down the street, smoked their cigarettes, and went back inside. Each time someone came out, loud music echoed into the street and was quickly swallowed up like a breath when the door closed. They waited in the dark for a long time. Joshua was cold and hoped that Nurse Emily would make spaghetti for dinner. His coat was

wet. He wished that they were home. Just then a gasp of loud music came from the door, and the man in the red jacket walked out, cupping his hands in front of his face and lighting a cigarette. Nurse Emily breathed in sharply, taking a step out of the doorway and then back again. She stood in the darkness for a moment, looking at Joshua, and then turned toward the street.

“Miles,” she called. “Miles! Over here.”

The man looked around, and Nurse Emily stepped into the light and called his name again. He walked toward them, blowing a distended stream of smoke into the air.

“I knew you was a smart girl Em. I knew you wouldn’t make me come find you again now.” In the darkness, a tiny orange coal shook from his mouth as he spoke. “See you got your little freakshow with ya tonight. How long you been waiting out here?”

As the man stepped onto the sidewalk, Joshua fixed on the soft shuddering of the neon signs down the street. He moaned a little.

“So what ya got for me Em? I know you were smart. Where’s that money?” The man was hunched and shaking slightly, his arms crossed in front of his stomach.

Joshua could hear Nurse Emily crying softly. He moaned a little louder, his head making circuitous arcs in the air, tracking between the shuddering neon down the street and the man’s shoes lit up by the streetlamp overhead. Joshua saw Nurse Emily’s red scarf land on the wet pavement like a bird. He heard a loud crack, like the Fourth of July, and then a second crack. Joshua looked over at the shuddering neon and then down at the man slumped on the ground and then up at the birds that

had been startled by the noise. Nurse Emily cried a little louder, coughing and sniffing. Joshua liked the Fourth of July and hummed quietly as the birds flew in tight formations above him.

The subway home was nearly empty and Joshua fell asleep watching his face flicker in and out on the window. He awoke when they had reached his platform. The saxophone man wasn't there but he recognized the familiar dark spot on the wall where some tiles were missing. The large windows on the street cast bright yellow light across the pavement and Joshua felt the cold air creep up his sleeves and down his wet collar. Nurse Emily didn't stop at any of the windows she usually stopped at and they hurried directly to his apartment building. She helped him out of his wet coat and folded the wool blanket up in the closet. She made spaghetti with red sauce for dinner but didn't put any music on the stereo and didn't say a word as she fed him. Joshua could tell that Nurse Emily was sad about something. These things were sometimes lost on him, but he was having a good day.

### A Taker

The room pitched and yawed as Takumi tried to focus on the letter shaking in his hand. *I'm not coming back*, she had written, and Takumi felt himself slip over the edge of the world. He filled his palm with a dozen of her pills and tilted his head back to swallow them before deciding otherwise, and throwing the handful across the room instead. Breathing hard, Takumi staggered about the apartment looking for more to drink. He still had most of another bottle left and decided it would be best to finish it before he died. He made his way nearly halfway to the bottom, then passed out beside the coffee table.

When he awoke, still alive, Sofie was still gone. Takumi retched twice and struggled to stand, glass bottles glittering and empty at his feet. The bright city outside hummed with indifference and his teeth hadn't been brushed. He had nothing now but a few of his sculptures and her letter. He would need money and distraction, a new love. A call to Robert to try and move some work might help. But

when last they spoke, Robert had said that no one was buying wood these days; only photographs were selling.

Takumi had always longed to be near the rich, eat at restaurants, ride in town cars, be invited places. It was the rich who had made his work important, calling his sculptures *elemental*, commenting on the *natural warmth of wood*. He took their money and their compliments and squinted into their spotlight. By the time he met Sofie, he had already slept with two of her friends. Theirs had been a world of money and carelessness long before Takumi had stepped into it.

It was Sofie who wanted the apartment for him, all that southern light pouring through its tall windows. Takumi began a new series the day after they first slept together. It was easy for him to be with a pretty girl. She would watch him work during the day and at night she would take him to dinner with her family's money. Sofie could talk about art, was educated—Brown maybe, or Dartmouth—and she was never shy when Takumi would stare at her, looking for the grain. If it had been love between them, he accepted it from her like all the other gifts.

Takumi rinsed his face in the sink and left the apartment with water dripping down his neck. He needed to eat something. Walking down Plymouth Street, he stopped in the shadow of the bridge to look up at its bones. He knew, of course, that he didn't want to kill himself—not really—but what scared him about the night before was that he had almost done it anyway.

Taking the C to Sébastien and Alice's in Tribeca, Takumi buzzed their door hoping for lunch. Alice answered in short pants and a baggy denim shirt.



“Well, Takumi, it’s good to see you. Been a while, hasn’t it?” she said, hands on hips, head canted at a maternal angle.

“Hello, Miss Alice,” he said. “It has.”

“Well, how are you? You look a little ragged, you know. Like shit, really.” She pulled him in and hugged his stiff shoulders. “Are you meeting Séb this afternoon?”

“I thought I’d stop in and see how the work was going. Is he here?”

“He’s in the back. Are you hungry? I’ll make us some lunch. Go on back, I’ll bring some sandwiches out in a few.” Alice was forever making sandwiches.

Takumi walked through the apartment, running his fingers along the top of the credenza he’d always liked, six feet of bookmatched rosewood, probably from the sixties, he thought, probably Danish. Sébastien sat smoking on a high stool, cleaning some brushes.

“Ah, how are you, my friend?” he said, looking up at Takumi with a cigarette grin. “You look a bit like shit, you know. Drink?”

Takumi waved away the offer. “It’s been a shit week,” he said, looking around at the canvases stacked against the tall white walls. Sébastien, he knew, had never been a very talented painter but he had managed an enviable amount of success despite it, and for that, Takumi respected him.

“You’re hungry?” Sébastien asked. “Alice could make a sandwich.”

Sébastien and Alice had met before New York, traveling somewhere. They had managed to fall in love before moving to the city; and had somehow been able to stay that way. Alice was from Virginia, and made decent money with her

documentaries and commercials. Sébastien was from somewhere in the south of France—Basque country maybe—and sold a few paintings every now and then. His paintings were confusing enough that people often mistook them for interesting, and he always played up the accent more when buyers were around. They were a few years older than Takumi and he liked coming to them hurt. They'd never had children. Alice told him once that Sébastien already had a son somewhere and she didn't see any reason to ruin someone else. Sébastien had never made any mention.

Takumi would watch the way they were with each other. Happy, it seemed. He was never jealous, not really, but always he would watch with a curiosity that bordered on the scientific. Alice and Sébastien were rare, in that they seemed to care about each other. And Takumi was often hungry, besides.

"So, what could be so very bad?" asked Sébastien.

Alice came in with a plate of turkey sandwiches and a bottle of white wine.

"Sofie left, and I don't know what to do now."

Sébastien sat cross-legged on his stool, nodding his head. "Shit—well—I'm sorry, Tak," he said.

"Oh hell, Takumi," said Alice. "I liked Sofie. She seemed so much brighter than some others."

"I was thinking of calling Robert," Takumi said.

"It's shit, isn't it?" said Sébastien, pouring wine into a mug. "But maybe you should work instead, eh? Maybe these girls of Robert's are not the best for you. Yes, I'm sure he will try to find someone else for you; but maybe this is not what you need."

"I need something," Takumi said. "I'm just not sure what. I can't call her now. I might be able to meet another girl though—to get by. At least for a while. I thought about calling Pepper, seeing if she'd let me on at the bar again. It would be better to meet someone new."

"There are so many girls in Manhattan with family money," said Sébastien.

"I wish you two wouldn't talk like that," said Alice. "It just sounds so ugly when you say it like that. I've never liked Robert's little hobby very much, the way he introduces those girls around. It's just so sleazy and sad. Takumi is still young—and so are those girls, well most of them anyway."

"No, no, no," Sébastien said. "You see, there is not youth any longer. There is not anyone to dream. There is no hopeful revolution. All the revolutionaries are at home, watching television, my dear. Our friend knows this." Sébastien put his hand on Takumi's shoulder. "Now, there is only money and magazines. They all know this too, yes? But none of them care. They are all older than we ever were." He waved his cigarette in the air with his long, bony fingers, and shook his head mournfully.

Takumi spent two days with Alice and Sébastien, leaving before they had the chance to ask him to. He went to the apartment and found a note from Robert about a party. A grey dress still hung over a chair in the entry; Sofie hadn't been back. She'd taken only one bag, but Takumi knew she wouldn't return for anything else. The few things left behind would have to be thrown out, some clothes, a few books, a glass with lipstick on the rim. The apartment was a mess.

He decided it would be best to work a little, and spent the next four hours cutting into a large burl of Bay Laurel he'd been watching the past few weeks. He worked the chisel in heavy strokes, cutting and guiding the wood toward a rough-hewn shape that meant nothing to him. Trying to carve too quickly, Takumi slipped and cut into the heel of his hand a deep crescent shape that quickly purpled and then bled steadily until he managed to wrap a cloth around his palm. Angry and sweating, he decided to quit for the day. He called Robert and asked him over to look at some old work.

Light was cutting across the floor in wide swaths as Robert looked around the room. "It's difficult these days, I'm afraid," said Robert, holding his glasses in his hand. "Do you have any more of that skeletal stuff? With the bones? Those ribcage pieces were a big hit, you know. I could ask around, if you have anything." Robert was always dressed a little too impeccably, his shirts newly purchased and the creases of his suits never seemed to relax. "And I liked those skulls you were doing. What were they—whale skulls or something, right?"

"I have something, but I'm not doing that anymore," said Takumi. "I can't just keep doing it all the same, Robert. I need a new direction. And—and I need some money too." He stood looking out the window with his back to Robert, the bloody cloth knotted around his fist.

"Now Tak, I could give you a hundred—maybe two—to keep you going. Some food at least. But—look—why don't you call her or something, huh?"

"She's gone, man. I can't. A hundred will be fine. Thanks, Robert."

“Tell you what, I’ll make some calls and we’ll go out on Friday. I’ll introduce you to some people. Have I mentioned Gretchen Cole? Probably not, I guess—but she’s fabulous. Her family is in restaurants or something—I don’t know—but you two should meet. I think she’s right around your age—maybe a little younger even. They’re buyers too—her family. I sold a couple of Reinhardts to her mother three years ago, some of the black and white stuff.”

“Do you think you’d have anybody for the basket pieces?” Takumi asked. “I’ve got two finished, and a third that could be, if you thought you might be able to move them.” He wiped the dust off of an oiled piece of Alder, carved into the shape of a basket woven from rib bones.

“I might know of someone,” said Robert, walking over to a bank of low shelves. “Of course, I can’t promise anything; it’s just not that kind of market right now. What about this one? I haven’t seen it before. New?”

Takumi picked up a rounded sculpture, resembling a ball that had had the air let out, and set it on his workbench. “It’s Madrone; a guy brings it over for me from out West. He always saves me these nice root burls.” It had been polished to a smooth finish and Takumi ran the fingers of his good hand along the curves and dimples. Sofie had liked the piece, said it looked like a song; Takumi couldn’t remember which one.

“It’s different from the other work,” said Robert, leaning in to look closer and ducking his head side to side like a slow-moving boxer. “Why don’t I take these with me, get some pictures of everything—this one too—and I’ll ask around for you.”

“Good,” said Takumi, “I could use the extra room.”

By Friday, Takumi had spent the hundred from Robert but knew he wouldn't be paying for anything that evening. Robert had invited him to an opening at the Erben Gallery for one of the Norwegian minimalists—Pihl maybe, or Blytt—and he knew there would be plenty of hors d'oeuvres and free drinks. Takumi rarely went to the actual gallery openings of artists he didn't know without the promise of an after-party.

Someone with money had rented out the old McKittrick for the party, and Takumi braved the dizzying assemblage of Turkish rugs and burgundy brocade wallpaper for the promise of an introduction to Gretchen Cole. He found the bar twice before setting off to find Robert. Takumi greeted the people he recognized with quick smiles and handshakes, cheek kisses for those that demanded them, and picked his way through the dark, crowded lobby until he heard Robert's showtime laugh coming from a back corner. He found him leaning against the wall, holding court in a small group of minor celebrities and overdressed out-of-towners.

"Ah, Takumi, *here you are,*" Robert said, all smiles, "I was just talking about you a moment ago—wasn't I—*yes, we were discussing your new work.*" He took Takumi under his arm and introduced him around.

After a few minutes of empty discussion, everyone shouting over the din and not hearing each other's responses, Robert accompanied Takumi back to the bar for another drink.

"Is she here?" asked Takumi. "The girl. Gretchen?"

“To whom are you referring, my friend?” said Robert, already well on his way, beginning to trill his R’s. “Ah, you mean Miss Cole, yes, I believe she is. Now, let’s see if we can’t arrange a little introduction, *shall we?*”

Robert led Takumi through the lobby, stopping every few feet to say hello to anyone and everyone he came across until finally, he pointed out a woman perched on the arm of a tufted sofa. She was pretty in the way most girls are in the city, tallish and consciously unaffected, always aware of the eyes in the room, always a little bored. She had a high forehead and angular features that made her look quick and serious. Robert, at his most theatrical, said, “*Ah! Gretchen*, how wonderful to see you, my darling!” and as she stood, he kissed both cheeks. “Mr. Takumi Imada, may I introduce the *wildly* talented and lovely, Miss Gretchen Cole. Gretchen, this young man is a dear, dear friend of mine and I’ve *always* wanted the two of you to meet.”

“Hello,” said Takumi, holding her hand. He kept his eyes on hers and half-smiled as they continued their overly long handshake.

Gretchen seemed amused with Robert’s histrionics and took her place again on the tufted arm of the sofa, tracing around a button with her finger. Robert stayed a few moments, talking about her mother and how fabulous the whole family seemed to be, before spotting some acquaintance across the room and leaving Takumi standing alone, in front of Gretchen, with an empty glass in his hand.

“I’m sorry, your name again?” said Takumi, leaning his ear toward her.

“Gretchen,” she said. “And it’s Takumi, right? These things are always so loud, aren’t they?”

"They can be, yes," he said. "So, Gretchen. Are you one of Robert's artists?"

Takumi leaned in, angling his head close to her lips to hear her answer.

"Well, I'm an actress. Stage. Like everybody else, I suppose. Mostly auditioning these days."

"An actress. Would I have seen you in anything recently?"

"No, the last show I was in closed at the beginning of the summer," Gretchen said, taking a drink. "Do you get out to see a lot of theatre?"

"Never," said Takumi.

They spoke closely in the crowded room for most of an hour, taking a break at one point only for Takumi to bring them both drinks. Things had progressed easily and Gretchen had moved down to the sofa cushion, giving Takumi the tufted arm to sit on.

"See the guy in the grey suit, with the hair?" said Takumi, leaning into Gretchen's ear. "More money than God, but he only buys black and white work. Robert has been trying to land him for years."

"So you're a sculptor?" Gretchen said. "Robert says you're so talented." Gretchen rested her elbow on his knee and rattled the ice in her drink as the rest of the party paraded around the room in front of them.

"Robert says a lot of things."

"Do they ever throw these parties for you?"

"I was part of a group show last year over at Agora. We had a nice party, I guess. Though I don't remember so many people wearing hats." Takumi nodded in



the direction of a man in a stark white suit, wearing a panama hat and white-rimmed reading glasses.

“And the woman over there, in that little number with the feathers,” said Gretchen, “the one that looks like Bea Arthur.”

“I thought that was Bea Arthur.”

“Too tall,” said Gretchen, wrinkling her nose. A man walked past them, speaking loudly and sweeping his arms through the air. “Oh my god, that accent couldn't have been real.”

“They never are,” Takumi said, and Gretchen laughed a little. “So—so I like working with wood—well, because it has its own character, and not every decision is entirely up to me. You have to pay close attention. You have to be very careful.”

“Oh—well are you working on anything right now?”

“I'm always working on something,” Takumi said.

Gretchen left to find the bathroom and Takumi went looking for the bar again. As he navigated through the dense stalks of people, he recognized one of Sofie's friends and made his way over to her before she had the chance to avoid him.

“Hello, Claire. Nice to see you,” said Takumi.

“Tak, how are...things, these days? You look better than I would've expected,” she said, spilling her martini a little.

“Well, I've had a shower, thanks,” said Takumi. “How is Sofie? Where is she—is she here?”

“How is Sofie? Sofie is just fine. And no, she's not here.”

“Where is she? I want to talk to her. Is she all right? I need to see her.”

“You need to forget about her,” said Claire. “You know what—I mean, did you even know she was—that she got—well it doesn’t matter now—she isn’t anymore. Look, just forget about it. She’s fine now. You need to leave her alone.”

And with that, Takumi felt the floor drop out from beneath his feet, and the roar of the room washed over him as he waded through a tide of faces toward the bar. The wound in his hand throbbed and he could feel the slightness of Sofie’s letter in his jacket pocket, an entire page of goodbye without anything resembling an explanation. Steadying himself on the brass rail of the bar, he took two whiskeys down hard and had ordered a third before Gretchen tapped him on the shoulder.

Takumi knew how to be taken care of. He knew the power of the tragic figure, and could always tell when someone needed to help him. Gretchen would be easy to love, for a while at least. He imagined that she would be a good cook, and she seemed smart enough. He let her take him to her loft but knew he’d already had too much to drink.

The ancient freight elevator lurched to a stop, its accordion door clattering open, and they stepped into Gretchen’s apartment.

“Are you alright?” Gretchen asked, turning on the light in the kitchen. “Seemed like you took kind of a turn back there at the party.”

“I’m fine,” Takumi said. “Look, do you have anything to drink around here?” He kicked off one shoe, and then the other.

“I’ll get you a glass of water. I don’t really keep much in the apartment.” Gretchen took down two glasses and Takumi stared at the little shadows on her shoulder blades as she leaned over the faucet.

“This is a big place to live in by yourself,” Takumi said.

“I like the space. There’s a view—sort of—you can almost see the river from that window.”

“Sounds nice.” Takumi stepped toward Gretchen and put his hand on her waist. He pulled her into him and kissed her mouth and neck, felt her teeth against his lip. Pressing her against the kitchen cabinets, he began to pull at her dress, fumbling for the zipper at the back and trying to peel the straps down her shoulders.

“Maybe not tonight,” Gretchen said, taking a step back and readjusting her dress. “It’s pretty late and you’re too drunk anyway.”

Takumi watched as her face changed and felt the situation slipping away from him. “It’s barely past one,” he said, running his hand along her ear. “Don’t be—look, don’t get uptight.”

“Maybe I’ll call you a cab.” Gretchen sidestepped past him and walked to the other side of the kitchen.

“Look, I’ll just crash here. I can stay on the couch or something.”

“I’ve got some things to take care of tomorrow,” Gretchen said.

Takumi knew he had misjudged her but pressed on anyway. “Look, it’s fine. Don’t be a bitch. Let’s just—”

“You should get going. Now. Look, don’t be a piece of shit. Just get the hell out.” Gretchen walked over to the elevator and pressed the button.

Takumi threw his water glass across the kitchen and it shattered against the wall. His knees buckled a little and he gripped the countertop. Gretchen grabbed

his arm and pushed him out of the kitchen. She threw his shoes into the elevator and shoved him in after them.

The morning sun bore down on Takumi as he awoke in a park on the waterfront, sweating and barefoot. He vomited into the grass and then sat up, looking out at the solemn grey Hudson in front of him. A lone house sparrow hopped along the sidewalk. Takumi watched as the little bird flitted and twitched about, suspicious of everything and nothing. He imagined the quiet, animal joy it felt as the sun warmed its feathers. The little bird flew off as Takumi tried to stand. After vomiting one more time, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and walked the fifteen blocks to Sébastien and Alice's apartment, unshod, gingerly stepping between the glittering bits of glass on the pavement.

Sébastien stood in the doorway of his apartment, smiling. "You are not doing very well, I think," he said, looking down at Takumi's bare feet. "Where the hell are your shoes, eh? You look like hippy."

"I've lost them," said Takumi.

Sébastien waved him inside and followed behind, giving him a mock shoulder massage and a hard smack on the back. "Alice is out working. I will make us some coffee, I think. Are you hungry?"

"Just coffee," said Takumi. He sat down heavily at the kitchen table and ran a hand through his gritty hair.

“So, you went to a party,” said Sébastien, laughing through his nose. “I don’t think you made any new friends.”

“Robert introduced me to a girl. But I fucked it up. Anyway, I feel like shit. I was pretty wasted. I ran into one of Sofie’s friends. She told me Sofie was pregnant—well I don’t know—she’s not now, I guess. I don’t know—it’s all fucked up.”

Sébastien set a cup of coffee in front of Takumi with some bread and butter. “Shit,” he said, before taking a sip from his cup.

“I could’ve—fuck, I don’t know.” Takumi looked down at his feet. “But now what? I mean, I guess this shit happens, but what are you supposed to do, right?”

“This happens, yes,” said Sébastien, “but this happened to you, my friend. You keep finding these girls—Robert’s girls—and taking all that you need. I’ve seen this. You’re not the only one. But it’s a shit game.” He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and tapped the end on the table before lighting it. “Sofie was a nice girl, sure—and you, you’re my friend. But this, what you do makes you... ah... *unpreneur*. Maybe you love Sofie, eh. Maybe this is love—but you make it shit, too.” Sébastien blew smoke up toward the ceiling and squinted across the table at Takumi.

Sofie was not the first beautiful girl with money Takumi had been with. The others, he had left easily; or, if they had left him, he’d chosen to forget how or why. Their faces were all obscured in his mind now by long hair and dark restaurants. It was only Sofie he could see clearly, her slight stoop when she walked and the dimple on only the left side of her face. He would remember her. It was Sofie, who drew

math equations in the air with her finger and preferred bread heel sandwiches. It was Sofie, whose mouth always tasted like weak tea, floral and faintly sweet.

Takumi sat picking at the bandage on his hand while Sébastien lit another cigarette. The street sounds came in through the open window and tangled in the smoke overhead.

“Well,” said Takumi, “she’s gone now.”

Robert brought a check to the apartment a few days later. It was less money than Takumi had expected. Less by nearly half. Two of the baskets had sold to a couple on East 74<sup>th</sup> Street. They were new, Robert said, from Philadelphia or somewhere. Takumi wondered what kind of story Robert had told them.

“I’m having a few people over on Thursday,” said Robert. “Thought you might like to come. I heard things didn’t go so very well with Gretchen.” He shot a look at Takumi. “She won’t be there—on Thursday—but I’ve invited some other friends, and friends of friends. You should come. It’d be good to get you out of here for a night.”

“I’ve been working,” Takumi said. He looked at his hands and wiped them on his apron. “I’m not sure I’ll have time this week.”

“Well, it’s at eight or nine. My place. Don’t worry about bringing anything. I’ll have it all taken care of. Do come.”

Robert left in a hurry and Takumi sat at his workbench to finish a piece of Alder he’d been busy with. Sitting on his stool, bent over the pale piece of wood, he carefully sanded the inside angles smooth. Every few minutes, he would stop and hold the piece out at arms’ length, squinting and studying, turning it in his hands. It

was the second in a series of five pieces that he had planned. Each sculpture would be a hollow cavity, empty and polished smooth, finished with linseed oil. Takumi completed the first piece the day before and hoped to have the series concluded within the month. He hadn't made it out of the apartment in two days and needed a shower and something to eat. He worked for another hour and then washed the sawdust from his hair before leaving to pick up some food and cash his check.

Thursday came quickly, and Takumi left for the party a little after nine. Standing on the sidewalk below Robert's building, he heard voices coming from the open windows and the chorus of *Ain't Misbehavin'* rang out into the night air—Dinah Washington probably, maybe Sarah Vaughan. Robert was always trying to impress someone.

When Takumi walked into the big apartment, Robert rushed toward the door to greet him.

"Good to see you out and about, my friend," Robert said. "Everyone is so excited to meet you. There are simply too many wonderful people here."

"I meant to bring some wine or something," Takumi said.

"No, no. Not necessary. We've got everything we need. Now, there are a few people I want you to meet. There really are some wonderful people here tonight."

As Takumi followed Robert into the living room, the song he'd heard in the street began to play again. Sarah Vaughan. Introductions commenced, and Takumi made his way around the apartment, shaking hands and kissing cheeks. There were other artists at the party—mostly men, one woman Takumi thought might've been a

poet—and a dozen or so of Robert’s wealthy acquaintances, all there in the hopes of meeting someone interesting and talented. Young women in expensive dresses laughed and smiled while photographers and mediocre painters told old stories into their ears. Takumi recognized a few of the women from around town. Most were pretty, and probably had family names and free time. Standing in the center of the room, surrounded by all the longhaired money in Manhattan, Takumi knew he could love any one of them, if only for a while.



### D-Douglas and the Squeaky Wheel

It was the photographs really. He had started eating lunch at the teriyaki restaurant mainly because of the photographs on their menu. It was easier to simply point to the dish he wanted than to order aloud. And besides, most of them probably couldn't speak English very well themselves. At eleven thirty, D-Douglas pushed his chair back from his computer, took the elevator down to level one, walked nine blocks, and pointed at a photograph of chicken. Two taps of his finger on the photo and a flat smile got him lunch without having to really talk to anyone.

At twelve thirty, D-Douglas was back at his desk unwrapping another mint when Kyle, from two cubes over, slapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey man, you already eat?" asked Kyle.

D-Douglas nodded yes. Kyle sat on the edge of his desk, pushing a pile of service cases aside.

"Oh man, you should've grabbed me, fucker." Kyle said. "Man, so I met these girls last night—so hot. Like, *so hot*." D-Douglas nodded, hoping Kyle would keep his voice down. "You should come to this place with me some time, man. It's in Belltown. So many fucking hot chicks—and they're all like, well, you know." Kyle lifted his head up above the partition and looked around before leaning down toward D-Douglas. "Two drinks in and it was on. You tell some chicks that you work for Amazon and all of a sudden you're the fucking man. I always tell them I'm a brand rep or something. Everybody always wants free shit, man. The hottest one wanted to blow me right there in the bar. It was awesome. Fucking dream come true, man."

D-Douglas smiled vaguely and moved a pen from one side of his keyboard to the other. *'That dream will never come true with that haircut and those fucking Corn Nuts you're always eating,'* he should've said.

Kyle liked to tell him filthy things that hadn't actually happened with women he hadn't actually been with, though most days D-Douglas didn't mind so much. Kyle had a kind of cycle of vulgarity that would play out each week, starting off rather mild, following a lonely weekend, and getting worse as the week wore on. By Thursday morning, D-Douglas could usually count on him for some charming anecdote about a fictionalized sexual encounter with a woman or two. But, to be fair, Kyle was one of the few people who spoke to D-Douglas at work and he rarely required much in response. Even if he was kind of an asshole, D-Douglas supposed that they were friends.

"Everything cool, man? You seem kinda—I dunno—kinda bummed or something."

D-Douglas cleared his throat, felt his jaw contract, felt the block coming on, and nodded. "—I'm f—I'm ff—I'm—I'mmm okay," he said, and swallowed hard.

"Alright, man. Maybe you just need to get laid, huh? When was the last time you got your dick wet?"

'If I were forced to hazard a guess, I'd wager that you and I are batting about the same at this point,' he should've said. Instead, D-Douglas just laughed lightly through his nose and shook his head.

A round of service cases popped up on the screen and D-Douglas raised his eyebrows at Kyle before turning to face the computer.

"Alright, man, I'll catch you later," Kyle said, slapping him on the back. "Plenty of customers waiting to be *serviced*. Think about what I said though, huh? You're not forty yet, fucker. Get yourself some ass one of these days. You come out with me and we'll set you up." Kyle took a few steps in the direction of his own cube but then turned around abruptly and leaned in toward D-Douglas. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, you know what I'm saying. You can be from Warner Brothers or something. Chicks will think you can introduce them to famous people. Squeak-squeak, man."

D-Douglas waved without looking away from the screen.

On the way home from work, D-Douglas stopped at the O&E Market on 56th. He bought a Diet Coke and shoplifted an eight-pack of AAA batteries. This had been happening a lot lately, the stealing. Sometimes it would be a candy bar or a rolled up

magazine, a pack of condoms that would most likely expire before they'd be any use to him. A growing collection of tree-shaped air-fresheners took up half a kitchen drawer in his apartment. He already had enough AAA batteries to power his TV remote for the next forty years.

D-Douglas didn't generally consider himself a man of compulsions, but he found that the act of stealing something, however small and trifling, afforded him a moment of exhilaration that he had yet to find in any other aspect of his everyday life. He fantasized about stealing bigger items; two-liters, family sized bags of Doritos, a frozen Red Baron pizza, all presenting a challenge of unwieldy size and shape. For the most part, however, he stuck to the basics of Bubblicious and M&M's. He'd never been caught.

At eight o'clock, D-Douglas opened a second bottle of High Life and logged on to [match.com](http://match.com) for his chat date with `Amy_Oh_My`. They had been chatting on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the past four weeks and he was thinking it might be time to cut things off soon. She'd been mentioning an F2F lately and so far D-Douglas had managed to dodge these moments by making jokes about how super fat he was and asking her if she'd ever met anyone with a glass eye and a mobility scooter. Sooner or later she'd get tired of asking. Maybe she'd start to wonder if all that glass eye shit was actually true.

A half hour later, and `Amy_Oh_My` was telling D-Douglas about her grandparents' house on Vashon, when a message popped up from someone named `AnthonyMakesItHappen`.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: is anybody there?

D-Douglas wasn't sure what to do. He'd never had to chat with a man before. His profile said straight. AnthonyMakesItHappen smiled out from his profile photo without showing any teeth, arms crossed to make his chest look bigger. He looked to be in his forties or so and was probably in better shape than D-Douglas.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: anybody home?

Douglas5000: Hello, Anthony.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: are you real? a real person

Douglas5000: Yes. Quite real.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: my name is rebecca

AnthonyMakesItHappen: tony was my husband

D-Douglas looked at the photo of "tony," standing in front of a big window in a nice collared shirt. Probably some kind of weirdo.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: he died three months ago

AnthonyMakesItHappen: i finally opened his credit card bill yesterday and noticed a funny charge

AnthonyMakesItHappen: i didn't know he was doing this kind of thing

Douglas5000: I'm sorry to hear that.

Shit. D-Douglas really didn't know what to do. He had left Amy\_Oh\_My hanging at the end of her grandparents' story but he realized that he didn't care about Amy\_Oh\_My or her grandparents' island home.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: it says he's been a member since summer

AnthonyMakesItHappen: the password was my birthday numbers

Douglas5000: I'm sorry. That must be tough.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: i've been looking through this stuff for the last two days. he has messages from all these women.

In the two years he'd been a member, D-Douglas had only ever really talked to five or six women online. Of those, only two had ever wanted to meet him in person, not counting Amy\_Oh\_My, and that was probably over now too. Calling it a total of three that wanted an F2F, D-Douglas had only met with the first, CaliLily, and it had been a pretty spectacular disaster. He could still picture the look on her face when he tried to say hello.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: one of them was 23. she emailed him a month ago. i thought about telling her but this is already pretty wired

AnthonyMakesItHappen: weird

Douglas5000: Ya. That sounds weird.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: yesterday i was talking to a woman in tacoma who wanted to meet me

AnthonyMakesItHappen: well tony actually. i pretended to be tony

AnthonyMakesItHappen: i searched for men on here and you seemed nice from your picture

D-Douglas wasn't sure what to do with this compliment. If it was a compliment. And if this really was a guy then it was weird. But even if it was a woman then it was still pretty weird. He looked at his own profile photo. Should've

crossed his arms maybe. D-Douglas leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, tucking his chin down and looking to see if it made his chest more defined. Not really. He looked back at his profile photo. It wasn't a bad picture of him. Maybe this Rebecca was for real.

Douglas5000: Can I ask you something, Rebecca?

AnthonyMakesItHappen: shoot

Douglas5000: Does it kind of make you wish you never found out?

AnthonyMakesItHappen: i dont know

Shit. What an asshole. Who asks a question like that? This poor woman, if she was a real woman and this wasn't some total scam, which it might be, but maybe it wasn't, she just found out her dead husband was this big cheating internet dater.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: its weird to think that he was doing all this under the same roof with me in the other room

Douglas5000: I can't imagine.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: we just paid off the house last year.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: tony's father left us some money when he died

AnthonyMakesItHappen: that was a heart attack too. but he had cancer anyway

In the photo, AnthonyMakesItHappen looked like a guy who owned running shoes. A heart attack? Jesus. Can't be more than forty-five. D-Douglas felt the urge to take his own pulse, palpate the glands under his jaw.

Douglas5000: Wow. He looks so healthy in the picture. I'm so sorry. Really.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: they didn't get along. tony was surprised about the money

Douglas5000: Sounds like it's been a crazy year.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: ya. i started smoking a few weeks ago. i don't care about cancer i figure starting at thirty-six gives me a pretty good head start

Douglas5000: My mother smoked like a burning house for fifty years before she died of salmonella poisoning from a bag of baby spinach.

D-Douglas thought about his mother for a moment, sitting on her front porch with her hands cupped around a cigarette, mousy brown hair and thick eyeglasses. He wondered what Rebecca looked like. Thirty-six. Her husband had been good looking. She couldn't be too bad. Maybe she was a cyclist or something. Some women play tennis.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: is that true?

Douglas5000: Completely true. That stuff can kill you, you know.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: thats funny

She was probably really pretty when she was younger. Thirty-six. She might still be pretty. D-Douglas wondered if they had kids. Did he want kids? Probably not. He looked around his apartment. Balled up socks and a sink full of dishes. The beige carpet patterned with dingy continents of mystery stains. A house would be nice.



He clicked on AnthonyMakesItHappen's profile. Kirkland. Holy shit. He felt a little strange about his sudden proximity to this woman. A beautiful thirty-six year old widow just a few minutes drive up I-405. D-Douglas wondered how long a person waits after her husband dies to start having sex with strangers from the internet. A couple months at least, probably.

He Googled around looking for Anthonys who had died in the past several months, hoping for a mention of a wife or at least a last name, but didn't come up with anything. Amy\_Oh\_My was no longer online and he went to bed without saying goodnight to anyone.

D-Douglas spent most of the next morning in his cubicle, scrolling through service cases, imagining different scenarios in which he might meet Rebecca. Each meeting became more elaborate than the next and at some point he was fixing her flat tire, dressed better than he normally would be, his tie thrown over his shoulder and his shirtsleeves rolled up, making her laugh at some joke about the economy. It was nice having something to think about, like a little note in his pocket.

At ten, Kyle came by his desk. "Sup, fucker," Kyle said.

D-Douglas nodded hello, rolling his eyes in a *one more day in paradise* kind of way.

"Let's grab some coffee over at Ladro," said Kyle. "There's a hot chick that works on Fridays. I've been going there every week for like a fucking month. Squeak-squeak, you know? She smiles at me now when I walk in. C'mon, man."

'You lucky sonofabitch,' he should've said. 'You got a barista to smile at you?'

Kyle frowned when a mustachioed man made his Americano. There was no hot chick. The barista waited at the counter for D-Douglas to order, admiring his own tattooed forearms and sighing audibly each time D-Douglas attempted another round of "c-c-co-c-cof—". Asshole. After finally getting across that he wanted a black coffee and paying his three dollars, D-Douglas sat down at a table against the wall beneath a framed black and white photograph of a urinal while Kyle studied the muffins, trying to get a peek into the back of the café. D-Douglas looked on as the mustachioed man went about his work with the focused concentration of a watchmaker. God he missed the nineties. In the nineties, you worked at a coffee shop because, fuck it. Forget capitalism and your parents' idea of success and the cocaine eighties. Fuck all that. It was slacker rebellion. You worked at a coffee shop because there was something vaguely ironic about it, and even that, you didn't really care about. Now, D-Douglas realized, looking at a grown man in his mid thirties leaning arrogantly against a La Marzocco espresso machine, mustache waxed into an unnatural curl, you worked at a coffee shop because it was important.

"Twelve ounce drip to go," said the barista, looking off at some odd angle like an asshole, his head craned away from the customers.

D-Douglas stood up from his chair and walked toward the counter.

"Twelve ounce! Drip! To go!" crowed the barista, just as D-Douglas reached out for his cup. He took the coffee and silently nodded in the direction of the barista who was busy polishing the chrome of the La Marzocco.

"It would seem that you're welcome," the barista said.

Taking a deep breath, D-Douglas turned back to the barista. 'It would seem that your irony has become your reality,' he should've said. Instead, still looking at him, D-Douglas took a sip of coffee and burned his tongue.

Kyle had finished his muffin by the time they arrived back at work. "So how about this weekend, man?" Kyle said, as he swiped his key card across the door sensor. "Saturday. C'mon. We'll find some chicks or something."

D-Douglas laughed through his nose and shook his head. "And th-ththen what? I c-ca—" Standing there waiting for the elevator, D-Douglas lowered his chin and tried to focus past the block. "I c-c-c—c-can tellll some jokes."

"That's perfect, man. That was fucking funny."

'Oh yes,' he should've said, 'I'll have them rolling in the aisles.'

"Come on, man. We'll go to like a really loud bar and you can just act like a tough guy or something. Like a serious guy. I'll do all the talking. Please?"

The elevator doors opened and a note rang out.

D-Douglas stole a pack of Lucky Strikes from the O&E Market. He didn't really plan to smoke them. Probably not, anyway. But the O&E didn't keep them behind the counter the way everyone else did for some reason, so when the guy bent down to grab a bag for his beer, D-Douglas just slipped the pack into his pocket and pretended to be studying the week's Lottery numbers taped to the wall. The clerk looked at him for a minute but didn't say anything.

When he got home there was a message waiting for him from Amy\_Oh\_My asking what had happened. He started to type out a response but then decided not to. She'd figure it out.

He made himself a DiGiorno and watched three episodes of a television show about prisons. A little tattooed guy demonstrated how to make a shank vest using back issues of National Geographic. D-Douglas waited with the computer in his lap for Rebecca to come online, staring at the smiling photo of a dead man, hoping to talk to his wife. What a creep.

After an hour or two, D-Douglas heard the ding of an incoming message.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: hey its rebecca you there?

Douglas5000: Hi, Rebecca. I was hoping to run into you again.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: oh really?

AnthonyMakesItHappen: online on a friday night? meet anyone interesting?

Pretty fucking pitiful. D-Douglas thought he should feel more embarrassed but didn't for some reason. You're here too aren't you, lady.

Douglas5000: Well it's still pretty early.

Douglas5000: I was actually thinking about you today. Picked up a pack of cigarettes on the way home and everything. I was thinking about your head start.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: you were huh? looks like im already a bad influence and we only just met

Douglas5000: Looks that way.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: mustve been nice before they had cancer you know?

Douglas5000: What do you mean?

AnthonyMakesItHappen: well before cancer i mean

AnthonyMakesItHappen: used to be you could be killed by any number of things

AnthonyMakesItHappen: witchcraft or weather or like god or something. not cancer though. nobody died from cancer

Douglas5000: I guess there was a lot more mystery back then.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: think what it mustve been like when people just died

AnthonyMakesItHappen: no reason. one day your walking around looking for buffalo or something and then the next your just dead

Jesus. D-Douglas thought he should try to steer away from all the death to something lighter but couldn't think of anything. He looked over at a shelf of movies thinking maybe she liked movies. But everybody likes movies.

AnthonyMakesItHappen: maybe not even dead maybe you were just really really asleep

AnthonyMakesItHappen: maybe your family was happy that you were sleeping so they didnt wake you

AnthonyMakesItHappen: anyway it just sounds a whole lot nicer than cancer

AnthonyMakesItHappen: heart attacks too

Douglas5000: Heart attacks too.

They chatted till two in the morning. Not all of it about death. D-Douglas went to bed feeling a little anxious. Excited maybe. He kept going over different ways to save her somehow, thinking up dangerous situations for her to find herself in and him just happening to be in the area. He could stop a robbery, for instance. But when was the last time there was a robbery in Kirkland? When was the last time he had punched a bad guy in the face and taken his gun? Probably not for a while. He went to sleep with thoughts of heroism and a teary-eyed and grateful Rebecca shivering in his arms.

D-Douglas had agreed to go out with Kyle mainly to shut him up. Part of him thought it might impress Rebecca somehow. Standing outside the bar, he watched men and women in nice shoes talking loudly over the music pouring from the open door and laughing at each other's jokes. He realized that he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a real Saturday night. Kyle was twenty minutes late and D-Douglas hadn't wanted to come in the first place but he was a little sick of saying no all the time. Finally, he saw Kyle's spiky hair coming toward him and D-Douglas waved like a dork for some reason.

Kyle bought the first round of drinks and they posted up at the end of the bar. At least the music was really loud. There were some good-looking women and some women who were just alright. Most of the men seemed to have decided on black button-up shirts and large watches for the evening.

"Dude, take this shot with me," Kyle said. "I got us the real shit, so don't spill it. It's like twenty bucks a shot. Fucking Patron, man."

Kyle was wearing a necklace. Fake dogtags or something? Jesus. D-Douglas took the shot down after Kyle's count of three. Kyle handed him a Heineken and winked in a way that said, *I'm a total idiot but you don't have any other friends.*

"To the ladies, motherfucker. Gettin' you some ass."

D-Douglas clinked Kyle's bottle with his own and took a drink. 'To being an ass,' he should've said.

By 12:30, D-Douglas realized he was a little drunk when he walked over to find the bathroom. Kyle hadn't managed to trick any women into having a conversation with him all night, but not for lack of trying. D-Douglas thought about just leaving him there but wasn't sure Kyle was drunk enough not to notice. He took a long piss and tried to read some of the graffiti scratched into the paint. Mostly it was just crude sketches of dicks but there was one Sharpie portrait of Batman that was actually pretty good.

"Hey, man! Hey! Get over here!" Kyle was sitting at a table by the door next to three women of indeterminate age. Maybe early thirties. Maybe end-of-the-night twenties. Kyle had his arm around one, a blonde-ish girl with what must've been a dozen bracelets on each wrist. The other two girls were deep in concentration, heads bent solemnly over the glow of their cellphones. Kyle was nodding and grinning like an idiot. Sometimes it was just a matter of shots on goal.

"Doug, man—Douglas, this is um, Tessa? And this is—"

"Sarah and Katie," said Tessa, with a note of slight exasperation.

Sarah or Katie looked up. The other one did not. They were all a little on the heavy side but still pretty alright looking. Tessa had a weird mole on her chin.

D-Douglas smiled primly and sat down beside Sarah or Katie.

"Hey," said Sarah or Katie, looking up for a moment from her phone.

D-Douglas wished he had gone home.

"I work with this fucking guy," shouted Kyle. "We're both at Amazon."

"Are you a buyer too?" asked Tessa, leaning across Kyle. Kyle shook his head emphatically up and down at D-Douglas, mouthing what he could only assume to be the words, *Squeak-squeak*.

D-Douglas smiled but felt his throat tightening before he even tried to answer. He pictured the words, pictured his mouth saying them straight. The block already felt pretty well dug in. "I-i-ii—" He focused on the block. "C—C-c-cc—" Sarah and Katie looked up from their phones and stared at D-Douglas as he felt his jaw contracting, his face drawn and distorted like a melting candle. "C-C-cussss—" The girls looked at each other. D-Douglas looked at Kyle, hoping for some kind of help, but it seemed as if the agonizing silence had paralyzed them both.

After forever, Kyle managed to blurt out something about D-Douglas being super drunk and Tessa made a strange face before taking a sip of her beer. Sarah and Katie returned their attention to their phones.



D-Douglas sat silently for a few more minutes next to Sarah or Katie and then walked out of the bar without looking back at Kyle. Tessa shouted goodbye as D-Douglas stepped out the door. 'Squeak-squeak,' he should've said.

Driving home was probably a bad idea but the thought of trying to give his address to a cab driver made it seem worth risking the lives of the other drivers on the road. As he made his way through the Seattle streets, he thought about Rebecca. About rescuing her somehow. He thought about those stupid girls at the bar. And maybe they weren't stupid. But Kyle was his stupid friend. He thought about the last thousand Saturday nights and about how, even though it was stupid, he'd still had a good time. Watching Kyle get shot down by all those women was a good time.

Once inside his apartment, D-Douglas stared blankly into his refrigerator for a few minutes before flopping down onto the couch empty-handed. He opened up his laptop and logged in. There, blinking with a little flag, was a message waiting for him from Rebecca.