

The Keeper of Dreams

By Matthew Keefer

Measureless Oceans Press



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Passport

Dreams

Words are flint to the soul, and the flesh its timber.

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Why Evil Roams

Two brothers, Good and Evil, came before the Judge on their last year training together. They had grown up hunting animals, knowing wild mountain streams, and had built their homes in the forest. The Judge spoke to the brothers.

“You must decide how to divide these lands,” she said. “You both have the courage to govern these.”

“But,” said Good, “my brother shall rip the trees from their roots! He will leave his lands rotten and fallow.”

“He,” Evil pointed, “has always been jealous of my ambition! Ever since our birth, he has been aching to rid himself of me.”

“Then,” the Judge said, “I shall offer these lands to the one victorious in battle. The slain cannot rule.” She placed two swords before the brothers.

“Dear brother,” said the weaker to Good, “surely we do

not need these swords. We should rule jointly, and no one shall be hurt.”

The older brother, knowing this to be a lie, hefted the sword before him. In it he saw the sky, the same color as the fishing stream, the birds overhead, and his own reflection, similar to his brother’s. He saw the two of them learning to clean fish, his brother’s joy in scaling both catches, in building fires and stalking deer together. Evil trembled before him.

“We cannot divide the migration trails, nor a single fox’s den. One must rule them all.”

“Then it is settled,” the judge received his sword from him, “and each brother’s reign shall be preceded and followed by the other.” She tossed the other sword deep into the ocean. “And should the seas boil...”

Evil could not contain his grin, and Good offered his hand first.

The Keeper of Dreams

“Here you go, honey,” my mom graciously licked her coffee breath onto a napkin and rubbed it on my cheek. I must’ve grumped at her all bratty, something like:

“Please, on god’s green earth, don’t ever do that again.”

Yeah, that sounds like me.

“Force of habit.” She shrugged. “I’ll be off in a bit, are you ready yet?”

“Yep.” I stuffed down some more mushed Choco-Crisps.

“Don’t forget to brush, pick up your poster, put on deodorant, and change those pants one of these days.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, and somehow she picked up I wasn’t planning on doing any of those things. She’s got a way with translating grumbles.

Mom scooted off and I slurped the last of the slushy mud water. Dad stopped bothering with breakfast way before the divorce, probably when he started seeing Lena, and mom keeps that one thing still going. He left her the house, too, which is to say not much: it looks like a shithheap since he stopped fixing the place up, and she's still paying for it all the same. Skipping out kinda runs in the family a bit, and that morning I was ready to skip out of school again and chill. I laid my head down and planned out all the nothing I would be doing later that day, though I guess my mom looked at me and wrongly guessed I was trying to sleep again. She rapped her knuckles right next to my ear, you know, that way angry moms do.

“Okay, well I don’t care, because I’m going to be late. Get your ass moving!”

Her voice practically threw me in the car by itself, and I made like it didn’t, doing that “don’t mess with me either” kind of gut-grumble. I had my life all planned out: in another month, I would be out of school, looking for some kind of job that a high school near-drop-out could perform, and I’d still (and probably always) get an earful from my mom about how I skipped out on my life, how I would have to struggle just to get my feet under me. Things, she

kept telling me, were going to get tough. But sometimes fate fucks things up for you.

I'm Travis Helms, a senior at Holyoke High. In less than twenty minutes, I'm going to have my conscious life crushed from me by a two-ton Mazda sedan.

"Did you bring your poster?"

"Yessummm..." I lied. I didn't even manage to finish it last night. I counted one point for me.

"Okaaaay." But she probably saw right though. She's a mom every now and then, so that love stuff probably gets in the way of rubbing it in. "Any plans this weekend?"

I rested my elbow on the car door and stared out. I guess this is me being brilliant, hoping that she would see how engrossed I am with staring out the window. She's really trying to get me to fess up to my other homework. I catch on pretty quick.

"You know Elisa," she switched gears onto the ever-successful cousin, "just started her second year of violin at the Virginia State. You know, it'd be nice to hear your old trumpet again."

I grumbled a non-response to her. I hadn't picked up the trumpet since I put it down in seventh grade.

"Some guys and I were going to check this band out."

"When's that?"

"Dunno."

"Well, it'd be nice to know."

"It's not like I'm going to play with them."

"No, but if you're going to see them, you probably should know when they're..."

"Jeesh," I shifted my head. "I was just saying."

"Hold on," she said. "Sounds like a siren."

And sure enough it was. She stopped over by the side and a cruiser slashed by us. It's kind of cool how it sounds when it goes by.

"I hope everything's okay."

"Nothing ever happens around here."

"Well," she stiffened, "my aunt always said to say a quick prayer when ambulances and cops go by. It's serious stuff, maybe someone could be hurt..."

"Uhhuh."

"...and you never really know what's going on. I just hope everything's okay. Glad I don't have to deal with it."

"Maybe someone's mangled."

She bit sharply. Yeah I'm a brat sometimes. "Watch your mouth," she said.

Most of the rest of the ride was spent in silence. She pulled by the Coffee Central and ordered a dozen donuts for the office (eleven, actually, I opted for the usual chocolate donut), taking a sip of her coffee mug to relax a bit. We were pulling into the intersection and I think the last thing she said to me was:

"I just wish I could see you all set in life, that's all I really-"

I was turned toward her so I didn't see it coming. The car came around a hedge and battered into the right side. Our car folded easily: it bent the door inwards and wrinkled the metal like cheap tin; the airbag rushed out like a vast cloud, but when it sank again, my face felt bloated and my arms were numb and kinked weird. My ears felt warm and I could see my mother struggling against the door, trying to get it open. It was kind of funny because she flustered and then unlocked it. She turned to pull me out through her side but blood was getting in my eyes and I think I heard that siren and that's about all I remember.

When I woke, I wasn't in a hospital bed, or in my own bed, or even anywhere I knew. I was just sitting by the side

of the road, some grassy road I didn't recognize, on some gritty rock I'd never seen, just looking about. I watched a squirrel climb up some tree (it was a willow; I hadn't seen a willow in Holyoke since ever), and then I saw the grass kind of swaying in the wind. It's funny, I mean, I'd always stared out the window on my way to school, avoiding my mom every day for the last four years, and I probably couldn't even remember how the damned frosted donut looked. But this time, I think I could tell you about every little blade of grass, the way each one bent its own way in the wind, some of them stiff and jutted against a few gray pieces of rock tossed in someone's yard. Even the colors of the asphalt, the small pebbles, the speckles of crystals in the pebbles. I guess, for the first time, I just sat there and saw.

A truck passed by, some sort of big darkish one, and he was there. Just a man, standing tall and warmly dressed.

"Hello Travis," he said. "We have work to do."

We stopped by some other donut place, Crazy fer Donuts, some chain that I'd never heard of. The back door was open and we just went in; I guess I was just out of it,

because I looked around for an apron with my nametag for some reason, thinking that somehow I worked there.

“Girl Suzie,” he said. “Sweet kid.”

“Is she cute?”

“Hard worker, a tough one. Can’t afford much better. Be nice to her.”

“Is she cute?”

The man stared at me, calm as the sky. “Get to work.”

I looked around in the back, and there she was, kind of cuddling a shelf. Red curls pouring out from under her hat, pale face and freckles, coffee stains and frosting pasted on her apron and shirt. She was cute, all right, I’m guessing in her twenties, but she was also asleep.

“Umm, I think I’ll try later,” I said.

“Try now.”

“She could probably use the sleep. Maybe another time.”

He didn’t say anything, but he’s got that silence that talks.

“Okay...?” I started remembering a few things from the accident.

The stare still.

“Actually, I’m starting to feel a bit freaked out...” I

looked at the door, which was now closed. “Look, you seem like a cool guy, but I think I’m going to scram on this one.” Still nothing from him. “Well, you have fun now, hopefully you won’t get caught, or maybe you will, but peace be with you, man.” I waved to him and backed away, kind of smiling to him. But this time the damn door was closed and locked.

Actually, it wasn’t even locked. It was just solid.

“Fucking thing, all this damn security for a stupid little donut...”

“You can’t move it. The girl, now.”

I tried again and he was right; the door was as solid as a rock. He wasn’t looking at me anymore, but I kinda felt looked at. I sidled next to the redhead, who scratched at her nose.

“Hey you,” I kept my eyes on the man; he didn’t budge once. “Suzie, right? You probably shouldn’t panic, but you’d better wake up.”

“Don’ wanna...” she mumbled, and shifted about again.

“There’s this guy, and he’s kind of freaky, and I’m not too sure what he wants. So just be calm and...”

“Marty?” Her head shuffled about. “Ah, heck with Marty,” she whispered loudly.

“Please, I think you should really just wake up right now.” I tried best to hide my panic.

“Mmmm...” She slunked down more comfortably.

The man seemed to sigh. I think it was a sigh.

Whatever it was, it made me a bit more scared.

“Hey Suzie?”

“Hmmm...”

“I know it’s been a rough night and all, but I hope you wake up and I promise that if you do, you can have all the donuts you want.”

She chuckled to herself. “Yur silly... okay...” The woman relaxed and kind of deepened in her rest. Then she coughed and sputtered and scrambled up.

“Suzie, get up here and assist these customers!” The manager was not too pleased.

“Oh god!” she said. “Right here, Marty!”

“Then hurry up already,” the boss said. “I don’t run a motel!”

Suzie stood up and straightened herself. “What a weird dream,” she muttered and walked toward the front of the store, passing by my warmly-dressed guide as if he were the most natural thing in the world. “Sorry about that, it won’t ever...”

The man walked up to me. “She works almost every day. Stomach pains, and a bit malnourished; didn’t look like time.” He pointed toward the back door, which was now open again. “Let’s go.”

We walked far from the donut shop. It was this time I started to ask the guy some questions.

“I’ve noticed,” I said, “that I’m not making any sounds.”

“I hear you.”

“No, but look at this.” I kicked the ground and nothing came of it; he kept going and I had to chase after him to keep up. “I think I’m dead.”

“No.”

“Well yesterday or something I was hit by a car. There was blood and everything; that would fuckwell do it. Where’s God?”

He stopped and turned around. He looked at me. “You’re not dead.” He turned back to his pace. “We have work here.”

“Here where? Another donut place? And what

about my arm, it looked pretty fuckin' gnawed-on last I remember."

We walked to an elderly care center. It was a bit nicer than the one my grandmother was in back home, before she died. "So I guess this is the place," I said sarcastically, somehow.

The man just knew where to be, because he didn't have to dodge through all the wheelchairs and nurses and caretakers. I got bumped around a few times; it kind of felt like a solid breeze. It would be kinda fun, if things weren't so weird.

We got to this exercise room, most of the seniors were seated, and about half of them were able to reach up when the nurse reached up, stretch left when she stretched left. The man pointed to some guys sleeping in the exercise room, and I brushed up to them and just kind of talked. Their lips chopped about and I didn't much hear anything but a few whispers, but I think I was getting it.

"So," I said as we left the room, "I guess sleeping people can hear me."

"Yes."

"And I'm not a ghost or anything."

"No."

“Then what’s going on, what am I supposed to do?”

We slipped into a separate room, and there was another old person but hooked up to a machine this time. He (or maybe she, I honestly couldn’t tell) was wrinkled and prone and smelled weird and stale or something. Just lying there, too, not even breathing for all I could tell.

“Hello, I’m Travis.” The person didn’t make a move.

I tried again. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, I hope you’re enjoying your stay at the Ritz. It’s pretty nice out from what I can tell, probably a bit past one, sunny and nice, but how’ve things been?”

Again, just nothing from the old coot.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, hope you have a good day.” I turned around to go, but the man was blocking my way.

“We’re not done.”

“I can’t talk to him, he’s not saying anything.”

“Listen to her again.”

“Her, fine, but nothing’s going to happen.” I turned to the old woman. “Hey you, me again, just wondering how things are since I last spoke to you. Which I’m guessing was about two minutes ago.” I turned to the warmly dressed man and shrugged, but he stayed there. “So, how’s

the weather over there? You enjoying your sleep?” Her lip seemed to tremble a little. “Did you say something, or was that just a bit of spit?” I laughed and joked it up. “Well, I’ll promise to come closer just as long as you don’t bite.” I walked a little bit closer to her, her wrinkled right hand still had a wedding ring on, the old flesh of her knuckles wrapping around it, and it just kind of felt different near her. I felt a bit of a breeze.

The window was closed, and besides, it was the kind of breeze that chilled you to your bones. Like when you stand up after sitting on your leg, and you feel numb, you poke yourself to make sure you’re still there. When I got closer to her, I just got more and more of that feeling, that I wasn’t there, that I was going numb. Now her lip really trembled.

“Shshshshshshh...” came from her. I rubbed my arms hard, I guess just a natural reflex from the cold. Not like I could actually feel cold.

“Hey, you, are you okay? I think it’s chilly in here.” I thought I heard something from her, but couldn’t make it out. I crept closer to the old woman.

“It’s... it’s...”

I had to creep up all the way to her mouth, kind of a

soft, sweet smell emanating from her pale, shriveled lips. I could hear her, but she wasn't talking; the only breath from her was the soft, fading odor of stale air passing through her grayed teeth.

"I'm really not all that comfortable with..."

A whispery voice came from her. "Save your breath," she said, "and run. He's here, He's come here again, and this time it's really going to happen."

I wanted to ask, but I felt the warmly dressed man close in behind me. "I'm not sure what to do. Is this guy your husband?"

"He is nobody's husband," there was a whimper, "and yet everyone's. Please save me from Him..."

He was moving closer. "Ask about her husband."

I didn't want to stay, but I was afraid of what would happen if I left. "Listen grandma, it's going to be okay..."

"Don't 'grandma' me, you little spunk. If Larry were here, he would know what to do, but He took him, too..."

He put his hand on my shoulder; I felt nothing from him. "How was your husband," he said to me.

"How was your husband?" I repeated, trembling.

"Larry? He's been gone, almost ten years now. I remember him like he was yesterday; strong and able, a

good man, hardly ever a drinker...”

“What did he do?” I asked.

“He’s a bridge-builder, an engineer; even built a shed for us, I think back in 1973, if I recall correctly. Then in ‘84, he slipped off a ladder, just fixing the wind-vane. The cruel bastard took him; a splinter from his knee, they said, but I knew it was him. It wasn’t his time yet. That was almost nine and a half years ago, and still every day I miss him...”

I wanted to correct her, to tell her that it wasn’t 1994, that I was practically born in 1994, but something in me seized and I couldn’t.

The man slowly crept past her shoulder. “What was the shed like,” he said.

“What was the shed like?” I said to her.

“It was gorgeous,” I heard a childish glee in her other-voice. “After Marion left, we had all her old things: posters, college books, even her old cradle. I told Larry, ‘No, we are not throwing a darn thing away!’ And you know what he did? He just said, ‘I guess I’m going to have to build a shed for all this!’ That’s the kind of man he was. But, you know, I think he wanted to hold onto that old stuff, too. I think he still liked thinking of Marion as his little girl.”

“What does Marion do?” I think I was ready to cry, and the man was by her cheek.

“Oh, she’s some sort of lawyer. She went away to New York to this law firm, I don’t much like cities, but then again, it didn’t bother me much what she liked. She was always our darling, bright as a button, helping out around the house. When Larry first passed her to me, just a baby, he said to me, ‘Caroline, this is our daughter,’ and that day, with tears in his eyes, I just remembered thinking...”

The man touched his lips to hers, something of a kiss almost, and under her two or three blankets, I could see the old woman relaxing just slightly, those blankets sinking down just a bit, and she stopped speaking. He brusquely left the room. I was cold. I stayed there, not really hearing the dead tone from the life-support machine, just standing in the corner: first a doctor feeling her wrist and jotting something, then the plump nurse humming her way in, pulling those same blankets over her, and carting the old woman out of the room.

The warmly dressed man waited for me outside. I was

shivering.

“We have work to do,” he said again.

I followed him nauseously out of the parking lot. “A young boy,” he said. “We have little time.”

I shuffled behind him. He kept his smooth, glacial pace.

“Wait,” I said.

He kept going.

“I’m not doing this.”

He turned around. “You will.”

“I can’t,” I said. I was shivering even harder; no, it was more like spasming. “I can’t fucking do it!”

“You will,” he said again, and left.

Maybe I cried. I just remember walking around after that.

I didn’t do much of anything, just pretty much hung around outside. I didn’t want to hear anymore, no more hopes and thoughts, no more dreams. But after a week or so, that passed, and I realized I was getting old and grumpy and caveman-ish. So I started hanging out with kids my

own age

We high schoolers are kind of a strange bunch, really, and I guess I never noticed how loud and obnoxious we really are (though am I still a teenager?); we move in packs, talk in groups, think as a bunch. And I know it sounds weird, but I started to follow some of them home. I'd wait for them to finish their work, they'd eat and brush and all that, and I'd just wait until they fell asleep. I'd curl my ear near them and try to remember what it was like to dream like a teenager. There was some sex, some drinking, cheating too, but generally it wasn't as bad as you'd think. Sometimes I'd hear the river's loud roar from a rafting trip, or cutting through the wind on a fleet-footed horse, or the tinkling of piano notes like snow might sound. I usually wouldn't have to watch over them or anything.

Their parents' dreams weren't much different, just a bit louder and more pronounced. Maybe some woman thinks her husband's cheating on her, and he's just remembering the old days of fishing; or the guy's thinking about leaving for the umpteenth time, and even I'm afraid that he means it; or sometimes it's just some old memory, some stupid boy who was an asshole way back when, made his best friend look stupid, and these dreams I try to soothe, because

sometimes it makes me feel guilty from when I was alive.

It's different to see a person die. I don't know how to explain it.

But I do know living people are weird. Standing a couple feet from someone, you feel a warmth that I'd never really gotten from my friends at school. Charlie, who's half-psycho most of the time. Dan, who just mumbles to himself and draws all day. There's this miserable bald guy I started following, just generally cranky and mean to his kid and wife. He'd have a bit of that warmth about him just as he got home, but then he'd shut it off. I didn't know people could do that.

"I tell you, I think he's cheating with someone at work," I heard his wife over the phone.

Which is what I assumed, too. But it didn't matter because it was warm mostly, and when you're cold, you naturally grab a coat. I followed him around, I guess like a moth and a flame, and maybe that's kind of right; then I saw her again, her hair seeming to burn a bit more.

"I guess the wig's still in the mail," Suzie greeted him.

It was the girl from the donut place, and apparently this bald guy was her boss. He attempted some sort of stumbling comeback, which Suzie pushed aside. Even as

she made fun of him, I felt heat rolling from her.

“Well, my cousin does hunt.” She shrugged. “He could probably send you a couple coon-skins.” Suzie took off her cap and rubbed her red, hat-flattened curls. “I’m pretty sure it’d be an improvement.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it, Suze.” He waved his hand and went on managing.

I think the thing that surprised me most about Suzie was how she lived. A sweet person like that you’d figure lived in some nice place, a place with less than three staircases leading up to it, a place that didn’t have cups and dishes stacked up even under the table. It was pretty filthy, worse than my old room, and fairly obvious why she kept clothing and mail and random wrappers thrown around everywhere: two jobs, school, and no mother-slash-housekeeper. Simply put, she was exhausted. As soon as Suzie placed her shoes at the door, she’d grab a couple aspirin, set something on the stove (every now and then the harsh odor of burnt food wafted about), and attempt to learn about finance and markets, something she’d dreamt she’d

be able to control not too many years from now, and after eating what remained of her meal, she'd write in a journal full of sketches and poems. The book was pretty often her pillow.

I watched this for six tireless days.

We had good conversations. I got back from the zoo one time and talked to her about the animals.

"The lions were lazy. I could barely see them."

"Oh, that stinks."

"Yeah, kind of a gyp. Still, you should go."

She moved around on her bed. She left a little room for me and I hopped on. Not like... you know.

"So tell me about you. Where are you from?"

"Jersey. I hate it."

"Oh, this is New Jersey. Didn't you know?"

I shrugged. "Not really. I'd just been hanging out mostly."

"Are you a ghost?"

"I think so."

"Are you supposed to haunt people?"

She snored loudly. It's funny, people do that little jerk before they really get into sleep. "I don't think so. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

“Maybe you’re just a working stiff. Where did you work?”

“Ummm...”

“Unemployed?”

“Well, no,” I shifted around stiffly, “about to graduate.”

“What college?”

“Oh, um... Holyoke College. It’s not that-”

“Haven’t heard of it.”

“I’m going to be a car mechanic, I think. It pays pretty good.”

“Good. Good for you, ghost.” She laughed. “Will you fix undead cars?”

I actually went to a mechanic the next day. It was interesting, I guess, just really... technical, really involved, just not my thing.

I actually went around to a few things. The rest of that day I shadowed an office recep, rode with a bus driver, watched a pizza chef, and even caught a movie. There’s so much in the world, you know! I think parents would get off

a lot better telling their kids all about how much shit there is to do in the world, instead of the end-of-days speech. That movie, it was just like four people in there reviewing it, with notepads and all. I never knew that's what they do; see what I mean? The movie was boring, something about the war of 1812, but there's always something new in the world. Something that I didn't know.

I followed a cop, too. They're not all that bad, actually. Seems like a good life: telling jokes, getting pizza on Fridays, doing a bit of paperwork. I followed one of them to some miserable place, where the boyfriend was a bastard and beat his girl; there was also some accident I went to, though thankfully no one was hurt. I said a prayer this time.

"Okay," said my cop, "let's move it out."

The car was total junk, an SUV that looked so cheap and flimsy, and they were towing it away. Instead of following the cop back, I had this crazy idea: that I would ride it. It was dripping chemicals everywhere.

After the garage, the tow truck tipped it into a car graveyard. I'd never seen one before! Chemicals on the dirt, cars stacked on top of each other; it was kinda scary, actually. There were some kids there I'd seen at the mall:

"That car smells like someone crapped in it," Dan said.

“Go take a shit in it, and we’ll be sure,” Stan said.

“You take a shit in it.”

“You hear that,” Stan turned to the girl, “Dan wants you to shit in a car.”

She kept her arms crossed. “Fuck off, idiot.”

They kept huffing about, and I went to explore. So much I never knew! There was this big pile of tires, all with water in them, smelling all rubbery; big stacks of cars, some of them paintballed on (which looks like an awesome place for it); this shed with an old ugly guy in it, which the trio made no attempt to hide from; and yeah, greens and reds next to the cars and stuff, right off the main paths. I’d never been to one, even when my dad got the “new” radio for the car, which was a piece of shit by the way. It was kind of a neat experience, anyway. Until I saw it.

It was our gold-ish Nissan, my side crumpled in, sitting next to a wheel-less SUV. I looked in. There was dried blood everywhere.

“What the fuck?”

I waited for night and tried to follow the junkyard guy back – you have to, you know? For a fat, sweat-smelling, grizzly-bearding gent, he sure gets out in a huff; I was too slow and got caught on the damned fence. Eventually I

climbed a stack of cars and jumped out, but it was too late.

I was tired for once. And without the warmly-dressed man to explain all this weirdness, I admit I was freaking a little bit. On top of that, I came back pretty late, and got locked out from getting into Suzie's place, which seemed the only normal place around. So I hung around outside her apartment building.

I don't know why I stuck so close to her. I mean, yeah, she was definitely kinda a little bit cute, and maybe because I didn't have anything to worry about, all that extra worry focused on Suzie. And then I got to thinking who'd worry about the adults, you know, all the people like my mom, who would worry about them? Watching them hold their kids' hands at the checkout after work. That's what I was turning around in my head pacing around in front of Suzie's place.

I waited out there and some scrungy-looking drug dealer came out, handling and mishandling all kinds of, um, rather unsavory characters. It was getting pretty bad so I went around to the houses around Suzie's place. There

was a family in this dingy little house with a mom, dad, and twin girls, and it was nice just like looking in. The kids were asleep, they had their toys scattered around the room, and the mom and dad just... I don't know. They made me sad; he was watching TV, she was reading some magazine in the kitchen. It's kind of what my parents started doing, and I don't know how to explain it, how to put in words all the stuff I was just figuring out, and then seeing this. Seeing people... I guess seeing them bored. It's sad, is all, like I just said.

This part of town is different. It's more rundown. I should feel pretty lucky, not like I had tons of rats running around me when I was alive, but watching these parents sit around and do nothing, it just made me realize something. Maybe people don't let themselves be lucky. Maybe lucky's not this outside force. Maybe I spent all my time complaining about my bad luck, bad teachers and bad this and the other, that I never had a chance to get the kind I wanted.

This is how the next day at the donut shop went:

“You know Mark,” Suzie said, “why don’t you invest in some bonds? They’re pretty safe.”

Mark is the cleaner who’s out by five. He was still mopping at some stain with a broom. “Safe. Really,” he said. “Considering how everything’s going...”

“Bonds are better than stocks,” she said, plowing a few heavy boxes of vacuums onto a shelf, “and a little investment now could help you retire.”

He laughed. “I pay bills. I’m not going to retire, Suzie, just not in the cards. You’ve got a good head for it, though.”

“Gosh, Mark,” she said, “I slave away, just like like you. You probably make more than me.”

“Then you should get yourself a good boyfriend and retire on him. But I guess you’d have to get out once in a while...”

“I do.”

“Do what?”

“Have a boyfriend. We’ve been going out a couple weeks.”

“Huh.” He grinned “What’s he like?”

“Well, he’s sweet, sounds kind of young, and fairly polite. He makes my nights wild.”

Mark balanced on the broom. “What is he, some kind

of dream? That's the only guy who would ever date a nut like you." She nodded. "So wait, you mean you dreamed up a...?"

"Well," she counted off on her fingers, "no fights, no messes, he doesn't hog the blankets, and by four he's gone. It's perfect."

She really knows how to make a tired ghost blush.

I left for the junkyard before nine. It made me feel sad to know that after this shift, Suzie would be going to her second job, stocking shelves at a grocery store; someone so nice like that, someone who throws in extra sweetness with your sugar and your coffee and all that. Sometimes you just want nice people to win, you know?

But I had to go back. I wanted to make sure I knew the owner's every move; I wasn't going to let him out of my sight. Which, in retrospect, was likely a bad idea: he drank. And drank. And drank. The guy vomited at least twice in the day. No idea what the hell was going on with him, other than he was a train wreck. A customer came in:

"Hey, do you have headlights for a Honda CRV,

2005?”

He snorted. “Check the yard.”

“You do have CRVs, right?”

“Check the yard.”

“Whereabouts should I look?”

“The yard.”

The guy sloshed through all kinds of anti-freeze and shit and still couldn’t find his way to the foreign cars section. You see? Just an asshole.

I followed the prick home. It wasn’t much nicer than the tin shack he worked in. He lived right next to the yard (idiot me).

“Pssst,” I told the sleeping bastard, “about that gold Nissan...”

“Check the yard.”

“There were two passengers, are they okay?”

“Check the yard.”

“Are you even paying attention?”

“Well, did you check the yard?”

I tried and I tried, but my mind was a blank and I couldn’t come up with a good way to torture the bastard. At least I taught him to say something new. “How do I get to Holyoke?”

He thought for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“You’re a real help, buddy.”

“I just run the yard, kid,” he said.

Thanks guy. Thanks.

I missed Suzie on the way back. The sky was dark, and the sun was just threatening to come up. I was pretty frustrated.

I spent that day sulking, mostly. What a waste, now that I think about it! How many hours can a person spend being crabby and depressed and shit like that! I must’ve spent at least four years that way. Life is too precious, too changing and big for small thoughts like those. Eventually I went to the mall to catch the new Spiderman - Suzie wanted to see it and I was going to preview it for her - and hung around the food court. I hopped on top of a couple little kids at the Leaping Lily there – one of those big rubber band things – and had a pretty good time, considering I was no where nearer getting home. I had no plan, and sometimes having a not-plan is more useful at that point. Sometimes it’s important to just be stupid, only for a while.

Then it came to me: I'd just ask Suzie, and she'd be happy to help me. More than anyone else, anyway. There was only one flaw in the plan: she wouldn't live through the day.

The drug-dealer was out at night again. "I don't sell a half," he told some toothless guy. "It's always been a whole ounce or more. Now move on." He wore an old knit hat and a new cheap coat.

"C'mon," the toothless guy said, "you sold me half last week. C'mon, Dr. H., it's what I got."

"Go bother someone who don't appreciate their time. Get going."

"Why you gotta be that," the toothless guy asked.

The dealer dusted his hand away from him and told him to move along. They kept going at it until Suzie came by, carrying what must've been a few bags of groceries, a few different colors. The "doctor" was gracious enough to keep quiet while she went by, except the toothless guy didn't really care.

I followed Suzie up the stairs. She was going pretty

slowly, and I wished I could help her a bit. Eventually she made it to her door at the top, and fussed about trying to find her keys in her handbag.

“Damned things,” she said. There was an edge to her voice.

She kept shuffling around her groceries and finally got a free hand. She cursed more quietly digging through her bag and finally got them. “Bastard,” she said.

The key scraped against the doorknob. Suzie sighed, it was the wrong one, and dropped the keys trying to flip to the next one. And when she bent down, something just gave.

It’s just weird watching something like that. I’d only known her a few weeks, but something about that put this miserable feeling into my stomach; it was worse than the old woman. I watched this poor girl stumble down a few steps and hear the cans tumble after her. It was like watching a doll tumbling down, just limp-ish, and eventually Suzie slowed down a flight down from her apartment. It was too much noise for anyone not to notice, but no one came out right away. I was the only one around.

“Hey Suzie, Suzie!” It’s strange how things can change so quickly. It’s really like the world goes upside-down, that

really is the best way to explain it. “Suzie, tell me you’re alright!”

“I’m okay,” her other-voice said, “where am I?”

“Suzie,” I told her, “you took a bit of a tumble. Please, just get up.”

And he was there. Watching.

“Suzie, you really have to get up now,” I said. “Please, I don’t want to see you-”

She gurgled. I felt that weird, numb breeze. Her other-voice said, “This is weird. I don’t really know what’s going on here.”

“Suzie, just foc-”

“Who’s that? You’re kind of a nice guy. What kind of donut do you want?”

“Suzie, focus!” I didn’t know what else to do. I yelled even louder. “Just wake up already!”

“Don’t be so silly, it’s just a donut! No need to be pushy. Now do you want a jelly or a cream?”

The woman on the second floor opened the door a crack. She closed it quickly, and after a moment came out with her phone. “‘Ello, ‘ello,” she said on it.

Death himself wouldn’t have held him back. He came up. “Tell her she’s alright.”

“I’m not going to lie to her,” I said. She looked bad, real bad. The eye that was open was rolled back. “She’s got to get through this. Lying’s not going to help.”

And he just stood there. The other woman kept half-shrieking on the phone. Suzie kept babbling to me.

“It’s nothing, no, you don’t have to give all your change to little ole...”

“Suzie. Listen to me. You fell down a staircase. Please listen.”

“It’s not the first time a staircase fell. Now let’s get you your drinks,” she said.

I wasn’t getting through to her, and the warmly-dressed bastard knelt down next to her. “Suzie, please! Get up!”

“Nope,” she said, brightly. “Gotta catch me first!”

I was ready to cry. Her eyes started fluttering, and the man drew closer. I felt a deeper cold rush around me, a kind I’d never known. It was more than just Death getting its way; I think it was how I’d feel if I lost someone I loved. And maybe I loved her a bit. Maybe my mom would feel that way about me, the world spinning out of control, all that nausea watching her son bleed to death crumpled in a car. I wouldn’t know what to tell her, how to comfort her

should I ever see her again, because there's just nothing to say that would undo it, even if my mom knew I was okay now. He was practically on her.

"Suzie. It's Travis"

"Yes? You want to dance?"

"I need you to know something."

"I know the moves, don't you worry."

"It's going to be okay."

She thought for a moment. "What are you talking about?"

"You're just a little dizzy. You're going to be fine." I lied.

"You're sweet to say that. Do you love me or something?"

And I thought for a moment. Before I wasn't sure, and after I wouldn't be, but at that moment, I told her "yes" and it was the truth. I was ready to throw up.

"Then prove it, you jerk! You just going to stand around all day? Come kiss me already!"

I dodged in front of him and kissed her on the lips. Her lips were cool and moist, but it was the warmest feeling I'd ever felt. I understood her for that one moment, why she went through everything that I thought looked real

shitty, why I shouldn't be afraid anymore. I understood why people make such a fuss about it, because it's one of those important things that you need, like air and water and saying you love someone.

The other woman screamed. Suzie was dead now. The warmly-dressed man waited for me outside.

An ambulance came. The warmly-dressed man said one last thing to me.

“Your pocket.” That's all. And he left.

I thought he'd pay me for killing her. I hated him for making me do it, but you can't let someone go that way. Given the chance, I guess I would make that choice. That's something I never knew about myself.

In my pocket was a piece of paper. There was an address on it, and the letter “H” like a name, “H-.” If I killed my own sort of girlfriend, then he thought I probably wouldn't mind killing a drug dealer.

I sat under a tree the rest of the night. I looked at the stars. It didn't make a difference, I could've just stared at asphalt for all I cared.

And when the dawn came, I knew exactly what to tell him. I had every word in my mind planned out. I went to the address as if it were Doomsday itself; the world sickened me enough, and I was ready to deal with it one way or another. Past a certain point, there's nothing left to care about. You just have to do something big and hope it's something you want.

The place was my grandmother's old house. I remembered it from when I was a kid. But the yellow paint was peeling, and the garage was half-collapsed; it was a wreck. The windows were boarded up. I stood there for a moment, but I was on a mission, so I went straight for the front door, turning the knob, except this time it actually opened for me...

“Hey.”

I looked around. Blurs, beeps, and bandages. A thick-eyebrowed doctor shined a bright light, too.

“Hey, can you speak?”

I mumbled something that even I didn't know.

“Good to see you back with the living, Travis. We'll let

you rest before we call your mother. You were just on the wrong side of a car. Do you remember?”

I moved my head side-to-side.

“Well, we can explain it all when you get your rest. If you need anything,” he placed something cold under my right hand, “just press this button.” He turned around before he left. “Twenty-one days, kid. You’re lucky to get out of it again. Most don’t.”

He left the room. A few more doctors looked in briefly, but didn’t say anything I had to respond to. The chirps of the hospital equipment kept me company until my mother arrived in an arm cast.

An Officer of the Peace

Rays from the sun grazed the muddy sidewalk. The mud sucked around Lizzie's bright red shoes. "But I want it!" Her half-blonde, half curly hair bounced in exasperation.

"No. And that's final."

She turned a pair of doe-eyes to her father. Paul examined the hunger, the utter delight and anticipation of a candy bar, a piece of chocolate, a soda bottle sipped and soon misplaced on a paw-printed counter. "But whyyyyy?" she moaned.

He gripped her hand and dragged her into the convenience store. "Now, like I said before, please do not touch anything. We are guests..."

"We are guests in Mr. Brooks' home," she said.

"It's his work, but yes, it's like that. Are you

ready?” She nodded to her father. “Hello Jamal, how’s the night been?”

“Well, not so bad. Could be better, recession and all. It’s just... hey Paul, your daughter’s crunching my chips.” He pointed to a dirty mop of curls, her fingers wrapped around a small, bulging bag. “It’s no problem, just...”

“Lizzie, please put those chips down, dear.”

She nodded and investigated an aisle of soda-pop.

“How’s business?” Paul patted the counter.

“It’s fine, everything’s fine.” Jamal arranged a bowl of jerky, turning the price label outwards.

“Mind if I...?” Jamal nodded to Paul, and he took a piece from the bowl. He placed sixty-five cents on the counter.

“No no, for a friend, I cannot take this money.”

“That’s fine, don’t worry about it.” He turned to the back of the store, “Hey Lizzie, where’re you at?” A muffled reply emerged from the dog food aisle. “Honey, stay where I can see you.”

“Okay,” a girl emerged covered in curls and kitty litter.

“Come here, let me brush some of that off.”

She shook her head. "Okay, but just stay where I can see you."

Jamal coughed. "There've been some crazy guys around. There were these three," he whispered, "three blacks around the other night. Coats, braided hair, I can line them up, line-up, you know."

"Uh huh."

"Sketch artist. I know them, I'll testify only if I get immunity."

"Immunity."

"Yes, immunity. And..."

A man entered the store and examined a bag of peanuts.

A crash of pickles erupted from a nearby aisle. Lizzie watched the green brine spread across the tiles.

"Come here sweetie, let me clean that up for you." Paul motioned for her to come close. "No, no, Jamal, I've got it."

"I can get that for you," Jamal grabbed a spray bottle behind the counter.

"Thanks."

Jamal gathered up the scattered glass and errant

pickles. The man watched him gather the glass into one area.

“I remember this one kid,” Paul shook his hand in the air, as if sprinkling something, “he’d had a pretty bad background, grew up in the projects.”

Jamal picked the pickles aside. “Okay.”

“So this kid was in the center of drug county, heroine, PCP, all kinds of stuff. I spoke to him a few times, a good kid, but he didn’t stand a chance. No father, no male role model, friends were drug heads.”

“So he probably joined a gang.” Jamal mopped up the last of the pickle brine.

“Hey, wait a second.” Paul laughed, “At least let me finish. You’ll like it.”

“Fine, okay.”

The man asked about the price of a bag of chips. Paul showed him the sticker on the bag. The man fumbled in his pockets.

“Okay, so anyway, I thought I caught the kid dealing drugs. You know, passing stuff out to other kids. I talked to him about it.”

“See, I knew it.”

“I talked to him about it, but he just blew me off. Whatever, I figure, can’t save them all, and I had no hard evidence. Then he starts passing out to young kids, like middle school age, then, eleven.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Paul whispered, “I was frigging pissed. It’s one thing in the high schools, kids pretty much have made up their minds, whether they’re good or bad kids...”

“That’s fucking shit.” Paul and Jamal turned to the man. He wore a faded baseball cap. The bag of chips trembled in his hands.

“Hey,” Paul said, “my daughter’s around. Watch your tongue.”

The man nodded and placed the chips back. He walked to the refrigerated section, within hearing distance.

Paul cracked his knuckles. “I caught one of these packages, finally. Thirteen year old had it. Opened it up.”

“Holy shi- sorry.”

“Opened the thing right up. A little note – Cecil Warner – that’s the kid’s name.”

“Okay.”

“Well, it was these, ugh, circle things. What do you

– pogs. He punched out cardboard and handmade all these pogs.”

Jamal threw the glass away. “What are pogs?”

“They’re for a game. Some of them were really nice, like dragons and wizards and stuff. The kid was selling pogs. Needed the money, I guess. All the packages were, uh, these crazy little pogs.”

“Oh.”

“So they weren’t drugs.”

“Okay.”

Paul coughed. “Well, let me pay for the pickles at least.”

Jamal shook his head. “No no no...”

“C’mere Lizzie, we’re going!” Lizzie approached Paul. He dusted off some kitty litter. “Three bucks for the pickles; thirteen for the kitty litter?”

“I think that one’s eighteen.”

“Let me get that for you.”

He placed a few bills on the counter. Jamal game him change back.

“Sweetie, let’s get going!” Paul yelled to the back of the store. After a prolonged silence, the girl came forward.

Paul turned to Jamal.

“How about that weirdo who came in?”

Jamal shrugged.

Lizzie tugged at her father’s hand. “The man’s gone, daddy.”

“Probably for the best. Well, say goodbye to Mr. Warner.”

Lizzie waved to Jamal. “Hey daddy,” she looked up, “Mr. Yeats left something.”

“Huh? Mr. Who?”

“Mr. Yeats. He left something in the can over there.”

“He just threw something away sweetie. See you later Jamal,” Paul waved. He turned to Lizzie, “What do you mean Mr. Yates? Is he imaginary?”

“It’s in the garbage can.”

Paul sighed and looked into the garbage can. “Holy shit.” He pulled a pen from his pocket and guided it into the can like a surgeon. He pulled the pen out and a gun dangled on the tip.

“Jamal, call the cops. Ask for Rick if you can.” He turned to Lizzie.

“Hey sweetie, could you tell me what Mr. Yates looked like?”

Bob Dylan Is Dead

The tour bus groaned to a halt; the troubadour kicked back in his seat and looked out the window. Cars passed by in the southern heat; the air conditioner kept blowing against a few loose papers. He opened the fridge and poured another cup of lemonade.

“This damned heat,” he said. His tour manager nodded and returned to his phone.

The troubadour sighed. The guitar from last night still rung in his ears. It was true: he was old. Even worse, he was famous: he couldn’t get a straight answer whenever he asked about his voice. He knew it was hoarser than a wolf’s growl; his bandmates lied, said it was as colorful as it’d ever been. His bandmates, almost half his age, stiffly swaying on stage, unable to get their own bands together. And he, the old man, still touring at, what, seventy eight,

now? And still audiences clap for him, applaud his piano-hitting, his rapsy voice, the new songs and especially the old. Except for a few of the young faces, the ones who seemed transfixed, who were stuck as if in amber, no emotion. But he'd heard the others, generally older fans, scream at the top of their lungs. Their wild swaying. Entranced, pulled in, even if his voice was no longer...

Wolf's growl. Wolf's howl; he wish he were Howlin' Wolf, he wished he hadn't lived so long, that his name had faded The Wolf's. That old generation, the true trailblazers, lost now to his own, more profitable, you can't find someone to tell you a story of Howlin' Wolf. Turned away, pulling the mic through his pants, crawling, the Wolf growling into the audience, wild, untamed. Alive.

He'd had those years. He'd taken fifteen people, tambourines, glockenspiel, harmonica all on stage. They'd performed for a dozen people once; the band was bigger than the crowd. He'd remember running around, from place to place, up talking all hours of the night: music music music. And each time they spoke about music, it was politics, it was the world, it was life, aching to be lived, to be thrust through with Truth and Vengeance and Youth. It

was true, once he'd exchanged his cheap suit for a hobo's rags, and then performed on stage. It said something, he didn't know what then, that stench, that filth, that people could hardly recognize him. He played on the streets, pure joy, people gathering around - "Hey, it's him, isn't it?" "That looks like- ", he knew he was something, he knew there was something special about him. Now when they looked at him, all the old, gray-haired fans, they saw this young version of him, they didn't see him as he is now: old and decrepit, sagging, hoarse. Tired and ragged. Old. Simply just-

The tour manager mentioned something. "I said we can open another date in Georgia. We're already doing Atlanta, you want to do Savannah?"

He nodded. There were few things he liked to do more than tour and write, and he was glad for the extra date. There was an urgency to his performing, that he knew time was nearing an end. Yet, when he was young, twenty-one, he knew death intimately, he knew it was just around the corner. It would pluck him in the middle of the night, he was convinced, and he would show Him how. There was a familiarity between the two. He'd often thought about

death, when he was imprisoned. Black riots, civil rights, The War, he'd only been one in a crowd and was arrested as just another demonstrator. He knew he was special, he knew it then. He was fighting for something, he was working toward something meaningful.

“Where’s it going to be,” he asked.

“We’re thinking the Martin Luther King Arena.”

“Sounds good.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. He remembered Martin Luther King, Jr., even met the man, he talked unceasingly about his father, the old preacher. He performed for him once, perhaps the most important concert of his life. It was special. Last night, with those stand-up props of musicians, hammering against his songs, that would just pass away; all the old fans, the gray-hairs would tell their old gray-hair friends how incredible he was. But that was not true. They would lie about him and not know any better.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was regal, majestic. He was in the presence of someone greater than he could ever be; it was humbling. A deep, rumbling voice. His own, a wolf’s angry growl.

The bus door opened. The bus driver stuck his head in.

“We’re going to get this show on the road again. Looks like a nail. Sorry about that.”

“No problem,” he said. The driver left again.

He even had to apologize about a flat tire. Where was he now? He remembered stepping on a nail, once, barefoot to Washington, in the hopes of changing the world; he just pulled it out. And he had changed the world, they all had. He wondered if that’s where they went wrong; there was nothing left to do now. All the fights had been fought. Maybe that’s what’s missing from these new musicians; none of them had impressed him. They keep sending him their songs; actually, that was not true. There was one boy who’d made him weep; it was painful to hear such poetry on his lips.

His songs no longer had that poetry. Had he switched places with that boy, just birthdates-

“We got it. We should be all set; any hotel you prefer?”

He shook his head. He’d been in Savannah a dozen times before; he knew all the hotels. He’d preferred the prison there, bunked with a black protester, the guards wanted to insult him. They talked about the future, about freedom and lovers and the country they loved. The country

that was in madness. His name was Byron, like the poet, he'd had a wife and a daughter, Samantha and Shelly. Also like the poet, he'd said.

He wondered where Shelly was now. Whether she and her generation were sitting fat now, enjoying the fruits of his labors. He didn't mind that, no, but he wondered where a person would get without that kind of fight. What kind of person you would be without that. Maybe the kind of person he was now, maybe a shell.

He'd thought his job was to promote the new generation, some time ago. There were bands he'd felt excited about, whose albums provoked deep thought and admiration in him. But as soon as he'd shined the light of his fame upon them, they withered up again; time and time again he'd been left feeling embarrassed.

"You remember those kids, the Painful Flight?"

"No." His manager was off the phone now. "Oh, back in eighty-four?"

"Yeah. Just thinking about them."

"Why's that?"

His manager was almost sixty, had been with him for twenty years. Didn't know what was on his mind still. He

hadn't seen the worst of him, hadn't seen the college girls, the girls barely old enough for college, the late nights, the parties, the sadness. He couldn't see his old manager afterward, couldn't lay his eyes on him after he'd decided to reform himself. He ignored his question; the tour manager would take this as just another quirk of a Great Man.

He hadn't thought to promote this new kid, to lavish praise upon his poorly-mastered hard-scrabble tracks. He was supposed to make it on his own, like he had, abandoning the old generation, forging a whole new language and future. He couldn't see how anyone could do it now, though. The new mores were in effect, the new rules would reign for some time, until what he'd fought for grew old and moldy and then they'd need another revolution. But in the meantime, there would be no greatness, no champions or heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr., no one to die before the great land would open before them. Perhaps that's where he should have been, perhaps he missed the dead more than he missed his three ex-wives, than his two children, he missed their company and their music and their jokes, crude and divine. He was an aberration, he should

not have lasted as long as he had. He needed to go now, he needed death, that is why death is, to carry one back to where one belongs.

“It’s a long day,” he said.

“They’ll fix the tire soon,” his manager said.

Tonight he would be in the hotel, four star, he could afford better, but he didn’t want to live too high. He wanted to keep that part of himself intact. No mints on the pillows, please. He would stagger stiffly into the room, there would always be someone with him: the manager, the lead guitarist. Always someone would be near him; he’s frail, he might break, we must watch him. He was a relic, that much he knew, and more than anything, he wanted to see the day of his death. Twain was lucky that way, he knew his fame, but more than that, he wanted to see the world without him. He wanted to pronounce those holy words.

He wanted to breathe them, “Bob Dylan is dead.” He wanted to see the world move on to greater things.

But that was the cruelest thing life would withhold from him. Not a family, not time away from the road, or true, deep friends, but his own death. He wanted to see people at the funeral, a simple affair, walk away and forget

him, pitch a few quaint stories about him, and go on with their lives. But he knew it would be too much, it would be all blown-up and crazy, and that would make him sad. He wished he believed in the afterlife again, just so he could look down and see the world when it had forgotten him.

The bus driver came back into the bus. It started up and roared. “Looks like we’re on our way again,” he said.

“See,” his manager said, “what did I tell you?”

He turned back to his phone, putting in a few more frantic calls. Tonight he would be in the hotel. He wondered what kind of movies would be on. Nothing of note, he knew. If only they’d left one thing, if only there was one dragon left to fight, left to multiply, if only there was that fight left in the world which he desperately needed. He failed in success. He should have fought for evil. He could take his own life. The bus started moving.

“Sounds good,” he said, and took another unending sip of lemonade.

Hymn of the Fallen

Should the crowd roar
And not hear my voice,
Then they are the lesser for it,
Their ears did not save them,
And I cannot fall back and say
My voice faltered.

Should the good part ways,
Bitter, divided,
Reckoning there will be another time,
That time is not now;
And should I not,
Yet again, at night, suggest
One more chance, one more coffee,
Just one more,
My firm grip did not fail them.

And should the old
Withdraw, bathe in the
Chatterings of demagogues and proclaimed gods,
Bemoan the lack of vision,
Of a champion:
'Those were the days,' they say now,
'Those were the days, my boy.'

They grow quiet,
These friends of mine;
Old, too, and do not halt
To offer a smile to those just
Passing by.

It is the first thing to go
I've noticed,
The voice.

I know I had no choice
But to disarm myself,
Lay down the strong weapon, my body,

A banner tall,
Taller
Than that of any state's,
And I must yield my only duty
When the wise know only
To fight.

The Madness of the Gods

“Have you heard about Lucius?” The lawyer turned to the carpenter. “They say he’s gone mad. The ‘madness of the gods,’ they say.”

Sitting in the barbershop were the former two, one in his forties and the other of his fifties; a gray-haired retiree in the corner, flipping through a day-old newspaper; and a young man attended to in the barber’s chair. That said, it was abnormally busy for a Saturday morning, especially one that forebode early showers. The barber, whose scalp was cleanly shaven almost to a new-car’s polish, stroked his beard, conferring with the young man in his chair. “Really,” the carpenter said.

“But you know what it is,” the lawyer continued. “they say he’s lost the love of his life.” He let briefly a short smirk.

“Love?” The carpenter snorted. “Let him put food

on the table for his wife and his kid, then he can talk about love. Seriously, what's a philosopher make these days?"

"Never mind what he makes," the lawyer said, "mind who he loves."

"What do you mean? He's a fruit?"

"Worse. Being gay would be an improvement. That's what I hear."

The old man let loose a loud sigh and crinkled onto the next page. The lawyer bent closer to the carpenter. "You know Davis' son?"

"What, Johnny? Isn't he out fighting?"

"I think so. No, the other one, the younger one."

The carpenter shrugged.

"I can't remember either," said the lawyer, "but Adam came to me, furious at Lucius, demanding that he press charges against the old bastard. He was livid, saying something about his son, trying to protect the kid, but it sounded like -"

"Hey," the barber pointed his comb. "Watch your mouth. There're kids around."

The lawyer turned to the glass door, where Stephen stood peering in. "Come on in, Steve," the barber said, "no use in standing out there all day. How do you think you're going to deliver my paper to me if you're on the other side of the door?"

Stephen came in. "Sorry Mr. Ross," he said flushed with embarrassment. He hauled up his newspaper sack and held a paper to the barber.

"Does it look like I'm going to read it now?" He smiled. "Over there, so Harris can catch up on today's news one of these days." The boy deposited the paper next to the old man. The boy studied the old man as if he were a exhibit in a museum. "Hey Stephen!"

The boy looked up.

"Don't you have other papers to deliver to industrious shopkeepers?"

The boy nodded and scooted out. The lawyer's eyes followed him out. The glass door slammed loudly.

"No shit," the carpenter said. "That's fucked up. Morris, I think his name is. Wants to be a priest."

"Something like that." The lawyer shook his head.

The barber looked up. "You two are worse than women. Worse than my older sister, and that's pretty bad. I can hardly cut this man's hair over here without hearing some seriously disturbing crap. I think you're just two old gossiping hens over there." He turned to the man in his chair. "Seriously, they look uncomfortable, like they're sitting on eggs or something."

"All I know," the lawyer said, "is that you don't come into a lawyer's office demanding a restraining order –

to protect your son – without a good reason.”

“That’s true,” the carpenter said. “If he were to come after my Stacy, I wouldn’t even need to stop at a lawyer. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Why didn’t he go to the cops?” The barber said.

“Habeaus corpus, they say. He doesn’t have proof. Legally speaking, it’s just conjecture.”

“So he didn’t see anything,” the barber said. The lawyer shook his head.

“But still,” the carpenter said, “you get a sense about these things. You know your kids. Fucking pervert.”

“Hey, watch your mouth in my shop,” the barber said. “You want to know something about this Lucius you’re talking about? You’re too young to know,” he patted the young man on the shoulder, “but ever since he moved here from god-knows-where Russia, people have only been telling crazy stories about him. He’s killed a man, he’s a circus reject, he’s a Russian spy. Blah blah blah. One guy even came in here, claimed he was a vampire. Wanted me to point out his house, as if you could miss it. Some young kid probably mixed up in all those stupid vampire movies.”

The carpenter laughed. “Hell, his house looks like Dracula’s. I know this guy who used to clean up his yard. Just leaves a check in the mailbox for him, year after

year. Never sees him, never says anything, doesn't open a window, nothing. My buddy stopped a few years ago, that's why it's such a mess now."

"Then I have something very interesting to tell you," the barber said.

The lawyer crossed his legs. "What, he's a broom-riding witch?"

"Nope, far more interesting. He comes in here, gets his hair cut, just like any other guy."

"No shit," the carpenter said.

"Hard to believe."

"It's true," the barber said. "Comes in every six months, beginning of September and – that would make it March, I believe – he's like the trains, always on time. He used to come more often, but the last few times I saw him he looked something like a beast." He cut the young man's hair. "Leaves a decent tip."

"Isn't he a philosopher?" the young man said.

"That's very true. Not many people know that. I mean, a real philosopher. Those Russians, what with the cold twelve months a year and Stalin killing everyone, they have to be philosophers to survive. Not like the, umm," the barber twirled his comb mid-air, "bookworms over here."

"The academics," the young man said.

"Yeah, the guys who couldn't wipe their asses if

you pointed to them. This guy,” he tapped the comb against his shiny scalp, “he’s smart.”

“Really,” the carpenter said. “What does that racket bring in? Hell, if Mary could get paid for talking all day, we’d be rolling in it.”

“I know you’re joking,” the barber said, “but this guy’s into some serious stuff. Very interesting conversations we’ve had.”

“When’s the last time he came in here?” the lawyer said.

“That – that I don’t quite remember. He hasn’t been in in a couple years.”

“Why not?” the lawyer said.

“Yeah,” the carpenter said. “I never saw him around.”

“First of the month, in like the tide. As for his last visit,” he paused from clipping the young man’s hair, “I should say he seemed a little off. The guy’s a little odd. But I suppose all smart people are a little odd.”

“What did he say?” the lawyer said.

“Well, he was talking about all this philosophical stuff that I didn’t quite –” the barber inhaled. “I guess he was talking religious or something.”

The lawyer crossed his arms.

“He said – well, I think he was trying to find God.

But the way he put it – how was it – he said something like ‘I have God on the run.’ Like he was trying to catch Him or something.”

“I think you’re talking out your ass,” the carpenter said.

“It’s tough to explain,” the barber said. “You know, I never took a philosophy course or anything, but we could really strike up a conversation or two. Just this time, he kept babbling about, I think I remember now, about creating God. Some kind of philosophical thing.”

“God is dead, god is dead,” said the lawyer.

“Like how you might make a house. You build it from the foundation, brick by brick, put in a floor, do the walls. But a philosopher, he uses different tools. Just the way he explained it to me, it sounded like he was trying to build God or something like that.”

“The guy’s nuts,” the carpenter said.

“Here you are,” the barber said to the young man. “Check that out: is that what you wanted?”

“Yeah, it looks good.”

“Good. Well gentlemen, I’m glad we had this philosophical-crazy conversation. I believe you’re next.”

The young man paid. “Keep the extra.”

“Thank you.”

The carpenter got up and sat in the chair.

“He’s found Him,” the old man said.

The young man bent to tie his shoes.

“Who’s found who?” The barber sprayed the carpenter’s head.

“Lucius. He found God.”

The young man bent his head. “Really? Good for him,” the barber said.

The soft clip of the shears kept a steady pace.

“What do you mean he ‘found God,’” the lawyer said.

The old man turned a page. “Just as it sounds. I even saw Him.”

“So you mean-” the carpenter started. “Bullshit, old man, you’re pulling our legs.”

“Wait,” the barber said, “you mean he actually ‘found’ him? I thought you meant he ‘found God,’ you know.”

The old man folded the paper and placed it aside. “Lucius and I go back many years. He knocked on my door one day, and I could see it in his eyes. He didn’t need to say anything – he never mentioned anything about his latest research – and still I knew. A brilliant man like that, what a shame...”

“What do you mean,” the carpenter said. “God killed him?”

“Lucius? No,” the old man said, “he is alive and well.”

“I’m a little puzzled too,” the barber said. “You’re saying he found God, with all his mystical teachings, and there’s something bad about that? All the more credit to the man, I say.”

“It’s not that,” the old man said. “I told you I saw God. Lucius, he had created Him, or rather, found him. That was the flaw in his logic, that somehow God had to be teased out.” The young man took a seat. “I saw Him, just once, and Lucius could conjure Him at a moment’s notice. He was beautiful...” the old man shook his head.

A moment passed in the barbershop, and the young man looked out the glass door, arching his neck to catch a glimpse of the overgrown estate. The old man paced a long breath.

“Too beautiful, one could say. Like Narcissus to the water, I could see the poor old philosopher wither in His light. He was trying to talk to Him, figure out some method of communication. That was years ago, I suppose...”

Silence fell in upon the old man. The carpenter muttered something, unable to inflate his words with his own breath.

“Do you hear that?” The barber looked around. “Sounds like something’s going on.”

Stephen rapped on the glass door. “Mr. Ross,” he yelled, “Mr. ____ is dead! Mr. Ross!” He panted. “There’s an ambulance up on the hill! Mr. Ross!”

A solemn moment passed. The newspaper boy, not finding the reaction he’d expected, sprinted to the next business over.

“That’s spooky,” the barber said. “I’ve got chills.”

“Think of all we could have learned,” the lawyer said.

The carpenter shook his head. “Too bad.”

“How terrible,” the old man said, “to have no beautiful surprise.”

The Sentence

As appeared on Ducts.org

To S. H.

A man escorted two women down a dusty path. He wore jeans and a tan shirt; they wore thin orange jumpsuits. One woman, in her mid-forties, looked about her: steep, reddish cliffs, the grit of ruddy soil swept about the desert landscape. “I’ve never been to Arizona,” she said.

“We’re in Nevada,” he said.

“Whatever,” she said.

The younger woman, in her late-twenties, shuffled about, head-down, with a smoother face but eyes more sunken-in than her mother-in-law. She hopelessly jangled at the manacles that bound the two together. “I don’t see any buildings, grandma.”

“I don’t either,” the grandmother replied.

They descended a brief, steep path, rounded about a

dry, desert bush, and the women saw two sets of shackles, only a few yards away. They were set firmly into the ground with metal spikes.

“I’m scared, gramma.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” she said.

They came to the small, flat area. The grandmother could make out several different shoeprints around the spikes in the fine dust. The man uncuffed the grandmother.

“And if I don’t play your game?”

The man pointed up the incline. The dark outline of a figure stood sentinel on the path they had just passed. The shadow of a rifle poked out from his silhouette.

The grandmother lay down. The man shackled her arms and legs. The bright sun blinded her eyes.

The young woman started whimpering. “This isn’t, this isn’t fair...” she muttered.

“They can’t leave us here forever,” the grandmother said. “These little shits will be back before sundown.”

The young woman fought. She struggled, unable to lay a hand on the man because of the cuffs on her. The man limply wrestled her, and let go. She curled into a ball and started crying.

“They can’t leave us here,” the grandmother said, “we’re going to what’s it called. We’ll call our lawyer when we get there.” The young woman turned her face up to her. “We’ll tell the judge. She’ll put these two fuckers in jail. Torture.”

The young woman gave in. He shackled her beside the grandmother, ignoring her mumbled words. “It’s not fair, it’s not fair...” she said.

“Hey!” The grandmother’s voice caught the man as he ascended the path. “Hey you! What’s your fucking name?”

He turned around. “Gary,” he said.

“Last name, badge number?”

“Gary White. No badge number. I’m off-duty right now.”

“Explains why you don’t got no faggoty uniform on. Hey!” He turned back to face her again. “When do we eat?”

He ascended the path. The grandmother laughed as he and the shadowy figure disappeared from sight.

“Probably my son’s piece-of-shit friend,” the grandmother said. She shook the chains. “Probably wants

to put the scare in us.”

“We’re gonna die, we’re gonna die,” the young woman sniveled.

“Mary-Ann. Mary-Ann!” The young woman turned her attention to the grandmother. “I love you like a daughter, you know?”

The young woman nodded.

“Then stop being a blubbery piece of shit and listen to me: they can’t leave us here. You remember that sign? We’re on government property. This is probably Area 51. Those fuckers probably have cameras up, want to see us shit our pants.”

“I don’t think they need a camera for that,” she whimpered.

“We’re going to sue them, this Gary, Gary White? - for everything they’ve got. We’re supposed to be in Nevada State, that’s what the transfer said, the judge said it, and we’re gonna be rich. We’re gonna be filthy fucking rich.”

The grandmother smiled. “And you know what? We’re gonna hire some guy to shoot this piece of shit, this Gary White. With his own goddamned money. He’s gonna wish he’d never done this.”

The young woman nodded and attempted a feeble smile. She turned away and cried.

“Fucking pussy,” the grandmother said.

The sun stood high in the sky. It was likely noon, perhaps a little later. “Can’t see,” the grandmother said.

A wind kicked up, and dust blew on their faces.

“Mary-Ann,” the grandmother said. “Mary-Ann.”

“Mmmhmm,” she replied.

“At least we don’t have to sit in that van anymore. Christ, my ass hurts.”

The young woman took in a deep, quivering breath. “I’m thirsty,” she said blandly.

The grandmother heard the slight crackle of the sun on the dry earth. Wind whooshed on the peaks of desolate outcroppings of rocks, far in the distance. There was the sound of crinkling, perhaps from the wind pushing about dry bushes, or perhaps from a small stream far off. The grandmother could not tell.

“I bet we can just pull these things out.”

She hefted at the shackle. She put her fingers around the thick spike and shook it a little.

“I betcha they just stuck these in the ground. Like a

tent spike.”

The grandmother tried for a grip around the spike. She lifted her arm, testing the shackles’ leverage against the spike. She tugged at it.

“Come right out.”

The grandmother tugged a few more times. She yanked on the shackle, straight up. The chain attached to the spike and shackle went straight, then limp, at her attempts. The grandmother grunted and lunged with all her might.

“Fuck,” she panted, “fuck. Mine’s in solid. Maybe they fucked up on yours?”

The young woman weakly shook her head.

“Can’t even try,” the grandmother said.

The grandmother paced her breaths. She sighed, then yawned. “I’m kinda tired. After all that. Just gonna rest.” The young woman made no indication of having heard her. “Try again in a bit.”

The grandmother turned her head away from the glaring sun. Her mouth dipped on the dry dust and she spat. She reached her head toward her hand, and wiped the dust off her lips. “Why, those...” she grunted harshly like a dog.

The sun cast slight shadows from a few bushes. The grandmother judged an hour had passed.

“I hear it gets cold at night, down here,” the young woman said. She huddled into a semi-fetal position, away from the grandmother.

“Nah, it’s nice all night. Nice and cool. It’s the best time of day.”

“Yeah,” the young woman said weakly.

The wind died down. The young woman saw a dust swirl somewhere off in the distance.

“What do you think about coyotes?” she said.

“I think I’d like to shoot one.”

“Do you think...?”

“Nah,” the grandmother said. “They’ve got cameras. They’ll come and shoot them. Probably already shot them all by now. Government property.”

The young woman shuddered. “I hear they have scorpions. In the desert.”

“They do.”

“They can’t shoot all’a them.”

“No, they can’t.”

The bush crackled in the sun.

“They live in your shoes,” the grandmother said.

“I don’t want no scorpions in my shoes,” the young woman whimpered.

“Mary-Ann,” she said, “they go in there when you take them off. That’s why you don’t just put on your shoes, like when you go camping.” The grandmother sighed.

“That’s true,” the young woman said.

“They can’t get in your shoes if you’ve got feet in them,” the grandmother said.

The young woman nodded.

The grandmother spat out some dust.

“I’m sorry, little girl, I’m sorry,” the young woman mumbled.

“Shut up.”

Dust caked in their sweat. The sun cast longer shadows off the rocks nearby, off the cliffs in the distance. “Finally,” the grandmother said, “it’ll be night. Night’s cool like the beach. Can’t see a goddamned thing. Goddamned sun.”

“My face is warm, grandma.”

“That’s probably a sunburn. From the sun all day.”

“I know, grandma.”

“What, you want some sunscreen then?” The grandmother spat. “You want me to rub some fucking sunscreen on it for you?” The grandmother struggled with her shackles. “What the fuck you say that for?”

The young woman sniffled.

“That’s right,” the grandmother said, “you just shut the fuck up.”

A grasshopper jumped about. The grandmother followed its irregular path. Slight colors shifted from the sun. A mini-sunset started glowing off in the distance. “The night will cool off your cheek,” the grandmother said.

“Sunset’s pretty,” the young woman said.

The grandmother arched her neck. The shackles rang as she tried to point above her head.

“You see that over there,” she said.

The young woman stayed curled.

“You see that? All the black suits? Lawyers, just waiting for something to happen. Then we’ll sue them.” She snorted. “This? Anyone can do this, doesn’t matter. Something’s gotta happen first, then we’ll sue them. That’s where the money’s at. The fucking judge.” She pointed again. “You see them up there? On that rock?”

“I saw, gramma.”

“Those fucking lawyers,” she laughed. “Can’t blame them, they gotta make a dime, too.”

“Yeah,” she said.

The sun disappeared. Night set in, and stars started to appear in the clear sky.

“It’s cold,” the grandmother said.

She heard a howl off in the distance. “It’s probably on the other side of the fence,” the grandmother said.

“Didn’t see no fence,” the young woman whispered.

The grandmother sighed. Crickets chirped. A crackle sounded off in the distance. “Probably a fox,” the grandmother said.

“Probably a fox,” the young woman said.

The crackle died down. “Foxes don’t eat people,” the grandmother said. “My daddy trapped one, once. I was little.”

The young woman sighed.

“They’re pretty things, foxes. Got into the coop, though. Can’t have them get into the coop.”

The young woman shivered. “We did wrong, gramma.”

“We didn’t mean to.”

“Yes we did, grandma.”

“We didn’t know,” she said.

The wind pushed a soft rustle through a bush.

“We coulda just let her to stop and got a cup of...”

The young woman trailed off. She cried softly. The grandmother looked over and saw her shivering. Her cries became a muted snoring.

The grandmother sighed. She stared into the pitch of the sky. “You out here and you thinking about water. The things you do, you don’t take them back if they stink to you later. You gotta take what is.” She yawned. “Lied about them lawyers,” she said. “Just wanted you to feel better. You goddamn baby.” She shook her head. “Just rest. For now.”

Her eyes darted across the night sky. “Haven’t looked at the stars. Not since I was a little girl.” A pang of regret bit her. “Ant on my neck.” She bent her neck toward her hand and attempted to flick it off. “You little bastard...” she reached harder. “Dammit.” The grandmother bent upward and landed down harshly. “Fucking ant.” She banged about a few more times. She lay back and relaxed.

“Oh, goddamn. Fuck it.” She stared into the sky and panted. “Too fucking cold.”

She stared at the crescent in the sky. “Moon’s out,” she said. “you’ll miss it.”

Later the sun pierced into the grandmother’s eyes. She shifted onto her other side, away from her daughter-in-law. “Just thirsty,” she said. “Could use some drink or something.”

The desert came back into focus again. There was the bush on the incline, with three sets of shoeprints making their way down to the small clearing where she was held. Her wrists hurt. “Mary-Ann, wake up.”

“Mary-Ann.”

The sunrise came over the young woman’s skull. Her hair was long and dark, tangled with reddish dirt. The wind blew it softly.

“Mary-Ann, wake up,” the grandmother said.

She lay huddled toward the sunrise, as if stretching toward its warmth.

“Some people can sleep all day. Whatever. Not like we’re going anywhere.”

The grandmother shielded her eyes from the sun.

“Your parents must’ve shit you right out, huh?” She peeked at her daughter-in-law from under her hand. “Sleep a lot.”

She turned on her back. “You lucky bitch.”

The sun slowly crept higher. The slight reds and solar hues diminished quickly, and soon the sun was a ball of yellow-white fury. “God damn,” the grandmother said.

“God damn it.”

She sighed. “Well, I gotta...” She twisted about, restrained by chains. “Fucking assholes.” Warmth crept down her thighs, and the soil darkened. “Fuck. It’ll dry out.”

She rubbed her nose; it was moist. “Least I didn’t shit myself. Fucking disgrace,” she said. She looked at her finger. There was thick fluid and blood on it. “God damn, what the...” She gently touched her face; it’d stopped burning, and was numb now. Her fingers cautiously dabbed the blisters forming on her cheek. “Jesus,” she said. “Oh god.”

She shivered. “Fucking cold.” She drew a long breath. “I’m going to lose my face, it’s going to melt off. I’m going to live in bandages. Fucking christ.” She closed her eyes. “Too fucking bright out.”

She heard flies buzz about. One landed on her wrist, and she flipped it away. “Get at her,” she said, “she’s the dead one.”

“Fucking god.”

Her chest heaved. She calmed herself down and attempted to regain control. She drew long breaths. The desert landscape crackled in the sun. “I hope the maggots get at you,” she said.

She drew a hand near to wipe her forehead, and thought better of it. “Dear god,” she said. “Can’t even dry my own sweat. Fucking god.” She sounded a hollow laugh. She turned on her side and vomited. “Ugh,” she muttered.

She heard a loud whoosh and flapping. She opened her eyes to a vulture, almost waltzing, on the desert sand, just beyond her daughter-in-law. “You go, you git!” she yelled. “You fucking git!” Her voice gave out, hollow like a shadow.

The vulture stood, staring.

The grandmother waited. It waddled in place. It crept closer to her daughter-in-law, and extended its neck. The grandmother rattled the chains around her arms, and it jumped back. Another vulture flew down, a couple yards

away, and the first vulture turned and squawked at it.

“You two fucking eat each other, now,” she said. She closed her eyes and sighed. The vultures argued.

“It’s not that bad,” she said. “You stop feeling the pain. It’s not all that bad,” she said. “I hope that fucking scorpion, or what-the-fuck, I hope it goddamned hurt. You lucky cunt. You fucking lucky...”

A cruel smile came over the grandmother. “I bet you fucked it. I bet you paid it to fuck it.” She laughed hoarsely. “You fucking bitch, I shoulda known.”

The sun traced higher. The shadow from the bush on the incline shortened. “God, I gotta shit, too. God damn it.” She gulped dryly. “They’re gonna find the two of us out here, shit our pants, gonna think we were fucking pussies.” She shivered. “Think we goddamned cried ourselves to death, huh?” She exhaled deeply. “Fuck, they’re going to have to clean it up.” The grandmother grunted. She shifted about. “Fuck,” she said. “Fuck, I’ll just do it later.”

The squawking grew louder. There was another voice or two in the argument. “Come on now,” the grandmother said quietly, “there’s plenty of her to go around. You fucking vultures.”

“What?”

The squawking continued. She huddled into herself and closed her eyes, as if straining to hear something. The vultures’ small feet padded about in the dust, and they flapped their wings slowly. “What was that? Fuck you,” she said.

“Shut up,” she said. “Goddamn shut up.”

The squawkings grew quieter and closer. “Please goddamn shut up already,” she said.

She felt a beak cut at her. The grandmother drew her sight to an oily-feathered vulture. Its eyes were wet. “Try, you little bastard,” she said. The vulture tried for another peck, and her hand darted up and grabbed its throat. She heard the other vultures fly back. It attempted a few feeble caws. “Gary you piece of shit,” she said, “I’ll wring your goddamned neck.” Her grip grew tighter around the vulture, and its eyes bulged slightly. “Fucking kill you, cocksucking bastard,” she said. She drew her fingernails into its neck, and her hand starting shaking. “Son of a bitch...” Her hand lost its strength and the vulture withdrew from her grip, dazed and hacking. “Piece of shit,” she said.

The grandmother panted. “So this is it,” she said,

closing her eyes again. “Fuck. Shoulda used the goddamn chain,” she said.

The squawks grew distant. A chorus of caws grew more insistent. “Shut up already,” the grandmother said to the corpse. “I just saved you now.”

The vultures shuffled about on the dust. “And then I’ll go to hell,” she said. Another flapped down into the group.

A shiver shot through the grandmother. She calmed her nerves and stuck her tongue out. “Dry,” she said. She opened her mouth, and bit down on it. “Owfmph.” She tried again, weaker the second time. She slowly dragged her rough tongue back in. “Christ,” she said, “fucking christ. Can’t even-”

She turned her head toward her daughter-in-law, her eyes still closed. “So this is what it’s like,” she said.

“You just keep yapping,” she said.

The cacophony of birds quieted down. She heard them shuffle closer again. “You know,” she said. “You know that fox?” The grandmother patted the ground with her hand. “My daddy, he followed that fox. She had pups in her hole.” She shivered. “They was beautiful.” She drew

another breath and calmed herself. “He reached in and grabbed them, drowned them one-by-one. Said they just starve without their mom, put them out of their misery.” She shook her head. “I watched him drown each one, in the trough. Fox pups, now they yip a lot.” She sniffled. “I miss him. I do.”

“Things you just do, sometimes.” Her voiced wavered. “Them pups sure do yip.”

She yawned and rested her eyes. The desert sounds seemed to quiet. “What?” The grandmother turned her head to the side, straining to hear. “What now?”

Her body relaxed a bit. “Why,” she said, “why dead girl, you’re gone, but? But laughin’... laughin’ at me?”

Her heart beat faster. “No, not laugh... a smile... but why, jus’ say it why? Say.”

She shook slightly. “Wha...? Wha said...?”

Another shiver ran through her. “I don’... wha you mean...?” She turned her head slightly.

“I don’ unnerstan’, I-”

A Stitch in Time

The dust is kicking up, blinding my eyes. I am thankful for my French guide, a man who knows nothing of my ultimate goal. My destination seems to lie somewhere in German East Africa, should the one map I have found of the area prove to be even reasonably accurate. My guide perhaps suspects, and would likely slit my throat, had he any reason to believe my travel takes me there, or if he could read English for that matter. I am thankful for that.

It is just before sunrise. Charlotte is dreaming now. It is done, it is done.

This is a relative piece of calm, so I have decided to write. I know I shouldn't, and I know I must be careful with my words, as already I have done enough. I have-

regrets. Many. The bumps on this road should make it difficult to think, but I know I must, for there are many places a car cannot go in Tanganyika. I should be thankful

that I am able to write now, that I needn't focus my energies on straddling an elephant Though I wonder how much of this journey I must tread by foot. They are quite sore.

I just looked up for a moment. Despite my suspicious guide, the few bullets left in my handgun, this place is beautiful. It is dirt, filthy filthy dirt, for nothing but miles, and there is no memory to it. There are no words to it, no faces no right no wrong. There is only life and the unliving. It is gorgeous. It is vast as God.

We just passed a skeleton of maybe a horse or zebra or whatever they have out here. I did not turn away seeing that it was dead. It was more of a statue, I suppose. It was magnificent, right. I'm not sure how to explain all that, what I know now.

I think I am going to bury this note, too. Let them know.

Whoever finds this, I hope you find my compass.

I suppose I am dead by the time you are reading this, too. That is fine. Perhaps that is what all the dead say, that is fine, there is nothing wrong with being dead. Only the living complain about it, kind of funny if you think about it.

I think my head's clearer now. I do not know what I am going to do after this is done.

Keep the compass. This one's yours. I know little of

them other than this one's a nice one.

S. D.

The past four months, my regimen has been immovable: breakfast at oh-seven-thirty; oh-eight to eleven, physical conditioning; eleven to twelve-hundred and thirty, arms practice, self-defense; lunch; three hours of language, German, Italian, French, phrases from a few others; two hours stress test, high Gs; half hour cool down, half hour of dinner, general history two hours, and lights out at twenty and thirty to twenty-one hundred. Stay awake thinking until twenty-three hundred.

Li is lucky: he is a machine. He sleeps almost as soon as the lights go out. He's hungry when they tell you to eat, pisses when they say to, picks up the languages as if they were cards scattered on a floor. They say he picked up English maybe two years ago, and he sounds native to me. They keep stressing that, *native*.

Still, it's an honor to even be here. They shortlisted not even a dozen for the program, pilots and astronauts, athletes, a classics professor. Somehow, it's just Li and me. I know they're going to pick him. I would pick him. I would discharge me, a city-level Public Transportation

Director, and let me enjoy telling my friends that, yes, I was considered for the first actual trans-temporal mission. Let me go back and tell interesting women at parties that I was interesting once.

But I'm here, and even though my father put me on the list – far more impressive than his landing me as a Trans-Director - second-choice for anything is a new record for me. Juan Carinos: first attempted flash-back (failed). Jaldev Pradhan: first successful flash-back, his eterna-plastic note a hundred and forty-eight. The first female Traveler, the furthest Time Traveled (roughly 1831), and now this, the first attempt to affect a change in history. Li Zhong, successful. Runner-up, Syndey Donalds.

I can't blame him. It's the kind of mission that's noble and honorable. It's the kind of mission that Li was born to perform, the kind that I could only ever fail at, should I even have the attempt. Somehow this mission seemed to notice me, and maybe that's noble enough.

The last day, Li's head is bent to his enhanced corn meal patty. He poured a bit of sweet milk over it, cuts into it, devours it as if he had been famished the past week. I don't mind the patty, it's raspberry-flavored, it's just that

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maybe his hunger for this mission is a bit more literal. Maybe food's good practice for it.

Li chats me up down the hall. He is a nice guy, quite honestly. He assures me that I'm wrong, that it's anyone's mission until they officially announce it, that I have as good a chance as any. I agree with this, to be polite, and tell him what I'd been thinking, that I really didn't expect to make it this far. He says the same thing about himself.

He stops mid-way, "Truly," he tells me, "it has been an honor to train alongside you. Whatever happens."

"Whatever happens," I say. I even believe him, and we shake hands.

We take one final test, another tree-paper one, and the room is blank as a sheet. The program director sits at a white desk by a white box. It's easy. Just some basic history, the Last War between the Nations, the basic structure of the three Houses, stuff a Third-Year could do. One last writing sample. I look up and yawn, and Li is already done, trying not to look impatient.

"Thank you Mr. Donalds," the program director takes the finished test from my hand. The room gently shifts to wood tones, the door reappears, the desk also turns to wood. He put it through the console, now a sleek, black box. "We just want to confirm our decision one last time, this probably won't affect much." He adjusts his earpiece.

“Your tables,” he said.

I moved my hands away and the screen came on under me. The image was a hand-written note on smudged tree-paper. It threw me off a bit, looked like I’d written it. You hardly touch the actual stuff after Second-Year, and now this program practically buries you in it. It said:

The dust is kicking up, blinding my eyes. I am thankful for my French guide, a man who knows nothing of my ultimate goal. My destination seems to lie somewhere in German East Africa, should the one map I have found of the area prove to be even reasonably accurate. My guide perhaps suspects, and would likely slit my throat had he any reason to believe my travel takes me there, or if he could read English, for that matter. I am thankful for that.

It is just before sunrise. Charlotte is dreaming now. It is done, it is done.

This is a relative piece of calm, so I have decided to write.

The bumps on this road should make it difficult to think, but I know I must, for there are many places a car cannot go here. I should be thankful that I am able to write now, that I needn’t focus my energies on straddling an elephant. Though I wonder how much of this journey I must tread by foot.

Whoever finds this, I hope you find my compass.

I think my head's clearer now.

Keep the compass.

S.D.

Didn't sound like me, though.

"Mr. Donalds," the director addressed me.

I looked up. Pointed at the screen. Li kept reading beside me. The director waited for me to say something.

"This is..."

The director clasped his hands. "Gentlemen," he stood in front of the desk again, "I want firstly to congratulate you. Both of you. What we have seen in the past four months and one week has been nothing short of exceptional, remarkable, truly, truly impressive. You are, without a doubt, the best of the best. While you are both selected for this mission..."

Something's not right here.

"... a one-man operation, and one of you has to take the lead, while the other must necessarily play the alternate. Mr. Zhong, you must play that part." Li looked at him. "Of the alternate."

Li studied the director. "Thank you for your efforts and dedication, Mr. Li." The director offered his hand. He didn't move. "Thank you."

Li took his hand and shook it. It was the only awkward thing I'd ever seen him do.

"Now if you may excuse us..."

Li took up out of his seat. I could hear his breaths. He nodded to me and forced a polite grin. He opened the door and as he left, two scientists made around him into the room.

"Lun," one of them said, and shook my hand. I introduced myself to her. The guy-scientist fumbled with the collar on his clima-frock.

"Little warm," he said, shaking my hand. "Sorry, Sydney. I'm Elbert."

The director continued. "The launch is scheduled for Thursday of next week, eleven and forty-three. You must be prepared by ten-hundred. The scanners should finish by ten-thirty. The remaining time you will likely spend waiting on the pad, so prepare accordingly. The doctors will fill you in on the details. Thank you and good luck."

As soon as he left Lun and Elbert crowded in on me, visibly excited. Elbert went over the specialized training of this last week, Europe of Old, the Nations, other slight adjustments. Lun smiled through Elbert's rush.

"And this," she placed something cold and metallic in my hand, "is the only tool you'll carry."

I looked at it, something of a yellowish tinge to the metal. “What is it?”

She nudged me on. “Open it, open it!”

I flipped open the lid, and there was a glass bulb with a floating disc in it, the edges graded, and some letters on it. I turned it around in my hand to get a look at it through the air bubble.

“We even got the air bubble in there,” she said, pointing.

“What is it,” I repeated.

“It’s a compass,” she replied, all grins. “It’s a simple navigational device. Very common in the time period, so a nice way to hide an audio recorder. Might as well get used to keeping it on you at all times.” She plucked it from my hand and tapped the underside a few times to show me something. “...*ompass. It’s a simple...*” it repeated softly. “Neat, huh?”

“Wait, so-”

“It uses the Earth’s magnetic field,” she swirled her finger around the floating dial, the compass still softly talking.

“Wait, what time period,” I asked.

“Oh,” she said. “Ummm, roughly...”

Elbert jumped in. “The early twentieth,” he said.

“You’re going to prevent a war.” He held up two fingers.

“Two, actually.”

The last week came on like a solar storm. Almost everything had to be redone. For arms training they got one of those old rifles from the Last War, except Lun fitted it with a booster. The gun sprung in my arms like a hard, plastic animal. “Recoil,” she told me. “It’s kinda neat, actually.” It shot awfully slow.

Idioms, a brief recap of the 1910s, technology I might expect, stuff I shouldn’t, half a day on edible foods, what effects I might expect to feel on a non-nutrient enhanced diet, all the crazy things I never had to think about so I’d be prepared for this: an over-glorified bodyguard position. “Mr. Franz Ferdinand,” Elbert told me. “He’s some sort of elder statesman. His murder, we are fairly certain, triggers a chain of events that culminates in the first of the Great Wars.”

“What does he look like?”

“We don’t know for certain,” Elbert said. “We’re pretty sure he’s a male.”

“What do you mean?”

“About eighty percent. He’ll probably stick out. Like a president, or pharaoh, he should have a, uh, retinue

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around him. He'll be easy to spot. His assassin--"

"Gavrilo Princip." I read the screen behind him. Must've murdered his name.

"Yes, will be harder to spot. All we have is a name."

I had to hold myself back a bit. "Any guess on gender?"

Elbert shook his head. "Mr., or I suppose Ms. Gavrilo may or may not be working alone. We also do not have a way to determine any genetically-typical traits he or she may or may not have. Mr. Ferdinand, on the other hand, should possess some manner of Anglo-European traits, similar to yours: paler skin, possibly medium- to medium-dark hair. Some facial hair around the chin and throat. Eyes..." he waved a hand, as if to complete a thought. "It shouldn't be too hard, he'll look important. And thankfully, you'll be pretty similar to the population there, too. We think you'll fit right in."

"We hope to drop you off on the European continent," Lun started. I was already tired after Elbert's session earlier, and started pacing around to wake up my legs. "I believe earlier today, Elbert informed you about the details surrounding..."

I stopped pacing and sighed. "Wait, so what do you mean 'hope?'"

"Sydney, no need to be so exasperated!" she said.

She laid her hands gently on my shoulders, which did the opposite of calming me. “Look. Sydney. I know you think this is just science, and it is, but really the Trans-Dimensional Teleporter is not one-hundred percent... you know?”

“Accurate?”

“No no no,” she said. “Like anything worthwhile, the calculations for trans-dimensional teleportation are more, well, art than, uh... science.”

“You’re saying I could die.”

“You took that risk from the start,” she wagged a finger at me. “And anyway, we know you made it already, because we have your note.”

“But not the recorder.”

“No, not yet,” she said. “We’re still trying to locate it.” She sighed. “Look, what I’m trying to say is, we’re not just transporting you through time, but through space, too. A lot of calculations. For one, the earth moves on average 70,000 kilometers per hour through space...”

“Okay.”

“Which means, figure it’s roughly three-sixty years of that movement, we shoot you, I want to say, that direction,” she pointed to a seemingly random corner of the room, “about two-hundred billion kilometers.”

“How many billions of whats?”

“That’s just through space, never mind time.”

She saw I was little consoled. “Sydney,” she patted my shoulder, “It’s not even a whole light-year. More like a fifth.”

I rubbed my arms and tried not to shake. “Thank you, Lun.”

“Okay then. One last present.” She pulled out a picture-card with an ancient bridge on it. It was just floating in the air. “Now Elbert already briefed you on the location of the assassination...”

“1914, twenty-eight of June. A bridge in Sara Jivo.”

“Not just any bridge,” she said, “but this one.” Lun almost pauses, half-wanting me to inquire about it, but I play dumb. “It’s disguised as a mailing-card. So you can make a visual ID of the location, show it around, and no one will suspect it’s from their future.”

I take the rough paper card from her. “What did you call this?”

“A mailing-card. It’s one of those... you know, never mind, you show it to someone in 1914 and they’ll know what it is. We had to crop out all the buildings around the picture, you know, just in case they built a cafe or something in, I don’t know, 1920 or something. That’d be kind of weird to an inhabitant of 1914, wouldn’t you think? See a building that’s not supposed to be there?”

It had an Italian word across the bottom, orange block letters, “Arrivederci!” The back was blank.

“You’re supposed to write a mailing message on the, uh... so you’re all set with the recorder?”

I nodded.

“It’s important you keep that on you. So if something goes wrong during your mission, we can figure out how to fix it.”

“I know, Lun.”

“And if you *do* come across a computer, you *might* figure out a way to access the sonic-location data. But probably not. That’s mostly for us. Try not to destroy it.”

“Thanks, Lun. I know.”

“Oh, and one last...”

“Paper transcript. I got it. Thanks Lun.”

“Good, good.” She sat up on my desk and dangled her legs until a thought caught her. “Hey, did Elbert show you the movie yet?”

The night before launch was the movie. Elbert sat next to me, somewhat giddy. Lun sat a few feet off with an assistant, both eating a couple bags of puffed grains.

“This was a big one,” Elbert whispered. “Really

big. We've got a lot of movies by this guy, he's like the, uh, Stefan Thompson of his time." He corrected himself. "More like Shakespeare, I'd say. Of acting."

The movie started up. A square-jawed man took the screen, grinning wide and annoyingly chin-dimpled. The film was in surprisingly good condition for a flat one.

"People used to flock in movie rooms to catch up with their favorite stars." Elbert couldn't take his eyes from the show. "They'd just all get in one room and enjoy stuff like this."

"Elbert," I said, "the film said it was made in 2001. How useful-"

"Historically accurate," he waved my question off. "It documents the 1930s, which is pretty close to the target time period. The archives get spotty before the 1970s, but my colleagues and I agree this one's the real deal. A few of us suspect the title actually refers to a place called 'The Pearled Harbor,' but that doesn't affect the research value here."

The ancient actor said something gruff and Lun snorted loudly. "But look at what they're wearing!" she whispered loudly to her assistant, between loud gasps. Elbert coughed loudly to her and pointed out the fashion to me. The clothing was so dull, weird browns and grays. Kind of flat, plain collars, too. Strange open sleeves.

Elbert made a few more comments about the time-period when he remembered to. Lun and the assistant kept a quiet conversation throughout the movie. I could tell she got a thrill out of the propeller-prop airplanes. Not a bad ending, turns out Elbert was only a decade or so off.

“Classic love story,” Elbert said on our way to the briefing room. “Timeless.”

Lun’s assistant went the other direction. She kept a little behind us, venting her clima-frock and wiping her eyes a bit. “Hoooooh... haaaaa...”

The program director waited for us in the briefing room. He congratulated all of us, went over the last details.

Thirty days max on the recorder, Lun said. Burn the travel suit as soon as possible.

Elbert would be available to me for the next twenty-four hours had I lingering questions. I said I had memorized both maps.

The director went over the codes. “Communicating with us is the most important part of this mission. If the mission is a failure,” he said, “use the code ‘I am delayed from attending the aircraft vendors.’”

“What do I say if the mission is a success?” I ask.

The director stiffened. “Well, it appears you went with ‘Charlotte is dreaming now.’ I think we have to stick with that. In either case, know your mission is not done

until you have buried the recorder within the provided coordinates. Upon completion of the mission, or if you are under extreme duress, you are to self-terminate. We cannot afford any collateral damage to history.”

I almost forgot about the tooth. Upper-right canine, feels just like my old tooth, not like a hard little poison capsule.

“I want to thank you all again for your time, your efforts, and especially, Sydney, for your sacrifice. Untold generations will live and breathe because of your actions. Thank you all and good night.”

The day arrived. I’m jittery, nervous, numb. I don’t really know how I feel. But after breakfast, a few minutes in the gym and a quick shower, two guards escort me outside. The spires of buildings and flat, clean pavement somehow seem to be special to me this time around; I take everything in as I walk towards some sort of execution. But they will know, the world will come to understand my sacrifice, and that’s still something to hold on to. The transporter is in a partially underground dome, paler and more plain than most buildings.

The clothing takes some time getting used to.

Buttons are every bit as annoying as I thought they'd be, and Lun's team thickened the material because of the loose neckline. I'm steaming in it right now, but ancient peoples obviously didn't have climate control and I'm assured that it's better than freezing to death.

The pants are separate and thicker. The walk to the teleportation room is a stifling one, and all the extra undergarments make me sweat more than a 50-mile run. It could be the lightheadedness, but I feel suddenly very unprepared.

"Mr. Donalds," the director greeted me from a couch on my right as I came in. It's a blank room, two large shower-stalls on the left and a couple consoles in the middle. Lun and a couple scientists are fretting about. "We shall have you in the booth in a moment," he finishes.

I stand around. The two guards who escorted me, I checked, are armed; they didn't even cover up the Defense Bands on their wrists.

"Okay," Lun said, prodding her comp-slate, "nothing seems to have exploded so far. Let's get a few more shots in there, make sure it's as close as we can get to target year."

I stand around a bit. It's not quite ten yet.

"Come," the director pats the couch, "take a seat." I do. "You've memorized the drop-off coordinates?"

“Of course,” I tell him. I tell him I am familiar with the former Tanzania. I do not tell him that Elbert has no practical 1914 landmarks for $-7^{\circ} 12' S$, $34^{\circ} 33' E$. The director smiles.

“Good, good,” he says, “then your message will be safe.”

“But you haven’t found the recorder yet,” I remind him.

“Continental drift, solar flares,” he brushes me off. “You know these scientists.”

It’s four past ten. “Come along, come along,” Lun practically drags me off the couch. “Stand still for a bit.” One of the scientists suits me up. It’s black, with all these metal gadgets and things sticking out. Takes forever to put on, and even hotter than this. He goes back to his console.

She pushes me into the stall and confers with the two other scientists. “Syd, try not to move too much. Preliminary scan, in four, three...”

The director is sitting across from me, his right leg perched up on his left knee. He’s tapping his foot up-and-down, checking on something in his hand. I bend a bit to see the guards chatting amongst themselves.

Lun and the other scientists finished their scans. It’s not quite ten-fifteen. “Gosh, we’re early,” she said. “You can move around, talk. Just don’t leave the pad.” She

fumbled with a computer in her hand and said something muffled to me.

“What?” I asked back.

“Syd, you catch the game last night?” she repeated, louder.

“Nope,” I said.

“It was a good one. You should’ve seen it,” she nodded.

It’s strange to think that Lun’s depressing small-talk is mostly what I’m going to miss about this world. It’s strange to think that, with all this around us, instant access to almost any person, real or imagined, I still feel a bit aloof. And I don’t think it’s just this steam-suit talking. The director’s still focused on his palm, grinning and shaking his head slightly. I think the only other thing I might miss about my life could be cold berry shakes.

“Figured maybe you stayed up to catch one last one,” Lun said to me. I shook my head far in the suit so she could see. She forced a tight smile and caught wind of the guards, who were evidently talking about the game. She argued about an important play with one of them in loud, friendly tones.

I’m still standing in the stall, watching the other people in the room. For a second I think about Li. When he gets over his hurt feelings, he’s certainly going to go

on to some sort of important government position. He'll be remembered, revered; me, probably forgotten for fifty years. His friends will remember him. He dodged a bullet. Even the director, who seems to share a private joke with someone perhaps farther down the solar system. And for all my isolation, all my failure, I still look at all these joking, content people in the room, important and significant, and sense some bigger failure from them. I can't put words to what my own may be, but at least I'm aware of it.

Lun finally turns to me. "Okay, Syd, let's get you all ready."

I dab some sweat from my brow and shut the visor. I stiffly bend down on my hands and knees in the pad. It's got some metal pads that scrape against some metal buttons on my knees, which obviously are pretty painful.

Lun seems to be saying something about my stance, but I can't quite make it out. "You said like a dog," I yelled at her.

"No no," she yelled back, "like a cat. A cat. You know, land on all fours. Pick up your knees, keep on your toes."

The sweat's really pouring now. She sees I don't want to do it. "Five minutes, Syd! That's all I need from you!"

I get my knees up, kinda like I'm going to do a

push-up. The room dims a bit, and I can barely make out what they're saying around me. Maybe the guards have quieted down. Maybe the director's looking up from his conversation. I'm somewhat glad I'd adjusted my ridiculous position, though, because in a moment, I'm jerked around, nauseous, and falling a few feet not onto a white-and-metal pad, but into what looks like a stew of defecation.

By the time I got my head on straight and removed the helmet, it doesn't appear that I'm that far off. It absolutely reeks, and as if traveling three hundred years wasn't good enough incentive to do so, I vomit into what looks like a large, muddy shit-bath. It's dark and miserable out, as hot as I don't know what. I lean onto a wooden post and rub my knees (the metal jabbed bloody into them, as I would have guessed), and have a few moments of quiet contemplation until I hear a woman yelling and charging at me.

I turn around and she's hissing some sort of curses at me, jabbing the air with a large metal rake. Just past her is what I'd presume to be her home, a small wooden structure, a little steam coming from the top vent. I

communicate to her in Italian.

“*Buon giournno!*” I tell her, louder and with a bit more terror than the phrase merits.

I keep my hands up and she tries to rake them off. I withdraw a bit and she slows her breaths a bit, thankfully tiring. “*Di-ahb duhmaird!*”

I tried a couple more languages before settling on French. “*C’est belle journée, belle journée!*” I shriek, covering my head.

Her jabs lost a bit of their anger. “*Une belle journée?*” she said.

“*Oui oui!*” I huddled a bit.

She said something quickly to me, a bit shriller and shaking the rake. I must’ve looked pretty dumbfounded, because she repeated what she said.

“What the fuck do you mean beautiful out? It’s dark as death and hotter than hell!” She looked exasperated. “The hell are you doing out here?”

I processed this a bit and tried to recover. “Oh, well, the noot – the night – it’s really nice please let’s just be-” she jabbed the air, “nice.”

“You,” she slowly walked closer, “you must be a *voleur*.”

“A *voleur*? A what?”

She crept closer and raised her rake. I backed

against some flimsy poles and attempted a defensive stance.

“They say a *voleur* is always a coward. And now I believe it.”

I shot back. “Please I won’t evolve, just don’t hit!”

I waited a couple moments for the attack, and it was a firm jab in my gut. I opened my eyes and saw the woman motion at me with the friendlier end of the rake. “Leave fool,” she said. “There’s nothing left for you to take. And my pigs certainly wouldn’t take you in, either.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, “I am sorry for the mistake the misin- the, the...”

“Trespass.” The stick pointed firmly at me.

“Yes, the trespass,” I started climbing over the fence, “thank you for your kindness and I shall – soon – be out of... your...”

I didn’t finish climbing the fence. The suit was indeed hotter than hell, and I could barely lift myself up. I gave it one more try but just propped myself up on the fence, which shook under my hand. The woman nudged at my suit.

“You need another blanket?” She asked. “A bit cold in there?”

I started stripping off the rest of the suit, which was, naturally, impossible to do from the inside. She came around my end of the fence to watch me struggle.

“Just another idiot,” she said. “As if one wasn’t enough.” She jabbed the rake toward me and I lifted my arms away as much as I could. The woman flipped the rake around and pulled down the fence. After quite a few minutes of what I assume to be her cursing, all the whatevers unlatched and I felt the coolest breeze I’d ever felt glide past my legs. I bent slightly forward and she yanked off the upper half.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

I just panted. I felt like a wet towel. She picked up the stick again and started jabbing me loosely with it. “Well,” she said, “come along now. I didn’t kill you so I guess I have to care for you. That’s how it works at the *Grand Relais du Pourceau*, no? Let’s meet your match now. Come idiot, you can’t help but seek out your kind.”

I woke up with a sore head. I looked around and it was certainly not any place I would’ve ever imagined: a squarish, dull furnace with a stack of wood pieces near it; a table, also wood, with a few crude mugs on it; a woven tapestry on a wall, a woven pattern and faded colors. Some sort of tools along another wall, some of the wood handles broken. My feet stuck out of the woven blanket.

My thoughts swirled into order again, vaguely something along the lines of time-travel, assassination, angry woman. She made her appearance, the angry woman, carrying two buckets of water in through the main door. She had brown hair and a nice nose. She also looked a lot smaller than last night. Or maybe she sounded bigger. I got up.

“*Monsieur*, did you enjoy your sleep?” She spoke loudly and hefted those buckets up. “Shall I fetch Him His comfortable shoes? *Garçon*,” she lit a furnace and yelled toward the other room, “prepare the bath for *Monsieur*! I am so – *hrnnn* – so honored.” Some grumbling came from the other room. She poured some water into a metal lamp and placed it on the fire. “And how long shall we be blessed with you?”

“I must get going,” I said. “Thank you for your-”

“Oh dear,” she threw a few pieces of wood into the furnace, “I hope your stay was to your liking?”

“Umm, well I-”

“I hope we didn’t keep you up?” She stopped and stared at me. “I hope we didn’t bother you?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “No, of course not, I was going to le-”

“I hope,” she walked towards the tools in the corner, “that you could bother to fix my fence?” She tossed

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a primitive hand-hammer at me. I jumped back a bit and it thudded just before my feet. “Bring it back before you leave.”

I felt the meaning of the word “sheepish,” and took up the hammer on my way out. Which was punctuated by smacking my head on the door frame, the same spot as last night apparently. “Thank you friend,” she said, “for again sparing my hammer the pain.”

Fixing a wooden fence is deceptively difficult. It may look like two poles crossed by two poles, but it takes some sort of skill not encompassed by directing street and hover-traffic or even grading high on the Norman-Schielder Phys/Psy Aptitude Battery. It certainly takes more than just a hammer. I decided to limit my destruction and headed back to the house to find my geographic bearings, as it was quite obvious I was not actually at a hotel.

I came back just in time to meet Francois. He sat naked in a chair and drank something from a dirty mug. When he finished he dragged himself to the other room and shut the door. I only figured out who he was a couple hours later, when he came back out and said,

“So,” he was more clothed this time, “are you

fucking my sister?”

He was still scratching himself, harder this time to get through the pants. Francois was pretty short, at least half a foot shorter than me, and had a stocky, bulgy build. His eyes were beady, trained on me like lead bullets. He wiped his mouth.

“No, sir, of course not,” I replied.

“Of course you are, you piece of shit,” he said. He shook his head. “Miserable loser. A cripple could do better.”

He pulled a flask and spent much of the time insulting me and offering a drink, often at the same time, and I stopped trying to ask him anything and sat around. There isn’t much to do in this time-period, except maybe look outside. And even that’s boring. Outside is so... plain. Green too, I suppose, a bit complex. There are no lights, no fountains or anything exciting, no clear floors where you can see the level below you. But the smell: there is none. I’d never noticed how perfumed those parks were, even the nice apple-scented ones, and just smelling nothing – for once – is refreshing. It’s like tasting water, somewhat. Then I threw the time-suit into the furnace, and that changed to toasted turd. Francoise said so himself, and let me know that for an unmerciful hour until his sister came back.

“Well,” she carried a pail of milk, “why bother

fixing the pen when we put the pigs in the house?” To her brother. “Thank you for that.” To me, “I must still be seeing ghosts?”

Francois seemed unfazed. “Again, a woman has no idea what she’s saying. Do you see any pigs in the house? The smell was him, anyway.”

“What, the cat took your tongue? You go beg somewhere else.” She practically walked through me and stopped at the furnace. “My god, that smells *evil*. It’s not enough that you gamble away all my hard work?”

Francois made an attempt to defend himself.

“There is a place for people as cruel as you, and now I’ve smelt it. And you, you gnat, go away. Shoo, shoo!”

She flapped her hands and almost shooed me away. “The, uhh, city... is where I would like to...” I started.

“Out to the road, take a left. ‘Bye.”

I ducked under the frame this time and made my way out.

She forgot to mention how far it was to town. Or even its name.

“Excuse me,” I tried with a peasant riding a

horsecart. He tried harder to ignore me.

Eventually I came to some town a few hours and several articles of clothing later. Even unbuttoned the shirt was brutal, and my thighs were on fire. I knocked on a few doors, but getting nowhere that way, I made my way to a beverage station.

They were all shorter than me, by almost a foot. The room half-quieted to turn to me, then got back into their dirty ale-mugs, huddled over them just high enough for their conversations to carry a few feet to their intended targets. It was wood in here, too, apparently everything was wood, darkened no doubt by the bitter smoke wafting from several of the patrons. I approached the master of the establishment.

“Excuse me,” I started, “I’d like to ask-”

A gruff, grizzly-bearded man pointed to a sign: “Bienvenue Buveurs.” Drinkers welcome. “What will you take,” he asked.

Which left me in an awkward situation. “I’m sorry, I don’t have my purchase card on me.”

“Your what?”

“I cannot pay for a drink right now. May I just ask-”

He cut me off and pointed at the sign next to it. “Bon Débarras Pauvres.” Good riddance, bums. I couldn’t open my mouth before he walked off to chat at the other

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side of the bar.

I waited. I got the date from him thankfully, with almost five weeks to get on with my mission. But judging from the state of transportation in this era, and my lack of headway thus far, even that may not be enough. Anger started welling in me, I mean, how am I supposed to save these annoying idiots if they're going to stand in my way? I sneezed angrily.

"Paying customers only." The bartender snapped at me, not turning from his conversation. "Take your sneezes outside."

I obliged. I was thirsty. Really thirsty.

The next thing I remember is waking up in Francois' house again. It was June eighth-ish, after almost two weeks in bed and some rather bloodied pants. Pretty disgusting, actually.

Apparently I'd kept walking and just collapsed. It was hot out, freaking hot, and I have no idea how these midgets put up with it. Luckily the bar was Francois' second home (or first) and he had the good sense to carry me back not too far from there. "You should've taken that drink I offered you," he said. "Now that bitch will suck

your blood out.” Typical Francois head-shaking.

Francois’ sister was a bit more sympathetic: “What kind of idiot thing were you doing out there?”

“There’s something I have to do,” I told her. She’d brewed a couple teas for us, and she took off a few hours from farmwork to check in on me. “I can’t really say more.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “But if you’re dead, who’s gonna do it for you?”

Steam twisted from the top of my mug. I could see her wanting to get more done, but waiting on me left her desperate for a break. Francois managed to keep up a fairly hectic schedule of playing cards and drinking.

“I honestly don’t know why I have to care for such wretched creatures,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I replied.

“It’s fine,” she said. “We’ll get you on your way soon enough. My mother used to care for sad creatures, I guess it’s my turn.” She held the tea close to her nose. “I’ve never actually heard an apology before. Strange, huh?”

“Really?”

“I mean, I must have, but I can’t remember a single one. Huh.” I could see her chest float softly. A few moments passed, and she got up to head out again.

“Wait,” I said. She turned briefly just before she left.

“You cared for me and I don’t even know your name yet.”

“It’s Charlotte,” she said. “Just like the dessert. I’ll be back when I finish up.” And she left.

Charlotte left me a few things to do to repay my debt to her.

It turns out wood is hard to split.

Animals, even the few she’s kept from Francois’ debts, are tough to herd.

And that damned fence. Fuck it.

But those were minor concerns. Was this Charlotte, the Charlotte? I don’t know. She’s small (and I’m tall) and, as if it matters somehow, she is kind of cute. Kind of pretty.

It’s tough work to do hungry, but I think I’ve acclimated to the diet by this point. It just tastes...different. Maybe even better. Not so sweet, more complex. Things aren’t as simple as they should be.

And things go slow here. No changing skies, no clicking your fingers and getting what you want. No super-rich—at least none in sight—and none of those jerks who always slides in to buy the girl you like.

Dear God, I hope I don’t actually like her.

But the rest of the day I spend sitting around. Tea

after tea. Neither of them shows, half of which worries me.

Francois stumbled in late at night. This was only noteworthy insofar as he usually stumbled in mid-morning. He mumbled some French that no amount of sobriety could decipher. I kept at my cool cup of tea.

“I said,” he repeated, forcefully enunciated, “where is my feast? I should – should not have to ask for a hero’s return, I am after all.” He stopped his thoughts there.

“Charlotte hasn’t returned yet.” I put down my cold mug and studied his face for any sense of panic. I only saw an overwhelming sense of “drunken.”

“Then... then then,” he waved a hand. “Then what shall I eat? You are a fine housekeeper, get to, boil a nice chicken for me. Man the masts, eat the albatross, go forth!” He turned and laughed with some long-deserted drinking companions. The room was silent for a breath and he fixed eyes of blood on me. “You heard me, I am hungry and you shall fix that.”

He bent menacingly. “Do I hear a traitor? What a fine guest...” he crept unsteadily forward, “a fine guest you are, a fine meal perhaps.” He closed the distance between us and raised a fist. “Perhaps you do not understand what I

am ask-”

I smacked his skull with the mug. The ceramic shards fell about, and he collapsed limply like, what I had heard described as, a rag doll. Francois snored loudly, and I wondered where Charlotte was well into the night.

She arrived in the afternoon. A gaunt man was with her. I do not remember much of that morning other than worry.

Francois was still pacing about, unaware of last night. The stranger threw a polite hand at me and I shook it before I could think. “Well well, here’s where you’ve been hiding, Mr. Donalds.”

I jumped back a bit, but my hand was already in his grasp. “Oh, don’t be so shocked,” he grinned wide enough to eat a shark, “you know how the agency loves redundancy. Come on now, let’s go somewhere where we can talk.”

Francois was complaining about a sore head, and Charlotte rubbed it and told him to put some more tea on it. He informed her tea leaves were of little use to wounds and she barely stifled a laugh. “And I suppose you’ll try to kill me?” I asked the stranger.

“I’d make no such threat,” he said, his French far more fluid than mine, “but I should warn you they might have to die.” He pointed to Charlotte and Francois, paused for a moment. “Just kidding! But seriously, let’s go somewhere private.”

By which he meant ten paces outdoors in the oppressive heat. “So,” I said, “how the fuck do you-”

He pulled out a compass. Exactly the same as mine, a bit worse for the wear. “Wait, then-”

The stranger polished the glass surface on his coat and fiddled with it. “Mr. Donalds, let me first apologize to you for not introducing myself: I am Adelard Brant, and I am here solely as your assistant.” His teeth seemed small, he was a bit smaller all around, and tougher, too. “Apparently your mission wasn’t entirely a success, so the agency decided to send me along to, well, assist. That is what I am here for.”

“Why is it I never heard about you?”

“Well,” he pocketed the compass again, “you weren’t successful the first time, and it was quite obvious

right away, so it's no bother to send another man along, now, isn't it?"

"Why wasn't my mission a success?"

"To be blunt," he pointed at Charlotte's house, "you haven't been terribly on task, have you? I have no idea what went wrong the first time, as we didn't get a full report from you, and my mission parameters are just as vague as yours. Now, as I understand it, we have maybe two weeks left to us to get along with it, and I'd rather not waste any more time playing with the natives, sound reasonable?"

"Of course," I said, "June 26 doesn't leave us much time."

"No," he said, "it certainly doesn't."

"Then let's get on our way."

"By all means," he replied.

I made it a point to at least make a goodbye and thank my hosts. Charlotte said it was no bother at all, and refused the bills Adelard practically threw at her for their trouble. Francois suggested she take the money for services

rendered, of which the specifics are impolite to repeat, and she just smiled lightly, ignoring her brother. She does have a sweet smile. We packed a light bag and she gave us a quick “Adieu” as we left.

“The things they’ll never know about,” Adelard said in the cart.

He’s picking his teeth. Adelard, sitting next to me and jostled by the rough cart, is picking his teeth: he’s wearing a thick, blue, buttoned coat, his fingernails are gritty, and he could well have been from this century, he blends in well enough. We have been on a train, ox-carts and a car or two for the past week. The route is especially bumpy on this carriage, lurching horses or not. Still he picks until the groove between his teeth is clear. He does not know that I know he is a spy.

He started by playing back some of the recording his compass made the past couple days. We pretended to glean some useful insight for the task at hand, pretended he wasn’t just trying relax me and make himself appear a likeable spy, at the very least. I have casually mentioned

details about the mission: the bridge, Sarajevo, the date and time, give or take a couple of days. I let him think I don't know the exact nature of my mission, and so far he's buying it. The unusual part is his willingness to navigate us there, and my inability to do this puts me in a fairly awkward position. Even worse, I still can't figure out why Lun would have built him a compass, or what his mission really is. I am not sure even Adelard could say that for certain.

"This is the stop," Adelard said. I broke out of a slight spell.

"Just a little sleepy," I said. "That's a lot of travelling."

"We're almost to Sara-jivho," he said, forcing my pronunciation on the word. "Just a couple more days should do it."

I nod and feign a bit of exhaustion. I'm actually quite awake, and have been wondering if I have to kill Adelard at some point. Most likely he won't tell me anything about his actual mission, and he looks too worn to bother torturing. Besides, my faithful scientists only really gave me a lecture on torturing, half of it just how to resist it and when to use the poison capsule in my tooth. About

fifteen minutes in, they suggested; my life is worth fifteen minutes of pain. I wonder what Adelard's is worth.

I lick the fake molar again. "Let's get something to eat," I suggest.

"Okay," he nods.

This area roughly called 'Europe' looks all the same to me. Outside the tavern, there are trees, roads that are just gaps in grass and river, towns that might've passed for an outdoor park from my own time. That's a strange phrase, just saying 'my own time,' the old people here often say things like that. The tavern inside has the distinct smell of sweat and cooked meat; not the fake cooked meat smell sprayed through our restaurant districts, not that I can remember what that smell is anymore. It's hard remembering much from that time (maybe that's easier for me to say), not much I can remember beyond the measured pulse, the vibrancy and lights, the grinning cartoon faces chatting on glass screens, how everything had to convince you of its own life and humaneness. A false-thing, a facade, I've never even used that word before.

But the barkeep, a balding man with a dirty mustache, shoves before us a couple tin or metallic plates heaped with some mashed foods, drizzled with chunky

brown sauce. He takes a few bills Adelard offers, does not thank him back, does not fawn on him the way our polite, female-voiced food machines do – will do, actually, hundreds of years from now – and generally ignores us going back to wiping out the mugs. And it's strange, but being here sometimes it's a comfort not being comforted, not needed to be comforted and cradled, to see the true state of the universe and its vast, boundless ignorance of me and my mission and this fairly nice man eating next to me, whom I will likely have to kill in a few days.

He is picking his teeth again, after the meal.

Adelard sent me off to scout for a clandestine little place to put up our feet. So I find the nearest hotel and hunt him down again.

We're in some unpronounceable town likely in Germany, and while I should be off hiding the two of us in a dank hole (though no one is looking for time-travellers, not that I've noticed) I track him down to a large German bank. He shows up, produces a slim paper, and the bank officials scoot him off, some kind of royalty. Maybe moreso

than Ferdinand himself, they bend around him. Adelard comes out minus the sheet, I'm pretty sure, and plus a bundle of cash – and then why didn't Lun set me up with this sweet deal?

“Not a good job,” Adelard came back and bashed our nice and bright room. “We don't want anyone to find us out.”

And I'm pretty sure I've kept all the important cards on my chest, or however the saying goes. I've seen him deal with a pick-pocket a couple days ago – just a kid, maybe seven years old – and that thrashing he gave the brat is maybe half of what Adelard would do to me should he find me out. If I'm that lucky. The kid could hardly walk after Addy took more than his fair share back. I can't give up now.

And worse: I've been having these dreams.

“Charlotte,” I said.

“Mmmm...? What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Huh,” Adelard said. “Just curious. You keep saying

it.”

“Oh. Didn’t realize.”

A few days later Adelard and I finally settled in to one of his preferred cramped, mildewed rooms. Someone pointed it out to us after we walked past it a few times. “We should get there tomorrow. Just one day to set up, get a lay of the land, so to speak.”

“Should be enough,” I said.

“Everyone’s been saying it’s a big city. Hopefully we can find that bridge, get a sense of how to secure it.” Adelard rolled his pants off. I try to ignore that he sleeps in his jacket.

I laid into my bed. “Sounds like a plan,” I said.

He unbuttoned the jacket. “Hey Sydney, is there something you aren’t telling me?”

A deep breath, too long a pause. “What?”

“Charlotte, is she anyone?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t think so. I don’t know.” I relax a bit. “Just... I’m not sure.”

“We’ve got a day to be sure,” Adelard said. “We’ve only got so much time to figure this out and get it right.”

I mumbled some sort of affirmation, and made like I was asleep. He relaxed into bed, though I knew he wasn’t

going to sleep this night either.

Sometime just before dawn he got up.

Adelard didn't take anything with him. He wanted to look like he'd just gone outside to get some air, but it was obvious that was not the case. There wasn't too much awake at this hour, and I shadowed him carefully enough to hear him converse with a baker, probably ask for directions. He talked to a farmer tending a mule on a small cart, and headed off in the direction we had traveled from. I guess I was glad he decided to misdirect and leave me lost rather than just leave me for dead, though I'd have to backtrack a bit. I asked the young baker where my friend had gone off to.

She replied in some sort of strange German. I tried that: "My friend. He has gone without me, could you-"

"Neirozoomnm," she said and kept kneading dough.

I sighed and realized she wasn't speaking German. I tried to invent some physical-symbolic way to express "I need to find the man who left me early this morning and forgot to bring me along," but jerking my arms around and

pointing didn't quite do it. A sweating gray-haired man came out from behind a curtain and talked to me in actual German.

"That direction," he pointed to a distant Adelard, "but you'll never catch the train on foot." He had a thick accent I had never heard before. "It should leave in twenty minutes, and I think the next one comes around noon. But I am no engineer." He waved his hand about saying this. I asked him one last question.

"You mean 'Sarajevo?' I would guess ask the conductor, perhaps it is on his route. I don't know, I don't go down there anymore. You can hardly trust the Germans up here, down there the officials are even bigger crooks. Oh, how should I know..."

The girl asked her father or maybe her grandfather something I couldn't figure out, and he practically shouted at her, pointing at a white-dusted cabinet. Even with the few days that lie bought me, I was still a couple steps behind Adelard. The bakers bent into their work, and I thanked them (I think) and left.

The train down there smelled like pungent oil and animals. When I settled into my seat, no more than a pile of moldy straw, it's the first rest I feel since Adelard abandoned me yesterday morning. It took a day to get to this station (no more than a few raised wood planks) and I got thrown off trying to sneak on the morning train. For the moment I have a second to think.

Austria is yet another country that would not make it into future history books. It is grass, trees, goats and farmers, not unlike everything else I've seen over the past few weeks. It is strange that these early people, wherever they live, they speak acid of those only a stone's throw away and still confide in a stranger from many distant centuries. Of all the future-people I had known, and some were friends I'd say, still each and all were as trustworthy and noble and vibrant as a fragment of loosened road turf; perhaps life intentionally pours some danger in the water. Something like that.

I talk to Charlotte. She is not here, but it is strange: I have spoken to my dead grandparents – a very clever brain-scan program – and it's not the same as speaking to someone not here. She tells me not to fear – not to be so stupid – and I tell her all about my mission in English. She

has a beautiful accent. Sometimes we sit out at night and watch the boring, black sky.

“Where I come from,” I tell her, “the sky changes to whatever you want.”

“But I only need a few stars,” she says.

“Not just stars,” I say, “but anything you want! Dragons! Spaceships! Purple cows!”

She sits pensive for a bit. “That sounds pleasant,” she replies, “but I need to trust the sky. How can you trust a place if you can’t trust the sky?”

And I huddle back and watch the train-goers discuss unimportant things amongst themselves. In a few days, the train brings me there.

I arrived with just half a day to spare. The night I’d spent with a few cows (covertly, thankfully) and not having money makes navigating a city noticeably difficult. It also makes eating a difficulty. I felt guilty about stealing both breakfast and a bed from a farmer (sort of a bed, if you don’t mind mooing), and went to beg a lunch at a small shop. It was near what I thought was the bridge, but upon

further inspection, it was just another bridge. The shop was packed.

And, lo and behold, he was in there. But with all the extra time on my hands, I was prepared.

“You son of a beast,” I yelled at Adelard. “What did you ditch me for?”

Adelard was frozen for a moment. It was something else, like he pretended I didn’t exist. When he finally turned around, he managed a half-cool half-smile. I got in his face. “Adelard, what the hell,” I yelled in English.

He made some gestures and pretended not to know me in an another language (yet one of a hundred that I do not know). I switched to German and kept riling him until he owned up. “Oh Syd,” he fumbled with his drink, “look, Syd, you’re a nice guy and all, but I’ve got to be honest now...”

“Honest what,” I said.

“Syd,” he started, “you’re no good at this. Sorry. I had to take over the mission!”

Some shady-looking fellow ran out and I pretended to get really offended. “But he’s okay, right?”

“Yes, Syd,” he said, “Franz is fine. But he’s not supposed to show until-”

I pushed Adelard roughly. He looked like a startled cat, a loud obnoxious pot banged nearby. He pushed back and I pretended to shake it off a bit. When I went in for another shove, Adelard blocked it but left himself open to the meanest, hungriest uppercut I could land on his chin.

And he fell. It was true: he also had a poison capsule, but his was the left canine. Miserable spy. His mouth foamed and I cleaned his pockets – a few hundred bills, some papers, and the compass – and made my escape.

The actual bridge was in eyeshot. For the first time on this trip, I actually bought provisions (okay, not really with my money) and tried to figure out why he had such a convincing compass.

It's a simple answer, really: it was my compass. I even etched an "S.D." on the bottom side at some point in the future. It must've been that lost compass, and when I tried to access the audio recordings, it was locked with a password. The compass would only give me access to my recordings, which thankfully didn't make it clear that I killed Adelard. I smashed it and threw it in the river.

Which left me with mine. I didn't know what to do. Adelard was dead, Franz was soon to come by, and I couldn't figure this thing out. The papers were all coded, too, to make it hard for me to figure out who Adelard really was, other than some conniving double-spy. Charlotte, for all her wisdom and lack of physical presence, couldn't offer me the right answer. "What should be should be," she said in my head. And I still didn't know what to do, even when I heard a pop some distance from here.

There was a large commotion. I wanted to carve into the compass, see if it'd look the same, but I just didn't feel like learning the intricacies of inter-dimensional time-continuum whatever. Not with something going on. I just stood there instead.

And that shady man-creep from the other cafe stood on the other side of the bridge. He looked like he was ready to cross over and talk to me. But before that could happen, a car pattered toward me, filled with some dignitary, a woman, a driver, and Franz Ferdinand. I did the only thing I could do, and pointed them across to their death.

He is lying in the car. Dead.

It is hard to describe death. Hard to get across to someone who doesn't see it, who cannot smell the bitter taste of gunpowder still in the air. This is the best I can do: his blood pools in the seat of the car. He is not moving, and will never move without another man's effort. His wife, or lover, whoever she is, she lies grasping him terrified, fear curdled on her face. Ferdinand himself was shot with no warning, looks like he's still sunning himself on a bright afternoon. I could prop him up, and you could not tell.

I could not describe his death to the assassin, a greasy, hard, unshaven man. There was some sort of halo around his face, just after the deed, after he shot Ferdinand and he lurched back, leaving the remaining six bullets not unripe in the chamber but in his lover. I could describe to him the silence, maybe even her agony, the small parts of it I grasped; but the assassin saw only the light of angels floating by him, not the bloodied souls they bore up. He could not describe the same figures that bore him after his body was done, after it flew into the river below and its contents feathered out under the bridge. But I will know them. I will remember them when they call for me.

I do not know this couple, but they are dead now.

That much is history, and now over. Sydney Donalds, failure; Adelard Brant, success. Still my mission binds me to one last task. And whatever might be left after that, I suppose, is simply mine.

Letter from “Monsieur Donalds, Legionnaire 2e Classe,” French Foreign Legion, translated from Fr., August 1917:

My Dearest Charlotte,

I do not know what fate God leads me into. It is night as I am writing this, and several of my friends have passed since last I wrote. I may be gone after this letter, they say the Kaiser may make his move within the week, and though they say that every week, I ask you to forgive me for disturbing what was our brief and relative peace together.

My thoughts stray to odd places. I feel there is a lot I want to tell you, so much of me that you do not know about. I think about Austria, Africa (did you know I'd been? It's beautiful there, I should tell you my stories when I get back), things I perhaps should not have done, insofar that I

must account for my actions and be torn from you presently.

The troops here are scared. They have seen their adopted brothers torn apart and do not know what will come tomorrow. Should I say? They do not know that tomorrow is more death, and the day after; but at some point, the blood will stop running. It doesn't look like he will win, but even if the Kaiser does and we are enslaved, that, too, should come to an end; and though neither our children nor our children's children would know, their children and their heirs and so on would taste of free air, until the next regime descends upon them, and we go through this all again.

But that is not my fear. I cannot fear death, only my absence from you, my life. I often have nightmares, but my thoughts all through the day are on you. Tell Alain I will fix the compass for him upon my return, and together we shall explore the woods nearby.

Faithfully,

Your Syd

The Way Back

They say
There is a fine line between it all,
Between good and evil,
Evil and good,
And when you cross it, fine enough
To cut a beard, slice one's belly,
Then that is it, there is no
Going back.

There are those
Who bend, heads down, pumped and primed,
A life of light and meek, careful
Smiles, handshakes,
And then -
Crack -
A tree branch or some

Other thing
Mistaken
For the shrill bark of a gun
And are gone, past and gone and gone and gone.

They say you must
Stick to it
Through and through
Not unlike a sweet summer pop
Melted close into the grooves
Of one's fingers;
They have seen too many good men
And women
Fall through those same fingers,
Chatter onto the ground like loose
Coins, or buttons, something of value.

They say
Do Not,
And I
Do Not.

It is a maze,
I have heard,
One that wraps around endlessly;
Perhaps a blanket does that,
Perhaps you find yourself in some quilt,
Knit carefully,
Each square sewn in upside down, intentionally
To spite perfection.

But it is not that.

They do not run, shouting
Gleefully
As children who have discovered an empty barrel
Because they are lost, thick
In confusion. I cannot fear that line,
Cut through some blubbering trout
Eyes as glass;
One day,
I shall pass through a wooded area
Behind my house
And then

That line
Is crossed.
The sun shall be as bright
And will not
Shout
Threaten
Will beat down the same.
My fear,
The one nudging, soft and insistent,
Is not how I shall find
The way back
But why.

The Tenth Tale

Shahrazad bowed to her master, “And that is the tale of the powerful sheik Hassan al-Din and the three widows.”

“Fantastic, fantastic!” replied King Shahryar, clapping enthusiastically. “That was truly a tale for the ages, fondest Shahrazad.”

“My lord, my thanks,” she turned her hand delicately about to the king, effusive and seductive, “that such a tale should be worthy of such a ruler.” Shahrazad adjusted her simple robe, white and pure, ruffled about her, and knelt again. She wore a turquoise necklace, once her mother’s, the wife of the king’s most trusted wazir. Her father felt a pang of regret that she insisted she be the next maiden for the king’s rampage. He had held the necklace in his hand, testing its three stones, worked about by copper, too ashamed of his fear to make eye contact with his

favorite daughter. She had told him the time would have come soon. “There is another such tale I could relate to you, dearest master.”

“And what might that tale be?”

“It is the tale of Ja’far and the Endless Bazaar.”

The king clapped again. “Do tell, do tell!”

Shahrazad stood again. She took up a tambourine, darkened with hand oils, and came into a slow, sultry stride. “Let us consider Ja’far.” She half-knelt in her strides, long and voluptuous. She shook the tambourine kneeling down, pounding it a few times and gliding with the certainty and grace of a master courtesan. “The son of a merchant, Ja’far al-Rasheed lived in Cairo. His father, a man of fabrics, taught his son of each of the fabrics in the marketplace and what to pay for each, what to sell each at. He showed him dyed silks, blood-red wools, cottons of the bluest sky blue, pale as an ifrit. Ja’far could identify each of them by the simple touch of his fingers, some even by their tastes, as his father was known to lick a fabric to distinguish the rich weave from the poor weave. The two grew prosperous together, man and son, and upon his fifteen birthday, Ja’far’s father told him, ‘No longer shall I treat you as an

apprentice, for today we are now partners in business.’ He let Ja’far ride his mule alone into the marketplace, set up their shop by himself, and conduct business without overseeing his every transaction. Ja’far was trebly excited on this day.

“He conducted he and his father’s business all by himself that day. He bought and sold, he tried and tested weaves, and he haggled and bargained like a true merchant’s son. Just as the sun was going down, an old woman in mourning-outfit came to Ja’far with a small piece of turban-cloth. ‘Here is the last thing I own,’ she said, ‘and I must get a gold dinar for it so I may bury my faithful husband honorably. I know it isn’t much, but will you please consider the price I am asking?’

“Now Ja’far looked at the turban-cloth, and it was once a piece of finery, but now old and dirty, well-worn and well-abused. He saw old woman, with a few of her teeth missing, wrinkled and agéd, and felt pity for her. ‘What was your husband’s work,’ he asked.

““He was a goat-herder, and we were quite prosperous, on the outskirts of such-and-such a town. We had not much, but with his wisdom and hard work, he

had multiplied his fortune many times. Alas, the fortune vanished in his loss, and I must come to Cairo to fetch a good price for my honorable man.’

“‘That is a sad tale,’ Ja’far said, ‘and I must be honest: that your turban-piece is not worth half a silver. But this is my first day trading, and as that I feel pity for your cause, I shall pay you out of my wages and wear the cloth to shield my scalp on the way back home.’ So he paid the woman and she went her way.”

“What an honorable man,” the king said, “what justice, what kindness!”

“Yes indeed, my lord,” Shahrazad said, “as saith the wise ones:

“Tis best to be strong of heart and availeth peace,

“Than might of sword to be, and sundereth breath.

“This young Ja’far was of the former, naturally.”

“A kindly soul. May good fortune be worked upon him!”

“It is well that you should say that, oh king, for as Ja’far packed away his wares and strode the back of his mule, he pulled back his hood and unwrapped the turban-cloth. It was once fine, once a rather delicate silk cloth

unlike he had ever seen, dipped in hues of green and gold, but now in shambles. He waited for the other merchants to leave to their homes, and wrapped the cloth about his pate so that he might get one use out of the precious price he paid for it. It was dark out, and as Ja'far and his mule paced from the marketplace, he spotted torches burning bright in the night around him. He knew the people of the neighborhood around the marketplace to be poor, and have no need to light their houses with torches, so he wondered at this unseemingly miracle about him.

“And soon he heard husky voices calling out, other merchants seemingly, asking Ja'far to come inspect their wares, to stop by and feel their soft silks and fine woven fabrics. It was a strange night to Ja'far, and he could not find his way back to the main road, so he stopped by one of the merchant's booths to ask his way.

““Dear sir,' Ja'far said, 'whither to such-and-such a neighborhood?’

“The man replied, ‘That place is neither here nor there, and never have I heard of such a town. Perhaps you should inspect this fine gold canteen?’ And at this, the man produced a canteen bladder, such of the like Ja'far had

never seen, woven of gold and inlaid with diamonds and rubies.

“‘Inshallah,’ he said, ‘that I should ever see another piece of workery of the likes!’ He felt the studded rubies and stones about its surface. ‘And what should be the price of such a piece?’

“‘Three thousand gold dinars,’ quoteth the man. ‘And it is the finest canteen one might ever possess, unlike anything of its type.

“‘I should be so lucky to be a king of kings to afford such a piece,’ Ja’far said.”

“That is a worthy canteen,” said the king. “I could not imagine any such a thing of woven gold. The price is barely reachable by most kings’ means!”

“That is not all,” said Shahrazad, “but the next merchant held a piece of the finest silk-cloth of China that Ja’far had never seen, even finer than the turban he had purchased from the old woman. He put his fingers on it to know its fineness, colored in dark blues and greens and reds of the deepest bloods, and when he put his tongue upon the cloth to know it by taste, it melted in his mouth.

“‘The finest silks of Asia,’ the merchant said.

“The sun was far down, giving almost no light, and Ja’far saw he would need to wend his way home in the darkness. ‘Kindest merchant,’ he said, ‘praytell which city we are in.’

“‘We are in Cairo of the New Age.’

“‘And in what relation is Cairo of the New Age to the Cairo of King Salimar?’

“The merchant arched his brow, for he did not believe him. ‘Cairo of the New Age is where we are, and the Cairo of which you speak is where we cannot be. For it has been a thousand years since Salimar’s Cairo has been on this earth. You claim to come from a place much older than one’s years.’”

“‘Incredible!’” The king slapped his knee. “‘What a strange tale this one is!’”

“‘Yes my king, strange indeed.’” Shahrazad shook her tambourine. “‘This tale comes from the deepest mountains of India, where merchants sell the strangest wares in the world. Magical furs, carpets of flight, all is available in those distant bazaars.’”

“‘Then this must be that Endless Bazaar they are in. Tell me more of Ja’far’s adventures.’”

Shahrazad knelt to Shahryar. "I would, my king, but that it is time we take ourselves to the bed. The sun is gone from the sky, and we must bring ourselves to a fair sleep for tomorrow's strength issues from tonight's rest."

"Well spoken," he said, and he motioned to his servants to collect their instruments and items and they had their playful rest that night.

The next day, after Shahryar's kingly engagements and meting out wise judgments, the king was moved to hear more of young Ja'far's tale. "It is every night that you must bewitch me with unfinished tales, and this night, I would enjoy a good night's rest having heard the end of one such tale."

"And such you shall, my lord," answered the wise woman.

"But I wish you to stretch this tale until our rest together," he said, "for this past week and half have I been kept up upon wonderings of your tales: whither your adventures may go, how such strange things may come upon their close. Last night, I wondered things of the future: should my kingdom still stand, should the world be at peace with itself. Should crime always be. I have had but

two hours' sleep since your story addled my brain! So do me such a right as you should but finish a story and let it end there."

Shahrazad knew of the king's bloodthirst and often deflected his frequent requests; this particular one, she feared for her life. She thought to herself, "It is in a storyteller's best interests that she keep her audience enthralled: the better to work the magic of her stories into them. I have yet to turn him from his manner of bloodshed, and yet to make an honest king of him. Should I quit tonight, Shahryar may tire of me and have my head."

"Dearest king," she said, "it has simply fallen upon inopportune times to finish a story. I wish to fill your nights with respite and entertainment, as suits a king as yourself. But think of it this way: a story's beginning and end are but short parts of the story as a whole, less so than the middle, so suffice it to logic that we more frequently find ourselves in its middle than at its end. But I will attempt to end our game upon a more opportune time, though my faculties for story-telling are weak upon that way. My apologies," she bowed, "should we not manage what you are asking of me."

“It is of little matter,” he said, “but that I have found myself musing on the nature of the world many years past our own. I suppose we should not live to see it, and yet I wonder: do kings and kingdoms exist? Should all be subjects and goat farmers? Or should things tend more opulent, as Ja’far has been finding out? A woven gold canteen: may such a thing ever exist! Yet it is folly to suggest that what is not now may never be; perhaps there may be silks that melt to the touch of a man’s tongue, in such their fineness. Still, I begin to wonder, what need has a king for such extravagant fineries? There is the show a royal must make, but three-thousand gold for a canteen? Perhaps there is some limit to the show, some limit to what one must possess, for, there are few years in one’s life, and all the pieces of gold in all the world cannot buy what Allah willeth not.”

Shahrazad grew tangled at the king’s musings, for her story was to unwind but one way, though her king’s mind was striving in another. Yet a good story-teller, as the over-modest woman was, knows that one must follow her audience, that it is their will a story remain locked in memory, their will that they applaud and appreciate the tale.

So Shahrazad grew a device in her mind, and told the king, “These are not idle musings, oh king, for they form the meat of our tale. It is excellent you have noted them.

“Consider Ja’far,” she continued, “who wandered about the Endless Bazaar of Cairo of the New Age. By the torchlight he observed many fine and goodly things: saddles of carefully worked silver, studded with ample stones; swords painted in the finest detail, inlaid in their handles with diamonds so large that one could not wrap one’s hand around the handle; florists peddling roses and other such flowers painted in gold, rubies, diamonds, turquoise and other gems on the tips of their petals. Each work was finer than the last, each craft shown in that bazaar having come to its absolute, utter perfection. The merchants were all clothed in clothes that shimmered and shined by the torchlight, each woven gold, each worth ten of the canteen he had seen earlier. After some time, Ja’far noticed the other customers of the bazaar were inspecting and feeling the wares, but not a one had purchased an item yet. These were people who admired the items, people his father would try to shoo away for they would scare away true business, the kind his father tossed water at. Some of

the merchants in this bazaar did the same.

“These customers were ragged about themselves, perhaps even worse in Cairo of the New Age than in Ja’far’s own time, and the merchants much-abused them with their tongues, calling them beggars and rascalions and poor. The merchants were kings of kings, surrounded by the harshest and crudest peoples in that New Age, and tossed water upon those they deemed less worthy of themselves.”

“What cruelty these merchants know,” Shahryad said.

“What cruelty rich merchants know,” Shahrazad replied.

“And yet,” she said, “Ja’far, who was dressed not much better than the poorest of the beggars, was treated like royalty, for his merchant’s clothes were unlike any in the bazaar. He passed from stand to stand, touching and studying things that are beyond the comprehension of kings. And who should appear, but that the king’s very own caravan! Forty wazirs wearing forty robes, beautiful to look upon, valued at twenty thousand gold dinars each, all on forty camels, each saddled with finer saddles than even

Ja'far had seen in the bazaar. Solid gold swords, each inlaid with the largest and finest stones, so large that they could not possibly fight off an intruder with them; these were the costliest of all. One of the forty, dressed even finer than all the others, took off his camel and bestrode himself to a merchant.

“‘The king needs the finest carpet of woven gold,’ he told the merchant, and the merchant produced a carpet unlike one Ja'far has ever seen before: shimmering gold in the torch light, glowing carnelians, finer stones and sapphires all gilt around the edges. The man hardly inspected the carpet and paid the fee, ten thousand gold dinars, and the caravan wended their way back to the palace.”

Shahryar gasped. “For what need has any king of such a fine piece! Let alone at night! It makes me ashamed of my own place.”

“Fear not your kingship,” Shahrazad returned, “for you are a goodly king and able and wise. But the king of Cairo of the New Age was known to all the great riches of the world. Chalice of the finest work. All the finest and rarest furs of the world, carnelians planted for eyes. His

palace was of pure marble, and contained all the rare birds of the age, bright plumes, ones from the tallest mountains in India. The palace was a gem in Cairo of the New Age, and much of the people's houses dulled its image."

"Whyfore was that, dear Shahrazad?"

"For that they were of the deepest poverty. These beggars in the bazaar had not two silver dirhams to place between one's fingers, and often had to beg their livelihoods from the king's escort. Ja'far watched the caravan kick and prod the beggars away, and felt pity for their plight. This king was a shameful one, unlike yourself, Shahryar. He would steal and rob every daniq with his excessive taxing from those of the deepest plights, and share the profits with those of his forty wazirs. They were rich beyond riches, and had left the rest of Cairo of the New Age in utter desolation."

"How terrible! What an unjust ruler. Why don't the peoples simply walk away?"

Shahrazad hit her tambourine. "Where to, dear king? There is desert all around, and there is not much water to be had elsewhere. The king in this story does not get his justice while Ja'far was there, but do know that he

died at a young age due to excessive drink and enjoyments of the flesh, and the kingdom after him vanished into the sands, as Allah the Destroyer of Delights decrees. But as to Ja'far, he saw this terrible state of affairs and bespoke himself, 'Here is a wicked kingdom, one in which all the deepest delights are taken by a handful of men. That I might return to my Cairo again!' And he fell a-weeping his ill-fortune and his dear lost father.

"The bazaar stretched for as long as Ja'far and his mule could go, and farther. Until at last, one merchant saw the strange sight of Ja'far in his foreigner's clothing, and told him, 'You do not look as if you are from Cairo of the New Age, dear child.' 'I am not,' Ja'far replied, 'for I come from a time a thousand years past and have become stranded here. But none should believe me.'

"'I believe you,' he said, 'for I have come from whence you claimed to be. It is a wondrous world around us now, but I would give it for the chance to be back.' And upon saying this, the merchant noticed the dirty turban that Ja'far wore; he wrung his hands with delight. 'How much would you sell that item to me for?'

"'I would sell it but for the gold dirham I paid for it.

It was an old woman, and I gave her alms to bury her dead husband in exchange for this.’

“‘Then I shall give you a gold dirham for it. It is not worth more than that.’ And they exchanged pieces and the merchant growled with greed at his purchase, for he recognized the fabric. It was the same green and gold of a robe that he had purchased from the very same widow, and had brought him into Cairo of the New Age. He had bargained the woman to three daniqs for it, but had lost the robe in the bazaar for half a loaf of bread.

“Ja’far fell sore and tired and hungry, and wanted his fill of the finest breads of Cairo of old and the finest meats of his father’s house. He took the dirham and purchased what he could, a loaf of bread-”

“How dear the loaf!” King Shahryar said.

“Dear indeed! The loaf was a stale one, two days old, at that. It was so hard Ja’far almost broke his teeth upon it, and a small child in rags looked up at him in pity. Ja’far, being of a kind heart, offered the child a bite of his bread, for he knew he was hungry, and the child chewed the harsh loaf, for he had known much worse. But the child, not being used to being a beggar, offered Ja’far a dirty head

wrap for to keep the sun off of him, and Ja'far accepted it. He offered the child another bite, but he said, 'That is all I have paid for, kind stranger.' And the child went on his way.

"Now at this, the night had stretched on further than any night Ja'far had known, and was getting darker and darker. The torches in the distance soon dimmed and went out, and in a few more moments, the torches around Ja'far went out, so that he could not see the merchants and their brilliant wares. He felt his way with his mule, trying to find a way out of the maze, and just upon the last moment of his panic, the sun came upon him and showed him in the marketplace of Cairo of old. Ja'far bent and kissed the ground, weeping to himself that he should find his way back, for it was the kindness of the child that had brought him back to his land."

Shahryar looked solemn. "What a tale, dearest Shahrazad. It is not as delightful as the last, but there is something to it, I think. I am not sure what to make of it, but I do feel the desire to deal more kindly with the poor who come to my court for justice."

Shahrazad bowed. "It was a cruel world Ja'far had

visited, and may that world never visit us! Imagine, all the finest fineries at one's hand, and yet well beyond one's grasp!"

"Indeed. What ever came of Ja'far after his travels?"

"He grew to be a kindly merchant, always charitable, always giving alms to those who came for it. And he grew quite prosperous at the same time, for he had figured a way to spin gold into thread and had woven it into fine things, but that was much before our time, and his secrets are lost to us now."

"Most excellent that it had ended well. Thank you, kind Shahrazad, but it appears we have time to start ourselves another tale."

Shahrazad laughed. "We do, dear king, we do! Let me see. I believe I have yet to tell you the tale of the idle mule and the horse, yes?"

The Masters

A waitress showed two young men to a table.

“Thank you,” said the one in a blue coat.

The young man in tweed took his coat off. He hung it around the chair. He wore a shirt, plaid and red, and the other man wore a tee shirt for a band or movie called “Twilight’s Numbers.” They ordered drinks.

“I even got the speech,” the man in the band shirt floated a hand. ““All this can be yours.””

“Really.”

“It was pretty scheissty.”

“Yeah.”

They opened the menus. The man in plaid yawned. “I’ll just get a drink.”

“The usual ‘I want you to be like me.’” The man in the band shirt perused the menu. “He even let me be a legal

assistant, doesn't want to show favor."

"How generous."

"Not even his assistant, just *a* assistant." He looked up. "I passed the damned bar. Come on, like I want to work for my dad the rest of my life."

"Could be worse. Could be a writer."

"But, you know, who wants to be given everything? I know those rich brats, they have a hell of a life, but really, I wouldn't give up my life for their shit."

"Plus liver failure."

"Right." The man in the band shirt closed the menu. "I want to make something of myself. Go out on my own. The old man did it, he wasn't his dad's assistant. He wouldn't pump other people's shit with a ten foot..."

The waitress came by and they ordered. The lighting was dark, dim, blue-lit. There were quiet conversations around the two, and they were among the loudest in the bar. They could make out the well-dressed shapes around them, if not their faces; the other patrons were a raceless, ageless crowd.

"Taking his time he is," said the plaid man.

The man in the band shirt sipped his beer. "How's

Miriam going? Things still good?"

The plaid man shook his head.

"Oh."

"It's okay. She wanted different things."

"That's a shame."

"It's fine."

A dark, husky voice spoke over the crowd, and they hushed. "Thank you, thank you for showing up on such a cold, cold night." They turned to observe the round, short man on the mic. "It takes dedication to show in the middle of our little snowstorm and pay tribute to our guest. He's played with Evans, Davis, and a whole list of masters. It's safe to say he is one himself. It is my great pleasure to introduce the beloved Mr. Joshua Carpenter and his trio. Thank you." The patrons clapped.

A tall man waved down their applause. He wore a light, gray beard and his scalp was clean. Several people held up cell phones and took pictures. The tall man took to a dark bass, and two more men, also in clean suits, sat at a piano and drumset. "Thank you, thank you," the tall man said. "It's cold out, so let's get started."

The piano rung out a few inquisitive tones, and the

percussionist followed. The tall man at the bass plucked along with them, following the percussionist for a moment. After the introduction, they settled in more, and the pianist took a solo.

“Her dreams were... different. House, kids, yard. The usual stuff. I don’t mind it, just...” the plaid man shrugged. “You know. Things weren’t right for a while, anyway.”

“That stinks.” The man in the band tee took a sip of his drink. “I thought she seemed pretty cool.”

The bassist took a solo after the pianist. His eyebrows arched, shading his eyes like a heavy skull under the harsh lighting. He danced on the soft, pounding basslines quickly, princely. He followed through a quick burst and placed some notes on high, cerebral notes, notes that neither touched ground nor human thought. The bassist swayed with his music, and the other musicians yielded for him.

“He’s good.”

“He’s not bad,” said the plaid man.

“Good for his years.”

“Not bad.”

The waitress deposited a plate for the young man. The man in plaid looked upon the white, crumbed fish and its simple garnish. The young man in the band shirt crushed lemon over it and took a bite. "You want some?"

"No thanks."

The plucks of the bass grew slower and fainter, and transitioned into the open melody. The three were cooking again, dashing in and out of each others' hits and notes, fused like three puppeteers over a dancing marionette. The young man in plaid tapped his finger in beats and off-beats.

"You should get something."

"Nah, that's okay," the plaid man said. "Not in the mood."

"Why not?"

"Just the usual bull."

"What's that? The girl thing?"

"No. That's history." He took a sip of his beer. "My parents want me to get a respectable job. They've got this recep thing all lined up."

"What's freelancing doing for you?"

"Jeesh."

The drummer hit some soft notes during his solo.

The plaid man stared at the fish. “I’m really not the recep type. It’s not what I want to do. Sure, it’s something to do in the meantime, but it’s only going to push me further from finishing this damned book.”

“I thought it was done.”

“Well, it isn’t.”

The drummer started pounding on his set. Sweat was streaking down his temples. His brush kept a steady tempo, while all hell reigned on his stick. It was a cadence unique and yet familiar. The bassist presided over him, arms crossed and slightly nodding along. The piano kept time.

“It’s something that’s meaningful to me. Something I want to add to the world. Like this hep cat.”

“Hmmm,” the man in the band shirt said.

The drummer walloped and spat fire. The pianist hit heavy chords. The solo finished, sweat beading on his forehead. The audience clapped.

“The thing that gets me,” the man in the band shirt pointed with his fork, “is that he thinks I’d be happy with estate planning. Like that’s really what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

“Should be good money.”

“It’s okay,” he said, “just reliable. But who wants to count another person’s money? I don’t want to be some glorified accountant.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something with immigration. That’s who’s really hurting right now.”

The plaid man nodded in time. “Is there one bar, or different kinds?”

“Just the state bar. It wasn’t too bad.”

The song died down, and their audience clapped. “Thank you. Thank you.” said the bassist on the mic. He introduced his players. “Best men in the business,” he said. They clapped again. The piano quietly picked up a few delicate chords, and he plucked a goofy bassline. He spoke into the mic. “For those Ellington fans out there, ‘Beginning to See the Light.’”

“I mean, think about it.” The man in the band shirt put down his fork. “Look at all the hard-working illegals getting shafted by their employers. They work, pay bills, pay taxes. My dad pays less taxes than they do! And still they get booted out because they don’t know shit about the

immigration laws. Work visas, green cards, just so much..."

The plaid man finished his beer. "Yeah."

The bassist started with a solo on "You Are My Sunshine." The percussionist kept a low profile, and the pianist put his arms up on the piano. The bar was silent, taking in each pluck. The bassist started with the known theme, and devolved it into rapid attacks, then raising it again off the earth. He continued his scooping attacks, changing quickly his direction, and threw in a brief lullaby. The people near the two young men were captivated, and the plaid man stopped his finger-tapping.

"So what'll you do," the plaid man said.

"Huh?"

The bassist slowed his attacks. The drums faded out. He was solo, alone on the stage, playing an intellectual hymn for the patrons. There was less order to it than carefully placed notes, some alien structure to them, and after a few more minutes, he returned to "Sunshine" and the solo ended. The waitress took the empty plate.

"You're not going to take the job," the plaid man said.

"Well..."

“You spent all this time complaining.”

“But I’ve got debts, B-.”

The bassist brought brought the room soft again. He played the main riff and signaled one last solo.

“You’re only given one life. You’ve got to make something of it.”

“I’ve got to live, too,” the man in the band shirt said.

The bassist insisted. No one picked up the solo yet. The room caught on to the joke.

“It’s just...”

“What,” the plaid man said.

“I want to, I really do. I have dreams and all. But looking at them, nothing’s going to happen. It’s just going to be-”

“Whatever,” the plaid man said.

The pianist took it up. Halting chords rung out softly.

“I think I know what it is,” the man in plaid said.

“Damned if you do?”

“Well,” he said. “We’ll never be as big as them.”

“Who?”

The piano danced gracefully.

“Do you know how old this guy is?”

“I don’t know. Seventy?”

“Like a hundred fifty three.”

“No way.”

“Not a joke.” The plaid man shook his head. “It’s them. It’s all of them.”

“Who. The Germans?”

“No, you idiot, the fathers of the world. We’re all just living in their shadows.”

“I can kind of see that.”

“There’s no new guys to play jazz anymore because all the old guys are still doing it. Jazz is dead. They’re killing it.”

The man in the band shirt smirked. “Well, everyone knows jazz is dead.”

The trio gained steam.

“But look. We’re listening to some old guy who’s way past his prime. Look at him. It’s all brain, no guts! We’re not listening to some new guy burning this through because he doesn’t exist.”

“Because there are no good new guys.”

“Bullshit. Josh had to come from somewhere. They trailblazed, but now the trail’s gone cold.”

“Cream rises to the top.”

The bassist played a rapid attack with the pianist.

“It’s a different world too, B-. We don’t have Vietnam and Jim Crow and Cuba happening.”

“But we do have things. We still have terrorists and nukes and wars. We’re just not feeling them the same.”

The pianist started a riff, and the bassist responded.

“You think people are different? You think we’ve changed in the past fifty years?”

“Not DNA, but yes.”

“What’s the change?”

“More complacency, more consumerism, less will. Less interaction, less need for imagination. Having everything you want and then some. Maybe computers, too, that probably plays a part. I’m not sure yet.”

“Our generation isn’t all bad. What about that facebook guy? He’s pretty successful.”

The pianist flexed rapid runs over the keys.

“Exceptions. New technology, that always comes first. I’m talking more basic. Music. Books. When’s the last

time you read a good book?”

“I tried some new Indian guy. It was about an Indian son returning home. It was okay.”

“Okay doesn’t help when you compare what they’ve done. Kerouac? Vonnegut? Our stuff is all shit. It’s small, microscopic, it doesn’t mean anything. It’s the kind of stuff you wipe on your ass five years from now.”

“Great,” the band tee said. “So then what?”

The pianist threw in a riff from Peanuts. The bassist chuckled.

“I don’t know.”

The trio gave room for the pianist. He played around “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and the audience laughed.

“Look at that,” the plaid man said. “Just anything will do.”

“It’s nice.”

“Life is too short. Be anything but nice.”

They continued playing. The plaid man circled his empty beer on the table, pushing around beads of condensation. The man in the band shirt sat, waiting for the next piece of conversation. The trio kept their interminable

pace, one they had known for half a century, well-practiced, expert.

“They’re no longer visionaries. The blind masters.”

“Hmmm.”

The plaid man continued. “We have to kill them. All of them. Total liquidation.”

“Wait, what?”

“You heard me. They’re in the way. They’re mucking up progress.”

“How’s that?”

“No room to learn. Only room for the old, proven stuff. So then mass executions, book burnings. I said not to be nice.”

The pianist died down. The audience clapped. The bassist marked the final return to the main theme.

“Jesus. Someone bit into your ass.” The man in the band shirt shook his head. “You don’t actually mean it, right?”

“I didn’t used to. Whatever it takes, I guess.”

“Wait, so you would actually...?”

“Their time is done. Has been done. We haven’t stepped up like we should. We’re a disgrace, every day

we let them write more of our history.” His words spat fire. “All these things, useless things, video games, social media, even books, all these books just meant to placate-”

“Jeez, quiet down!”

“And this. Look at how revered they are. Look at how they record every little thing on their phones, as if they really need to keep all this crap.” His voice rose. “It was never about that. It was supposed to be about the finding, right?”

“Look, let’s just go already.”

“No. Not yet.”

The song died down a bit and a few people clapped. The three stood united, hammering back and forth in what sounded like a struggle.

“I think I still have something to say.”

“Then say it and let’s get out.” The man in the band shirt scratched at his neck. “Let’s just make it quick and we can go to my place, I just don’t-”

“Want to talk? In here? Where Josh is playing? He’s had worse; remember, the guy’s survived Martin Luther King-sized beatings and the fifties. I think he’ll be fine with what I have to say over here.”

“You’re nuts.”

“Maybe.”

The trio started cooking on a hard beat from the drummer.

“But we’re all lost, gone.”

The drums kept pounding.

“You and I, we’re not going to make it in another’s footsteps.”

The bass plucked loud.

“We’ve got to jump ship, leave them for dead if our lives are going to amount to anything.”

The piano smashed rigid chords.

“It’s not just us, it’s everyone I know. They’re all scared of the shadow that’s been over them. They’re all weaned on the fruits of our parents’ work. Fuck that. Fuck them.”

Sweat dripped off the drummer.

“We need a space to make our own lives, a space to make our own mistakes. Your dad, my dad, they’re all about success because that’s what they know. I’m not. I want to be great at what I do. To be great, you don’t need an opportunity to succeed so much as a bunch to fuck up.

We don't have that leeway they did. That room for frontier.
We're just--"

"Excuse me, sir," a tall waiter stopped by, "but
you're disturbing the other customers."

"He didn't mean--"

"That's okay, we were just leaving. Seen him
before. I'm kinda sick of this place, anyway."

The man in plaid left a few bills on the table, and
they left.

To the Miserable Artist at the End of his Rope

And when Death came, they clasped hands,
and his was a strong grip.

