

*The Keeper of
Dreams*
Volume 2

By Matthew Keefer

Measureless Oceans Press



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Press website:

www.measurelessoceans.com

Artist website:

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Dreams

I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding

-Walt Whitman

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A House Burning

A House Burning

As appeared on No Extra Words

What would you take, what would you leave?

It's a large house. It's an old mansion: the old wing has collapsed, no one ventures there anymore; the new wing, that has been vacant for years; the servants' quarters, crowded, where we live now.

Or used to. Until the fire came through.

We're adaptable creatures, ultimately. But to a point. You can't bring cattle into a desert; a bird does not fly through the ocean. Inside, there is fire: outside, what is there? Is there anything to adapt to?

Have we even seen that world?

Food, clothing, each other. We're staring at the fire, but we didn't know it would be dark; outside the fire it is dark. Candlesticks –but no, it's too late to go back. Shelter, too: something more than the overcrowded caves, off in the distance. Shoes, perhaps.

A House Burning

It is dark out.

We were used to a lot of things. A lot of conveniences we took for granted. Food, clothing; each other. We definitely took each other for granted. Especially when it grew dark, when the mood was right to tell stories in that dark, lying back, propped up on a pillow. When I thought of the comfort that might come if you'd only cross over, come off your bed into mine.

But that is long ago. It is the fire now.

It's what there is. What is left. Its thick lips and long tongues, licking and biting what was once ours. It is hungry; it is always hungry. It is light, too, pain to our eyes, pain to see it flicker out and die in the coals, I am sure. I turn away. The fumes ...

When will the sun come out?

The bureau, the fights, the dancing. There won't be dancing, anymore. That isn't true, that can't be true; but there is no floor to dance on, you know?

Things we should have left: the money, our IDs. We know who we are. We know where we're from. We know what we've been through: trudging, dragging feet through thick muck; the insults, the insinuations, the sneers; fingers, wagging, heads, wagging. We've heard it all, and it's passed through us. Sometimes it's just easier to believe.

Easier than seeing what's really going on. The fire: it has always been there. It started in the corner, that old wing, but no one ventures there, no one but ghosts and mice and flames. We were too busy keeping our heads down, telling ourselves the black smoke was harmless. Trying to drag through the muck, like a dance partner, listen to those shouted insults, pretending them music. And here we are. The fire. More of us are turning away, now.

It's out there. Out in the pitch. Was the sun always like this?

Faith, hope. Ourselves. We failed individually; we are individual failures. They never mentioned history: bands of hunter-gatherers; families of farmers; a phalanx of soldiers. Failures together are even bigger failures, apparently, each individual failing balled into more. They never mentioned that failure balled into failure balled into success; but they never had to say that. We just assumed the opposite.

They let us assume.

We can blame a lot on them. We can blame them those haughty looks beaming down from those portraits; we can blame them, yes, for that old cigar that never quite put out in the old wing. We can blame and point and shout.

Not that the dark would listen. Or the flames, either.

But here we are, the last turned away from the fire, from the

A House Burning

all-consuming. Burnt in our eyes; burned in our hearts. A true heart never came from anything more than ashes. There is that, at least.

Do I know the answer? Do you? We don't, either.

But I do know a direction. And a purpose.

There is a pace.

There is a lot to accomplish, yet. Too much. But there is a joke, too.

How do you eat an elephant? (It is my mother's.)

One bite at a time.

Perhaps that joke will last the first mile, perhaps you will think of something next (something mean, something dirty? It doesn't matter, something you). But there is a pace, and with that, hope and riches and fears. And love, if there is time.

Can you smell it?

It is dark out.

But already the air breathes cooler ...

Pressure

Pressure

what does not break
shall bend
a stone's igneous beauty
warped and glassy
fog-lifted
a black mirror
pitching dark reflections
what does not bend
shall break

Mercy

Mercy

“That’s it,” the angel said.

“Ah.”

George shifted in his chair; he leaned in on his knees. The room was ordinary, that is to say, ordinary to a living man: off-white walls, a pale blue curtain on the window. He had expected fire and brimstone, or something along those lines. “So,” he nodded, “Alesandra ...”

“It says here,” the angel produced a book, “that you are granted one last wish. You shall have one memory from your living life granted to you as your afterlife.”

“Oh.”

“This memory,” the angel continued, “will carry weight toward your judgment. Even if it is as light as an onion, it may carry you from—”

“Jennifer.”

“Truly?”

George nodded. “Yes.”

“Do bear in mind, the memory you keep shall anchor on you

and grant you either condemnation or release. You may take all the time you need.”

“And I get to keep this memory?”

The angel nodded.

“It’s clear. I want the memory of Jennifer. No one else.”

The angel closed its eyes and sighed.

“You’ve never had anyone like me.”

“It is not that,” the angel said.

“They’re all idiots,” George said. “They all choose something they think will get them off the hook. I’m done. I knew that since Jennifer, even before her. But I get to keep one memory. It’s obvious, isn’t it?” He crossed his arms. “Go out in a blaze of glory.” He snorted. “Right?”

“No, I wished that you—” the angel bit its lip. “That’s not her name, you know.”

“So? You know who. Gimme my damn wish.”

It shook its head. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

The angel smiled stiffly. “Yes, of course.”

“About time something went my way.”

“Of course.” The angel tapped two fingers to George’s scalp.

It was a dark night on the path. It was always dark. It was cold

this time, too, a cold night in the city. Which one? He wasn't sure. One up north. New York, maybe. Maybe it was Chicago, this time. No lizards; not Florida.

Doesn't matter. George had been following this girl for two weeks, just off the path. He was certain she spotted him once, four days in; certain that she would catch on and not run this late. But we're creatures of habit, just like he was. It's easier to craft a lie, bend reality, than it is to change a routine.

You can't change routine.

He waited by the side of the path, panting. Next to a tree. His phone buzzed—his brother. He turned it off. More important things to attend to.

George looked up briefly: neon orange shoes; same pink running suit, small breasts, zipped up; and a sprig of chestnut hair jutting out from a blue knit cap, cheeks certainly flushed. Young, college age. He shook his head by the tree, feigning exhaustion, and glanced up; a quick peek of his target, a small flash of the path he'd descend upon. She focused away from him and kept going.

Again, easier to craft a lie, work around the truth than to confront it. He'd hoped she would stop to check up on him, but even this late at night, this darkness, animal instincts kicked in. Danger. It's this moment he thrives in, imbibes, the moment just before all others—the moment that extends to eternity, that grants immortality.

He sprung his trap toward the end of her run. Too bad for her. He sprinted after her and tackled her to the ground.

“What the fuck!”

There was a struggle. “You know, Jennifer—you do make a good Jennifer—”

“Mmmphhhh!”

“Now now, there’s no need for—OW—that. Let’s just ...”

All it takes. Just one. Little. Little slash. No scream, no more struggle, eyes fade into acceptance. That’s how Jennifer ended. She dies.

But this memory, there seems to be more struggle in—

“Fucking HEEELP!”

The girl grabbed at his hand. She fights over the knife. He pushes, overcomes, at least for a moment, scrapes her throat ...

But something else kicks in. He’s panting, he’s panicking, the knife is in peril, now it’s pushing toward him. That’s not how it’s supposed to—

“That’s not how it happened.”

“Watch,” the angel said.

“I don’t die here. It was a gun. Quick. Bam, gone. Not like this.”

“Just watch,” the angel said.

The police are there. The girl is shaking. A body is carted off.

“We just want to get your story straight, Miss, we’re not trying to ...”

“Come here, we’ve got another blanket for ...”

“You’re okay? Sorry, we’re just doing our ...”

Numbness. Vertigo: the world upends itself. Suddenly you’ve killed someone. Someone who deserved to die, yes, someone who was going to kill you. The earth beneath you is fake; it’s also numb. It’s shaking, too. People can’t look at you. You wonder what you look like. It’s cold. You’re wet.

She vomited again.

“We’re done here. Let’s get you somewhere warm, Miss.”

“Rookies go through it, too.”

The cop took a liking to her—a Joe, she wanted to say—he was older, gray-haired. Probably had a daughter her age, too. The medic didn’t introduce himself, she didn’t think. He kept sighing while checking her vitals. She felt unreal in the back of the ambulance.

“They do. Survivor’s guilt. Sort of. But that situation, you know. You have to.” Joe sighed. “Think of the people you saved by stopping him there. He would’ve just done it again. You’re a hero.”

She didn’t know what to say. She just wanted him to shut up; he was kind, warm, too, but the edges on his words. No, it was the

edges on all words, those fake, phony, plastic little things that don't mean anything. Like: "Stop," and "please don't."

He noticed his words still grated on her ears and quieted himself. Was she special? Did she do anything heroic?

"He's better off dead," said the medic. He was younger. "Not go through the courts. My girl: I'da done it myself."

The ride to the hospital was rough.

Coming home was the toughest.

"Oh my God, my little girl, my poor little girl!"

Her mother wrapped herself around her. Her auburn hair smelled unwashed. "Oh my God oh my God!"

Her father stood behind her. She'd hardly said four words to him in the car.

"Where's Jamie?"

"She's asleep."

She nodded. It was best not to bring this up to her. It was better if it had never happened, and they could just about do that, the three of them.

So she was quiet.

The quiet extended to school.

Soon the rest of the semester off became the next semester off became a temporary leave-of-absence from college. Which she never returned to.

She became skinnier, too. Scrawny.

“Darling,” her mother said, “eat. *Mangia*.”

She pushed an ice cream cone in her daughter’s direction, but all she could wonder is whether the cold substance in her mouth had a similar wet texture to dead human flesh.

She thought about her lover’s flesh. Pale. In this light, gray, maybe. Gray like ...

“Are you okay,” Antonio asked. “You’re not saying anything.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Should I ...?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s okay. Keep going.”

“You sure?”

She nodded and feigned a smile.

He continued.

She and Antonio had been dating four months prior to the incident. Through sheer force of will had they remained together these past two; in a few more weeks, he would leave. Like the others to come.

But that was not the point of this. The point was ... maybe the

point was gray, gray like the dead body on top of her, the one still trying to slit her—

“You tired?”

“What?”

“You were yawning.”

She thought. “You know, maybe not tonight.”

“Okay.”

He rolled over next to her and wrapped his arms around her. The world had yet to right itself. His arms felt numb and wet on her.

The world would not right itself for some time yet. She let go the plunger, the needle jerking to her arm’s soft rhythm.

“C’m on babe, c’mere and gimme ah kiss.” His breath smelled sharp and yet softly foul. “You owe me ...”

She wondered what she owed. She was given life she didn’t deserve, life she had been pissing away for years. If only she’d graduated, if only she’d fully forgotten; if that night had never happened ...

“Gimme what I want, you damn little ...”

He slithered over to her. Owe? What a strange word. It’s like you have to have some sort of grasp on the world, some solid basis on such a tenuous thing: you need to have a foothold on a mossed-over rock, keep from plunging into the sea. Had she plunged?

Owe—could anything be owed to her?

Perhaps that was the night that changed things. She was too translucent to tell.

Nothing was owed to her, she found out. Life is life; it is the quickest of gifts. But she found that out when the doctor told her she had contracted HIV.

A decade ago, she'd be declared incurable. But she had a shot, now. That was enough for the moment.

"If I could take things back," she told the classroom, "I would. I wouldn't take heroin. I wouldn't have unprotected sex." *I wouldn't have let myself be attacked*, she wanted to say. "I would have finished college. My life isn't over, but I have a lot of obstacles to overcome now. It'll never be the ..."

The questions afterward, some embarrassing, some insulting. *What is heroin like? Can't you do college now? What is it like to kill someone, Alex?* They'll never really get it. Not until it happens to them. But she can't blame them, can't blame them for being in high school and full of life. Not full of death, like her.

But everyone is full of death. Even those ignorant of it. That is the tail-end of the gift granted us, it must be returned. The moment that decides that, those three minutes, takes years to heal back. A lifetime. But it can, it often does. The future ahead: different, yes,

but worse? Worse than lying dead in a park, half a dozen cops picking at the scene? What is given freely is also given without concern, without thought to good or bad. Good or evil. Had George lived, what would his life be? It's time: forward. It's time for that, finally. She had one more place to return to.

The tombstone read: *George Armitage, 1978–*

“Why am I here?” George spat. “What is this garbage you’re showing me?”

“That’s what could have happened,” the angel said. “But it didn’t.”

“What do you mean?” George snickered. “The fuck is this?”

“I didn’t have the killer’s instinct that fateful night, when you slashed my throat perhaps three years ago.”

George’s eyes became slits.

“At first I wished your death,” the angel sighed, “but soon I realized that is not how things work, how they’re supposed to work. I could have fought; I could not have fought. I was tired, and fate decided. Fate granted you many chances, too. I gave you a few. Even the others, Kaylae and Marionne and ... but ... eventually ...” the angel opened two flat palms.

George grumbled. “Bullshit.”

“This is not my decision, ultimately, but I am almost certain that ... you will ...”

George threw his chair back. “You bitch, you fucking bitch! Gunning at me from above! What a fucking saint, what a fucking coo—”

“George,” the angel started fading away, “I’m sorry. Maybe the greater mercy ... I should’ve fought harder. I shouldn’t have been so afraid. But that’s okay, I don’t have to be afraid, now. You, too, don’t be afraid, even where you’re going, it’ll be okay. Just realize your actions, you can always ...”

The angel faded away, and George found himself bent over shaking his head, feigning exhaustion by a tree. His phone buzzed—more important things to attend to. He looked up at his target, caught in a moment of danger or mercy, waiting for a runner on the darkened path.

A Typical Call

A Typical Call

The three flights of stairs were cramped and humid. Sweat poured off of Greg, whose frame was bulkier than Tyler's more limber build. Filth mucked on the carpet of the third floor, and the paint along the hallway cracked. The officers huffed to the apartment.

"You ready," Greg asked.

Tyler nodded. "Just a typical call." He rubbed the cross around his neck.

"That a joke?" Greg said. "Well, luck never hurts." He knocked on the door and it opened a crack. "Police," Greg yelled into the apartment.

Woven tapestries hung on the walls of the apartment. Newspapers stacked onto a leather couch, and food wrappers and takeout boxes lay strewn on the floor, covering a spotted animal rug. Wooden masks cluttered about on a cabinet. "The fuck is this place," Greg said.

"Some poor immigrant," Tyler said, "probably Nigerian or something, judging from the tribal stuff."

A Typical Call

“You some Africa expert?”

Tyler felt his pistol. “Did you hear that?”

Greg paused. “Hello? This is the police, who’s there?”

A dark woman in a colorful robe approached from a room. She folded her arms. “Hello.”

“Hello Ma’am,” Greg said, “my name is Officer Stanton. Is everything okay here?”

“I did not call,” she said.

“So no one’s injured or anything? We got a call from a neighbor.” She shook her head. “We’ll have to check it out, regardless.”

“I just told you nothing is wrong,” she said.

“What’s that behind you, ma’am?” Tyler said. He looked around the woman.

A man in a green printed tee lay on the floor of the kitchen, shivering. “What the fuck,” Tyler pulled his gun.

Greg motioned to the woman to get against the wall. She took two steps back, arms still crossed. Greg brushed aside shards from a shattered plate on the ground and felt the man’s pulse.

“What’s it look like,” Tyler asked, gun trained on the woman.

“Maybe poisoning or something.” Greg knelt down at the body. “I’m not sure there’s much we can do. His pulse is faint. Let’s call in for an ambulance.”

“You do as you must,” the woman said. Her stare was stoic.

Tyler felt heat building in himself. “What, your man slap you around? They’ve got divorce for that.”

“Not in my country,” she said.

Greg looked up. “What did he eat?”

“His lunch.”

Greg stood up. “Fuck it. Let the EMTs deal with this. Ma’am, you’re going to have to turn around.”

She stood like a statue.

“What did you poison him with,” Tyler asked.

“I am his wife,” she said, “I cannot poison my husband.”

“Put your hands against the wall,” Tyler said. “I have maced a woman before.”

The woman stood silent.

“We’re going to need an ambulance,” Greg called into the radio. “Looks like ten-thirty-four, possible poisoning.”

“Roger, Officer Stanton, sending ambulance.”

“Where is it,” Greg asked her.

“Save him or me.” Her teeth clenched. “That is your choice here.”

Tyler slammed her against the wall and cuffed her. She sat on the couch while Greg opened the door into the bedroom. Tyler heard him shuffle about in the other room; the woman stared into his eyes. Her eyes were dark and hard. Greg came back with a small prescription bottle and needles. “Hyperglycemic, I think. He’s

diabetic.”

“Well,” Tyler said, “That’s not terribly original.”

“There’s a gun on the dresser, too,” Greg said. “Keep an eye on the wife.”

“Really now,” Tyler said.

“It is not my gun,” she said, “and I have no intention of using it.”

“Too messy?” Tyler said.

“It is not my gun,” she replied.

They stood for a moment. Greg felt the man’s pulse and shook his head.

“They’re too far away. I don’t hear anything; I’m making the call.” Greg stuck a syringe into the man’s buttocks. The man shivered less. “C’mon, buddy,” Greg slapped him gently.

Tyler looked at the woman. “Too proud to divorce?”

“I am neither proud nor ashamed.”

“That’ll sound good to the DA,” Tyler said. “You want to know what I think? I think there’s a special place in hell for women who poison their husbands.”

“Hell?” she laughed. “You come to my country, you see what this monster has wrought. You see the streams of blood he has carved in the dust. And you wear your cross and talk to me of hell.” Her breath deflated her, leaving pale anger there. “You cannot.”

“He’s coming to,” Greg said. “I think he might make it.”

“You may have saved his life today,” she said in a monotone, “but you have damned mine. He will have me killed as soon as he gains the strength.”

“You could have run away,” Tyler said.

“I came to watch him die,” the woman said. “I came to give him the mercy he did not give his second wife. Vultures should have their fill of him, that is justice.”

The man coughed and mumbled in an indistinguishable language. “Wake up you bastard,” Greg said, gently shaking the man.

“Perhaps you did not know? He killed my husband,” she said. “He had his men cut him to pieces with their knives. He had them stick their bayonets into him. He took me for his wife in front of him, as he lay bleeding.” Two soft tears edged down her face. “The flies ...”

“Muh, muh buh ...” The man twisted about on the ground.

“And your country, your country gave him freedom. He came to hide from the ghosts he let loose on my homeland, and it is only fitting that they find him in his—” the woman uttered in another tongue and spat. “That is what we call the devils that eat our children. The evil give no mercy; there is no mercy for the evil.”

Tyler sweated. “The fuck?” he said.

Her eyes drilled into him. “I am scum to you. That is fine. But scum ... scum is a beauty far beyond such monster and such filth.

That body deserves its life no longer.” She spat at the prone man.

“Judge me a murderer; I am. But I have only asked of God one life.”

“Mhhhh ... hnnnnnn ...”

She shrieked at the unconscious man.

“Ma’am,” Greg said, “where are you from?”

She glared at Tyler. Her body started shaking, and she mumbled quietly to herself.

Sirens hummed distantly. The radio inquired about their status.

“Even if he’s a murderer,” Tyler said, “it’s our job to save him.”

The man coughed and turned on his side. “That, that that ...”

“She could be ...” Tyler said.

“Would you make that up?” Greg shook his head. “Jesus ...”

The woman came out of her trance. “Leave,” the woman said.

“Perhaps God may save me and take him yet.”

“The ambulance is on its way,” Greg said. “These things, it’s hard to pick up as murder.”

“What,” Tyler said.

“In fifteen years,” Greg said, “that’s the most disturbing shit I’ve heard. The courts can’t do anything about this kind of bastard, their diplomatic bullshit.”

“Greg ...” Tyler turned to her. “But we should ... I mean, still ...”

Greg sighed. The radio asked for confirmation again.

Tyler turned to her. “You could’ve run away.”

The woman shook her head. “No. I have a duty to my family. They are here now. They watch me always.”

Greg stood up. “Tyler,” he said, “We can call it in as an ...”

“This isn’t right,” Tyler said.

“This isn’t right, either.”

The man attempted to prop himself up but his hands kept sliding out from under him.

Greg weighed the bottle of pills in his hand. The man’s eyes opened in terror. “Money,” he said, “money ... am-american’ dollars ... I can ... money ...”

The radio blared.

“Knives, huh?” Greg said. “What a way to go ...”

He approached the man. The man crawled back and wept like a child. “Anything ...” he said, “anything.”

Greg held the last remaining pills from the bottle. They stuck to his sweaty palms. He rolled them around with his fingers. “Mercy ...?”

Tyler turned to the woman. She stared intently at the crawling man, neither in her body nor out. He turned to the man, propped on his side, his face contorted into a sickly smile. The radio blared again, and the cross hung heavy around Tyler’s neck.

The Swan

The Swan

The moon splayed the night open
Clouds offering, covering the orb, on feathered fingers
I didn't see you there at first,
I don't know why I did not see you.

You arrived a week before, your presence
Pushing back the others, they split like dividing the sky.
You were alone, you were beautiful, your slender neck
Pale humble face, perhaps they were afraid.

That sensual curve, open gems your eyes,
You are now on the curb, arms spread wide,
Alone, beautiful,
I see that soft down, still clean ...

The Prisoner

The Prisoner

Gray desert sand swirls beneath the skeleton of my vehicle, a hollowed-out SUV. It had shed doors, metal skin, anything extraneous it needed to drop for this journey. Somewhere, back there, I know they're following. There's a name for that, that feeling of ominous unknowing, where something hits you hard and fast and you're in the dark, you know something else is coming at you but you can't see what. And over the horizon, a flame in that dark, some fenced-in complex. I don't know how long I've been driving, or why I need to get there. I also don't know, but somehow I do, that I'm going to die there.

I stop the SUV far enough away, I hope, so it won't get noticed. My gut aches, maybe it's a bit of fear, maybe it's tossed by the ride. I pull myself out, a mess of dust and riding sores, and plunker down to the sand. I'd forgotten how difficult it is to walk in the damned stuff, but now I'm too far away from the car to go back to it, and besides, that isn't the plan. I don't admit there is much of a plan. But this is no time for regrets.

My thighs are sore. I remember those movies, the ones where a

pilot is stranded in the desert and forced to find civilization, failing that, an oasis; miles and miles of sand dunes and oppressive heat beating down; and I think: how can a human being even stand ten minutes of that? It's your brain, not the sun, that beats you down, the idea of never making it back, of having no discernible plan that lay ahead. But also it's the repetition of your feet, the left-right-left, the sand shifting beneath, making everything harder, everything that grinds and wears you down soft and raw, like waves beating on a piece of foggy sea glass. Should I turn back? No, it's too late for that: I make out the other vehicle searching my car, off in the distance. I pick up my pace, as I'm no longer that far away, and I start to make out the chain-link fence clearer, the almost bare grounds, and a building within.

When I make it there, almost nothing stirs. It looks like a prison, except with no prisoners: vast concrete grounds, a fence with a couple openings in it, a guard tower. Almost no prisoners. The one, perhaps, sits on a bench. A couple of guards, dark blue uniforms, gold tassel and markings for rank, on the other side of the grounds, walk without a care. For a high-security installation, it's pretty lax. Though I guess being out in the middle of nowhere affords some natural sense of protection.

"Hi, I'm Sami," the man says as I sit down on the bench. He extends a kind hand toward me, slightly hirsute. His foreign accent almost catches me off-guard, except that it is followed with a

congenial, grandfatherly smile, and rather American civilian clothes. I dust myself off before returning his firm shake.

“I’m Al,” I reply.

“Good to meet you Al. What brings you to here?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, “Where’s ‘here?’”

“This,” his hand waves around, as if he had dominion over it, “is the Institution. It is where dreams are made, cradled, and smashed.” He chuckles. “What is it you’re looking for?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a difficult place to start,” Sami says, “but I suppose we all start off not knowing. Questions are the best place to start.”

“What is that building?”

“What building?”

I point out the only building for miles, probably in the whole damned desert.

“Ah,” he smiles, “that is the Director’s building. He overlooks each aspect of this compound. Some say he built it by hand, but I don’t think that is the litter—what is the word?—literal ... He has strong connections. It is dangerous to approach that building unannounced.”

I look around. There’s nowhere else to go. “Thanks Sammy.”

“*Sami*,” he says, “and you are welcome. Do take care.”

The sand grit everywhere on the compound, and as I walk toward the building, my shoes grating against the concrete seems

to be the only sound here, save for the pitch of the wind against the building. The other two people in the distance, guards apparently, take notice, and stop their pacing, turning a curious head towards me. I walk a bit faster, keeping up with my heart, and the guards start to walk towards me, more intent. I pace faster, eventually running, and the two guards chase after me.

A klaxon sounds.

“Security Breach,” echoes over the intercom. That aching fist grabs my stomach again.

I make it into the building before the guards can reach me. Apparently they abandoned their posts, as the whole first floor, a single room, is nearly empty except for a couple screens and some other security equipment. I find the weapons cabinet, but it’s locked, and there’s no way to get into it unless I shoot the lock off. On the screens, the two guards multiply by two more: another pair of guards are coming through the other opening in the fence. I haul it up the stairs.

I look around the second floor. It’s bare, as if someone had not finished furnishing it. I look out of a window, and a contingent of guards from all over the grounds are flocking towards the building. An insect-like instinct carries them to me, swarming all over the concrete, and I run toward the stairs to the top floor.

“Halt!”

Before I can make it, those first two guards arrive, their rifles

drawn. I'm beat. I raise my hands and stop.

"You got me," I say.

They keep their weapons aimed at me.

"I'm unarmed," I tell them, "what do you want me to do?"

Still nothing.

"Where are we going?" I swallow. That weird danger is in the air.

"You," one of the guards say, "are going nowhere." They open fire and gun me down. I remember my last thought being that I'd never get to see my infant son again, and being desperately angry at the guards for that.

And I die. What I'm not prepared for what lay next.

Sand grit against my teeth. I spot the complex again, the guard tower and the Director's building. I stop the SUV, an overheating pile of sand and slag, and reorient myself.

"Okay," I say so I can hear it, "I'm pretty sure all that happened."

What happened isn't a premonition or anything—it's too specific—but on that assumption, I get out of the truck and look around. It's desert, everywhere, and the only things in it are the tracks leading back from where I came, and the compound that lay

ahead. I'm not going to last much longer out here, and I suppose I have no other choice. I have to go for it again.

I hide the SUV behind a sand dune. I'm a little closer this time—but damn!—walking all the way there is still a small eternity. I make it, and two guards are still walking the grounds, not a care in the world; an older gentleman on the bench. I take a seat beside him.

I extend my hand to him. "I'm Al," I say, "Al Perault."

He shakes firmly. "Hello Mr. Al." He turns to look at the two strolling guards.

"You're Sami, correct?"

"*Sami*, but you're close. Better than before."

"So we do know each ...?"

"I'd like to think," he turned that grandfatherly smile towards me, "that we've all met each other, and have been meeting each other, for quite some time now. But that's only the belief of a silly old man."

I look at the building. "That's the director's building," I say.

"It still is."

I think better of storming it again. "So, what should I do then, announce myself?"

He hushes his voice. "You don't want to do that. I have heard: the Director wants your name."

"What?"

“He needs your name,” Sami says. “Don’t let him trick you out of it. He is rather cunning.”

He sees the expression on my face; even I feel it. “That is okay. It is sealed with me, my friend. On my honor.” He puts a hand on his heart.

“Why? Just my name?”

“Don’t be—hum—naïve,” he says. “It is who you are, is it not?”

“Well, I suppose.” I think for a second. “So, about my name, can he ...?”

“He, too, is only human,” Sami frowns, “and does not possess a dog’s hearing.”

“I mean, he has cameras in the compound.”

“No, he does not,” Sami assures me. “He has eyes and ears, but I promise you, I am not one of them.”

I sigh, still uncomfortable with my mistake. “Okay, then how do I get in there?”

“Why do you want to get in there?”

He has me there.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“What don’t you know?” Sami says.

And I’m not sure what he means by that. I think for a bit.

“I’m not sure,” I say.

“They say the wise man knows what he doesn’t know, but even

I know I am not wise enough to understand that.” Sami dusts some of the sand off his legs, as if it would matter.

I look a bit flabbergasted, I’m sure.

“You have a question,” Sami says.

“What am I doing here?”

He smiles. “Let’s start simpler. ‘Who are you,’ for instance. ‘Here,’ that is complicated.”

I stare at the nutcase. But he has a point. I can’t really answer that right now. I can barely make out my infant son’s face.

“Sometimes when we prepare for a journey,” he’s saying, “we forget to pack our clothes, our wallet. Keys to get back home. You, Al, prepared for a journey without your self!” He laughed.

I stood up. “This Director probably did it,” I say.

Sami shakes his head.

“Then he’ll get me out.” I turn to the building, but Sami touches my arm.

“We are all put here to help. The sun, the sand; the street, the prison. Perhaps even the Director. But do not ask the Director for his help. He may find his own way to assist. If you ask ... he is that kind of person. He is too cunning for you.”

“Thanks.” I turn away. Sami lets go and goes back to some humming.

There’s not enough time to play games. Those two guards are still strolling. I have to find my way out of here. Apparently the

Director has some power over this place, and that's the only place to start. I go toward the Director's building.

Those guards start following me again, but this time I'm walking. I get to the door, and they yell at me to halt. I turn around to face them. The dark wool uniforms, sweat beading on their foreheads and down their necks. One of them unbuttoned halfway, damp collar, fanning himself. Guns at the side. Real pros.

"Who is it that wishes to see the Director," one of them say.

"It is I," I tell him, "Andrew Dupont. I am looking to speak to the Director."

And now their rifles are up. "The Director has no time to trifle with liars. Who are you?"

Beads of sweat drip down my temples. I'm pretty sure I won't die, not really, but it's a half-brained notion in the face of a couple of full-auto rifles. "Sorry, I'm Al. Where is the Director of this place?"

They lower their rifles and both wear a similar, childish smile, as if it is part of the uniform. "He is right in here," the other says. "If you would come this way, Al."

They sit me down in the security room. There are a few more monitors now, and another guard sits inside, rifling through the weapons cabinet.

"So who did you say you are?" The unbuttoned guard asks.

"I'm Al," I said.

“Okay, Al, I’m going to let the Director know you’re here.” He pats me on the shoulder and buttons up. Then he climbs the stairs. The second guard keeps watch over me.

“So,” I say to the second guard, “how are things?”

“Good.” He nods.

“Who is this Director?” I say.

Doesn’t look like he heard me.

I try another tack. “Where are we?”

“This is Complex 127.”

“What’s that?”

He ignores my question again.

“What does Complex 127 do?”

He turns to me. “Complex 127 is a high-security facility that engages in active area defense.”

“What does that mean,” I ask. “Is that code for a weapons testing base? Is it part of the government?”

“No,” the guard explains, “it is the Director’s unique vision to hone this invaluable and vital defense facility fully before deploying it to wherever it is needed, regardless of government. And we do not deal in ‘weapons.’”

“Then how do you defend anything?”

“We deal strictly in the most valuable of assets: information.”

Then Sami is right. But what can they do with my name?

“Thanks for the talk. Is there anything I should call you?”

The guard stares at me blankly. "Excuse me ...?"

"Do you have a name and rank?"

"My rank is Fourth Green."

"And your name ...?"

The other guard slams the cabinet shut and grabs at the pistol on his side. "You will remain silent while detained. Any further conversation with Fourth Green will be met with hostility. Understood, prisoner A1?"

I shut myself up. Two more guards come in, dressed in dirty robes. They look like the men who followed me in the truck. They hang up their robes and reveal blue, tightly buttoned uniforms, the same material and gold embroidery as the other guards except for the large, dark circles beneath their armpits. They go to sit at the monitors and plug away at a couple keyboards.

Guard Fourth Green stares at a screen of an empty courtyard. The two new guards enter furious information into the one system, and then stare at the screen. Then the other guard returns to fiddling around with the weapons cabinet again, and I shuffle unnoticed forward. There's a picture of a house in some familiar suburb on the screen. I wonder where that camera's connected to.

It's quiet, like before a funeral. Ten minutes pass before the first guard clomps down the stairs. He's popped a few buttons again. "The Director's ready to see you," he says.

Even the stairs are gritted with sand. The second floor is still

bare, and the guard stops to wait in front of the next flight of stairs. I almost walk past him, but some unseen signal wakes him up and we continue. The third and final floor is furnished, but barely.

There is a man at a dark wood desk.

“Sami?”

“Why hello, Mr. Al,” he speaks without an accent, “I believe you know my compatriot, then. He’s helped you get this far; don’t worry, we’ll pay him a visit.” He motions to the guard. “What can we help you with?”

Two cabinets flank the desk, and a flatscreen stretches behind him. “I want to go home, that’s all. I’m sorry if there’s been any misunderstanding—”

The screen flickers on. “Here, then?” It’s that same picture of the house downstairs. He turns slightly to face it.

I shake my head. “That’s not where I live.”

“Regrettable,” the Director says, “but there is a fix for that, too.” Children come out of the house and play outside; I recognize one of them as a friend’s daughter. “Sign your full name to the deed, Al, and it shall be yours.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“Then what is it you do want, Al?” The screen shut off, and the Director steps out from behind his desk. He sits on it uncomfortably. “Because I know you don’t want to be here. Nobody does. But you know, or maybe you don’t yet, that we’re fated to be here as long as

you want to be here. We can make this easy, or not.”

Air conditioning or not, it’s hot as hell in the office. “Why am I here?”

The Director shakes his head. “I don’t know. But Complex 127 is a high-security facility designed to engage in active area defense.” He leans a bit closer. “They sent you to me.”

“‘They?’ Who are ‘they?’”

“A road crosses a bridge crosses a rail crosses a runway,” the Director’s walking around now, losing his mind. “A lot of crossing to do. It takes careful navigation not to cause a commotion.”

“So I’m at ... what, a crossroads?”

“Essentially, Al, yes.” He offers me to sit down. “A very specific type. A very complex type. Very expensive. But you know this rather immutable fact: nothing comes free. Certainly not an active area defense facility.” A smile crooked on his lips. “But yes, we’re here for *you*.”

I remembered Sami’s words. “Why should I trust you?”

“We are not open to debate,” he says. “A yes or no will suffice. You are in no position to question or weigh our trust. But know that this is not a one-sided deal; we ask each of our clients to leave something behind. Staffing, training, technology upgrades, other expenses. Things like that to consider.”

There’s something I can’t quite figure out about this. “How much?”

He laughs. “You’re not ready yet. But remember this: I hold the power of death over you for as long as you remain in this place. Once I release you, I no longer hold sway over you.” He snaps his fingers. “Third Red,” the second guard marches up, “give Al time to think about his decision.”

I turn around in time to see him level his weapon on me and blast away.

The desert’s grime is without cease. It crunches in my teeth, and my mouth’s too dry to spit it back out. The SUV is overheating again, but maybe it has enough life left to take me somewhere else. Worth a try.

Backtracking isn’t an option. So I turn to the right, keeping the sun and the compound by my left shoulder (that would be south, right?). I’m driving carefully enough to make the car last, but it doesn’t (naturally), and the damned thing strands me in the middle of nowhere. I jump out of the car, a few more sores than I had before, and walk in the new direction. It’s plodding, miserable progress, if I call it that, but maybe that palm-tree oasis is out there—again, maybe a movie-inspired fantasy—and in my luck, there’s a little blur over the horizon. It creeps closer, one miserable footstep at a time.

As the sun cast overhead, I make out the Director's compound, the single, small building, the probably empty guard tower. A sinking feeling cast into me as I made out a couple of guards strolling the grounds, and the possibility of it being some other compound in the middle of the desert is finally obliterated. My clothes are nearly rags now, my hair tattered and sand-swept, and the sun nearly setting by the time I make to the infernal place.

"Welcome, Al," Sami said. He extends his other hand as his right arm is in a sling. "I thought you'd forgotten about this place." A wry smile overcomes his face.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Oh, this?" He lifted the sling slightly. "It is nothing. I got the better of the argument."

"Hard to believe."

"It is good to see you again, friend." The wryness on his face melted away into something kinder.

"Sami, I'm sorry, I didn't realize—"

"Oh, I'm not *Sami*," he shakes his head. "You have me confused. He was never here. They call me Jonah."

I probably show disbelief. "It's okay," Jonah says, "you'll come to understand."

"Jonah," I tell him, "I'm lost. Why am I here?"

"You are right," he said, "you are lost. Why you are here. 'Why' is a big question. We are but small creatures. 'How,' that is

something we are made to understand.”

“Umm, okay.” I shook my head. “How did I get here?”

Jonah smiles.

“Jonah ...” I say.

“Al, my friend, you are here to learn that.”

I shake my head and he laughs. I am about to say something, but somehow, the smell of smoke, or maybe its image, flickers in my eyes, and a truck ...

“Do not worry,” Jonah tells me, “for the ‘how’ will come, too.” He sighs. “But do listen to me, Al: do not lose faith. Evil waits for that day, for hope to be extinguished; but when hope endures evil, then—”

The guards from the other vehicle push aside the two strolling on the concrete.

“Halt!” They sound in unison.

They’re pointing their weapons at me from the far side of the compound, as if they can really hit me from two hundred yards half in the dark.

“Al,” one yells, “you are to come with us.”

Jonah and I watch from the bench. It’s ten minutes of their creeping slightly closer (weapons still drawn, as if I might pull a small infantry unit out of my pocket), and they bring me into the compound, where I wait again. There are a few more monitors installed and another weapons rack this time. The one guard inside

stares at that picture of the house on one of the monitors. It is now dark at the house on the monitor.

The other two guards, Red Three and Green Four, rush in almost panting. “The Director wants to see you.”

“What if I don’t want to see him?” I say.

They look at each other in bewilderment. The guards from the vehicle, still in dirty white robes, drag me up the stairs regardless. They sit me down at the third floor and leave, despite the fact that the Director’s chair is clearly empty. His flat screen is still on, an eagle’s eye view of a familiar-looking neighborhood. I sit in the chair for some time, expecting the Director to come in, but he doesn’t. I look through his desk.

“What the ...?” I sort through the first drawer, packed with useless trinkets and those bubbles like the ones kids get from toy vending machines. There’s even a plastic capsule with what looks like a real wedding ring, and looking over the items closer, they look less like toys than on first sight: keys, probably to a house; dentures; loose paper clips, bent at strange angles; a fistful of pens from different banks encircled by a couple old rubber bands; mints; other items that you’d find in your old jeans pockets, if that includes some wind-up toys.

“I see you enjoy my little collection,” the Director says, almost out of nowhere. “Go ahead, you are wondering what is in the other drawers.”

“A little.”

“By all means, I have nothing to hide.”

I close the first drawer and check the other two. Literally nothing.

“By now, you know we’ve eliminated Sami,” he walks toward the desk, and I feel my gut grip again, “your friend and confidant. You have no friends left, Al. Come, sit down.” He motions for me to sit in his chair. I sit down. The Director takes a seat at the chair across the desk.

The Director starts to lean forward with an elbow in the air; he realizes he is no longer at his side of the desk, and adjusts his arm on his lap. “You see, Al, we have all the time in the world. We do. Do realize that I’ve never lost a battle of wills.” He sits forward again, but the desk isn’t there to support him. “Never.”

“So what is it you want?”

He lightens a bit. “A game of chess?” The Director gets up and searches a new bookshelf to my left. He frowns and pulls out a board and a drawstring bag. He places the board on the desk and starts setting up a game of checkers instead, except the pieces are on the light squares.

“I’m not interested in playing a game.”

The Director scoots the chair closer. He presents two closed fists to me. “Pick one.”

“Neither, I’m not playing.”

He almost pouts and puts the translucent chips back into the bag. He puts the game away and sits down again, now terribly close to me, in a chair next to me. There's a zit on the right side of his face. "What is your game of preference?"

"I have none."

"Then what should we do?"

"I'm fine sitting here."

"I," he stands up, "unfortunately am not. Perhaps you're forgetting your manners as a guest."

It'd still be nice to know something. "You know my name, but I'd like to know ..."

He sits down again. "Twenty questions? That would be acceptable."

"No," I say, "what's your name?"

"You may refer to me as the Director."

"But you have a name, right?"

"Of course I do," he smiles, "and I believe you already know it. Besides, you are in no position to be making impositions upon your host. We have other business to attend to." He points to the screen. It is a security truck. My security truck. Smoking. Police taped it off, and there is a body lying next to it, my partner. My stomach is gripping again.

"What did you do?"

"I told you," the Director does not contain his amusement, "in

here, I hold the power of *death*, but outside of this place ...” His smile is something snakish. “Think of me as a hand: a quick shake, here and there, but no eyes, no brain. What I need is information: your information. Now, let’s start with what you know, and we’ll work on what you don’t.”

The fog is starting to lift. My partner, Joey Wess. And there was a group of them, too, masked ...

“Something stir in those brain juices? Together, we could get those bastards. Just one word.”

I shake my head. “This doesn’t seem ...”

“Do you really have time for what seems,” the Director asks me. “No? Make a decision, or one will be made for you. Rule number one of the world. The Silver Rule.”

“I want to get out,” I tell him.

“There are many ways out. Do you prefer head or feet?”

“What?”

“The tuckus is another choice, yes. Note that how you get out is not inconsequential. Perhaps we can solve this question.” He pulls a pack of cards from somewhere and shuffles clumsily. “Pick one.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not here for games.”

“Games? All this careful preparation, and that’s what you ... Well.” He clicks his fingers. “You’ve spent my time, and more tragically, my patience. Prepare to die, Al.”

Guards appear with drawn guns, and wait for the Director to

move out of the way. When they see he isn't moving, they march closer and shoot me through.

Desert sand is difficult to spit out of your mouth, especially when your mouth is dry, and especially when you wake up lying face-first in it. The SUV is gone now, and apparently I have to make the whole distance by foot. And now my stomach is pounding worse, where the guards shot me. Dammit.

And the sand. The sand gets in everywhere. My feet burn with sweat and sand, my shoes are more desert, and I make out the Director's complex over the horizon. It's too far. This is it.

It's all over.

I lay flat. Heat exhaustion feels like a painful way to go. You burn up, like you're in a fire; sunburns, heck, blisters, I ... I have no idea. I shade my eyes, like it matters.

I cough out more sand.

Off in the distance is the sound of a motor. I turn to see the two guards who are following me. It's something. I get up and stick a thumb out.

"Halt," one of them yells from the truck. "Stay where you are." I keep my thumb out. One of them gets out of the truck.

"You thought you could get away, Al," he says. "How foolish,

because now you're coming back with us."

I sigh. He points me into the back seat with his gun, and I cooperate. As the complex draws nearer, I'm able to gather my sun-cooked wits. Maybe I can grill them a bit more. Maybe there's a way out.

"So you know my name," I said, "but the Director, he's got one, too. Right?"

"Of course," says the guard next to me, white tatters of a robe blowing in the air. "We all do."

"Of course," I say.

He looks at me like it's a silly question. I guess it is.

"Do you know what it is?"

"We report to the Director," he says. "It is not our place to know him personally."

"True."

"Indeed," the other says.

Something's not right. "Then you don't think it's strange you don't know his last name? Like Director Roberts or something?"

He gets offended. "Don't ever," the guard whispers harshly, "ever pretend to know the Director personally. If he knew we're having this conversation ..."

The truck stops. He sighs, and the driver shoots a disgusted look at us. The guard next to me shuts up. The driver shifts into gear again, and we drive the rest of the way in silence.

They let me out at the gate to the complex. It's as if they're dropping off a child at school, something that I'm going to have to do with Michael when he gets older. I can start to see his face, now: the small bud of his nose, the pudgy, grasping fingers and brown eyes. The wailing, pitched voice as it struggles to mimic my words. Maybe I gave up too soon. I still have something worth fighting for.

Jonah's on the bench again, and the guards in the truck dismount and converse with the other guards. After all that ride, they don't bother paying any interest in me consorting with my ally.

"You look determined," Jonah says. "As if something will break through."

I sit down. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about," I said. "How do I get out of here?"

"I do not know how you get out of here."

"That's not what I—"

"But in all things," he says, "patience is key. Children, art, the universe. The self. The greater part of acting is patience. Preparing. Acting is simple; knowing the right moment to stay put is difficult."

"I'm confused. Then when do I act? What do I do?"

"We are crickets of limited time, but the universe, it is built upon patience, upon waiting, upon time. We are lent a part of that time, and a part of that time we may give to action, and a part of that action—is it to give us more time? Foolish, isn't that?" He shakes his head. "Some believe our actions are already written down,

before we know them. That is not my belief, no. But what to do? I cannot say what you will do, Al, only to act with conviction and to act toward your beliefs. Act toward good, if that is your belief, or evil, should that be your—”

“Jonah, please, I remember something about a robbery. You’re confusing me, and I can’t ...”

“I apologize, but it is not my fate, so I cannot tell you exactly what you want to know. I am, after all, a foolish old man waiting for the bus to arrive.”

“There’s a bus that comes here?”

“It comes for all my friend,” he says. “We all hope some wisdom by the ride, but remember: a bus is mere conveyance. Quiet moments in the seat, waiting for the bus, sometimes that is the bigger journey.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I say. “What do you mean by that?” Guards hook their arms around mine. “Wait! How do I get out of here? Help me!” Jonah sits there, smiling still, watching them drag me into the building.

They throw me at the desk. The Director’s shuffling through piles of papers—apparently he does some work beyond setting up a board game—and signs a hundred documents before looking up.

“Hello Al,” he says. “Glad you could make it.”

I dust off some sand.

“So Al,” he says, “have you made your decision? Or should

we play this little game a little bit more? I never really tire of the struggle. I've always wondered what it is you want."

"I want to go home," I said.

"Of course," the Director stood up, "of course they all say that. But there are so many other things to get out of life, now, aren't there? Take, for instance, Mr. Michael Jones." He turns to the screen and it flickers on. "This rather tasteless McMansion is where he currently resides. Hate the faux zebra carpet. Tasteless. Do you know where he was before he came here?"

"No," I say.

"He'd lived in a little apartment in the middle of nowhere. Roaches, repairs, and rent. Now, he lives like a deluded little king—and let's face it—who doesn't want to be their own king?" Even though it's barely evening, the windows are dead. "And now, my favorite," it clicks to a tall apartment building, "one Mrs.—I mean Miss—Genevieve Travers. Abusive husband, dead-end job, all the trappings of a life gone awry. And now she makes payments on an entire floor in this little building I helped put up on the East side. That's part of the New York skyline, if you aren't familiar. By the time she gets out, she'll be her own queen, working on her second book, hopefully, which should feature—"

"What do you mean 'get out.' She's trapped in here too?"

"Of course not," the Director smiles. "That isn't up to me. I merely showed her the most profitable way out of her situation. The

subsequent trial and—here’s the beauty—autobiography merely ensures that her eventual homecoming from prison shall be one of joy, and not of desolation. Most assume I play some part in the courts and lawyers, but in truth, they work themselves out.”

“Then you’re—”

“One-hundred percent at your service, Al.” He bows. “All we need you to do is to paint your John Hancock here,” he shows me a brief, typewritten page, “or here, or here, or anywhere you want. Name it, and it shall be yours.”

I thought. “Out.”

“Perfect.” He pushes the paper toward me. “Then sign this, and I’ll give you the tickets. The bus arrives at four.”

“Bus ...?”

“Yes, we’ve made a deal with some bus line or another, though the details are of little consequence. Truly.” He sniffs a bit and sneezes. “Desert allergies. If you need a pen, I believe I can offer you one. Or pull one out of your pockets.”

I check my pockets. Apparently I have a fancy cartridge pen—my father’s—a couple paper clips, a squirt gun, and a folded sheet of paper.

“I’ll be taking that,” the Director snatches the squirt gun from me. “And if you don’t need those?”

I offer him the paper clips. He bends them around, frustrated, and dumps them in the top drawer. “Anyway, here’s the contract.”

He gives it to me. “Read it at your leisure.”

ONE PEN FOR ONE ROUND-TRIP TICKET, it says. And there’s a place to sign. I check the back, too, blank, and sign it “X.”

“And here you go,” he says, offering the tickets. “This one’s back if you don’t like your destination,” it’s marked “BACK” in felt-tip pen, and the other has no sensible markings. “And now, Mr. Perault, one last thing and you’re free to go. The back pocket.”

I search through my pockets again. This time there’s a folded piece of paper clipped in there. “Your receipt.” the Director says.

It’s a bill. For services rendered. Most of the items don’t make sense; there’s a “highway robbery” fee.

My gut is getting tight again. I don’t know where this ticket will take me, but what choice do I have? He waves his hand for me to go, and a guard escorts me outside the building. The other guards are conversing, perhaps it’s an off day for them, and one of them sits down on the concrete, apparently having a good time of it. I sit down on the bench with Jonah.

“I did it,” I tell him, “I fucked up.”

“What do you mean?” he says.

“I think I ...” I can’t hold back anymore, it’s too much. All for a couple damned tickets. “I knew I shouldn’t have, but I’m so tired.”

His eyes lit. “These tickets—do you know how precious they are?” He sighs. “This is where I’m going. It’s a shame I’m still here and waiting for—”

I jab the tickets at him. Fuck it, if he can make use of them ...

"I'll take this one, if you don't mind," he gives the "BACK" one to me. A large smile overcomes him; now he's on the verge of crying. "Thank you, Mr. Al, this is really ..." he offers his hand. "Thank you."

"Okay ...?"

He stares at the ticket for a while. And the bus does finally come. The windshield is tinted. Jonah climbs on board, and doesn't seem to notice me he's so ecstatic. He doesn't even wave goodbye when they leave. I sit at the bench like an idiot.

Maybe I should have used it. But the klaxon sounds before I can give my gift more thought.

Guards swarm around me, rifles drawn, not even telling me to halt. They're standing there, sirens blaring, and after a while the Director pushes through the crowd.

"You," he's seething, "you shouldn't have done that. Those tickets are meant for *you*."

"What do you mean?"

He breathes harshly. "We made a deal, and you spat in the face of it."

What can I do? I shrug. "Oh well. What are you going to do, kill me?"

"Worse."

He pulls the squirt gun from his pocket and aims it at me. It burns my stomach through and through.

“The flames of my passion ...”

The lamp overhead is cooking my scalp. I’m locked into a chair. Handcuffs. I open my eyes a slit and make out a dark shape humming to himself in a warehouse. “Fucker had to throw the fucking keys ...”

It takes me some time to reorient myself. The dull fist in my stomach aches. Probably a bullet. I slow my heart and make shallow breaths.

Another man yells something about my truck. “Cleaning up,” the hummer says back. I hear him glug some gas around the warehouse. The fumes in my nose. I don’t have much longer left.

Curiosity makes me feel my back pocket. A receipt paper-clipped in.

I close my eyes and pretend to be dead. This is it. I work at the paperclip, hearing Jonah’s calm, insistent voice.

The Student in Her Study

The Student in Her Study (The Masters Part II)

“Today is the golden age. This day. Right now. Yours is the first generation to enjoy what we can call the perfect storm of technology, lifespan longevity, and international peace. Relatively perfect. Drink it up, drink it up.”

Her students chuckled briefly. The professor paced about in the lecture hall, heels clicking softly on the thin carpet. The rest of her dress was casual-professional, a white blouse, dark skirt, soft color on her cheeks. She brushed her hand around her long bangs. “I should note a caveat: in the United States, of course. The Western World, in general, but especially here. We should keep in mind how lucky we are not to live in, um, less fortunate areas of the world.

“But enough of that. This is my favorite lecture, the last lecture of our course, and I appreciate all of you showing up considering I warned you this was an optional lecture. I think this is the most impressive showing of the three years I’ve held this particular lecture. I think I’ve got almost half of you, no mean feat considering finals are next week. This lecture, I want to say, is tentatively titled

‘The Failure of Modern Art.’

“It’s a strange choice for a Modern Lit class, I know. But hear me out.

“So then, what is failing about art? Art, with the exceptions of politically minded hip-hop, which is still in its infancy relative to rock, jazz, other forms of music (though, yes another aside, I should mention even this is starting to get stale); in any case, art, especially English literature, has tended towards a plateau for the past two decades. It no longer has the fire and purpose that it had in the fifties and sixties. Sexual mores are less rigid, and there is less battling against them; there is no longer a looming Cold War; there is prosperity in our corner of the globe. Prosperity, even though there will always be relative inequalities from community to community, is anathema to art in general, but especially literature. That is the thesis of this lecture. I’ll let you know that right away.

“Art needs a purpose, it needs a direction. It needs a battle to be waged. Take Dickens; one of the great writers in our language, second to Shakespeare. In my opinion, at least; I can see a few of you disagreeing. That’s okay, disagreement fosters creativity; so does entropy.

“In any case, Dickens was one of the great writers of social justice and poverty. *Great Expectations*, *Tale of Two Cities*, even *A Christmas Carol*; he had a very clear subject, which was social inequality, the grand spaces between rich and poor in Victorian

England; and he had a purpose: to champion a voice for the downtrodden. Granted, he didn't suggest policy or attempt social change himself, but Dickens was closer to a reporter in his era, albeit in the genre of fiction. He turned the sufferings of the lower class into art. And not just Dickens, but take Woolf, who wrote about the divide of wealth; Chopin, the divide in treatment of the sexes – Woolf, too. W.E.B. Dubois, Frederick Douglass, countless other advocates for racial equality and social change. Vonnegut, Stephen Crane; former soldiers. I should correct myself, that Crane was a journalist in that latter case. The last century alone, we faced the two largest wars in the history of the world, the rise of our country as a world leader, Jim Crow, social and sexual revolution, and so on. It's only been about three generations since that you couldn't find a female doctor, just to give a more practical view of the changes of last century.

“So then: all of that stuff. All these changes the last century. And we've had a plethora of brilliant and important works: Sylvia Plath, Vladimir Nabokov, Vonnegut as I've already mentioned. The past century has yielded a new library of important works, of tried-and-true classics, and with a few of the exceptions we've mentioned in this course, the post-Cold War era has been artistically dull. At least from the point of view of enduring literature, of which there is relatively little right now. Why is that?

“Let's consider what makes a book good. Good writing, a

good voice, notable characters. A good plot. All you need for a good book. A classic is more than just that; many classics are only passable in one or more of these categories by today's standards. *Treasure Island*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. A classic does two more things: it activates a primal knowledge of story. What do I mean by this? There are certain stories which are instantly recognizable because they affect us on basic, primal levels: stories of love, of death and loss, of betrayal. Of growing up, such as *Star Wars*, the heroic journey. Of the question of mortality, the epic of *Gilgamesh* and his friend *Enkidu*. I should have mentioned betrayal for *Monte Cristo*. I'll do that now. In any case, a classic works on a basic, primal understanding of story. That is the first thing it must do.

"The second thing it must do is produce valuable commentary. Not necessarily social commentary, but commentary on at least the primal aspects of the story. Another way to put it is that it should have a moral, that it should say something. Now, most stories tend to do this; they don't tend to simply relate actions and plot, at least not the good ones. But the moral of the story is the tricky part, the part where you have to find something new and valuable to give to your reader. The tricky part is that all those primal stories have been told, and they've all been answered, either by *Homer* or *Aesop* or who have you, and a classic has to add something to the primal discourse. *Hemingway*, *Milton*. Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy

my romance novels, but what they have to say pales in comparison to anything that, say, Cervantes has said about modern society almost five-hundred years ago. I take it none of you read romances? Or maybe you won't admit it. No shame in reading them.

"Now I see we have a question. I usually wait until the end, but I'll take it. Carol, right?"

A young woman with frizzy hair sat up in her seat. "Yes, it's Carol. I've read romances, I'll admit it." The other students laughed. "Nothing better than a girl getting her guy after three hundred pages. Anyway, I understand your thesis, but what about the fact that there's so much new media now, like the television? The internet? Wouldn't that competition just pull away readers and ... I don't know, what do you think?"

"Excellent point," the professor said. "I was actually going to address that after this next point, but to sum it up, it doesn't directly affect it. It does, however, greatly affect it indirectly: magazines close up, or they pay less, making it harder to make a living on novel and short-story writing. Without that support, monetarily speaking, it makes it more difficult for the writer to hone their craft and write that classic of English literature. You know, you don't get it on the first try. Unless you're Harper Lee. Excellent question.

"Now what makes writing novels different from producing other media is that it's the most time-consuming artistic pursuit. Leave a decade or two of relatively fallow profits, and guess what happens to the novelist who ..."

The student entered her dorm room. On her roommate's side were a couple movie posters; on her side she had sketched a looming dragon in pencil on the cinder block wall. She took off her jacket, a puffy lavender one, and picked up her lucky mug. She had made the cup in a pottery class, and the handle had broken off, more of a bowl now; she sipped some of the cold coffee in it. Her roommate was out.

The student opened her journal. She put a date on the page, under yesterday's sketch of an elf, and wrote:

Wow. So books suck, I get it, prof. Kinda funny she never mentioned Marquez or Coetzee. Anyway, then what's the point of writing? Maybe I shouldn't. It's obvious I'm not going to write something important, too much prosperity, ugh. Dammit.

It's got me depressed. Just what I need to finish a novel, more depression. I already have enough doubts about how good it's going to be (it's not) and now my teacher has to shovel this on top. Stupid.

She sighed and bit her pencil. *Whatever, so why do people keep writing if they're not going to write anything worthwhile? Answer that for me! "Well, they think it's okay," she'd say. "But it's really crummy. Not as good as a romance." I know that's what she'd say.*

She got up and paced around. The student cleaned up her desk. She arranged the paints and cleaned up the spilled colors from last night. On her desk the watercolors had pooled out and dried as rainbows of lakes. She yawned.

Hell with her. It's still important to me. Even if one person picks up this book, if it's ever good enough, and finds something worthwhile in it, isn't that what matters? That's why I'm here, that's why I read. That's why I write, too, to pass it forward.

Damn.

She drummed her pencil on the book. Shapes played in her head, vague colors coming together, a world forming, just beyond reach.

I wonder what Ariachne is going to do next. She could visit the Spider-People, though I wanted to do that later. I don't know. I'll just have to think about it.

Or maybe that's wrong! Dickens and Vonnegut and whoever she loves didn't just sit around and think about it! Asimov and Dan Simmons and Ray Bradbury didn't just sit around and mope all day. This isn't going to be as good as a romance, but

She chewed her pencil.

You know, I think maybe fantasy isn't falling into that trap. Not that Glorious Professor would consider fantasy a worthwhile read. But still, there's so much imagination in there! There are so many good books, you just have to give them a shot, you old hag! So what if they aren't all classics, how many classics do you expect a writer to come up with?

"Fuck!" The student shook her head. She drummed her pencil on the pad. "Fuck it. The heck am I going to do with ..."

I wonder what the Spider-People culture would be like. With so many babies, maybe they wouldn't place such regard on pregnancy and stuff.

Don't spiders eat their own babies? Ewww!

She smiled. I can't wait to show her my book. I hope it's good, just so I can rub it in her face. I hope it's "Important."

"Ha!"

Or even better—I hope it's terrible and popular and makes her head explode.

The young student stood up. She stretched her arms out and pulled her hair back. She read the clock and cursed; work was in an hour. Her stool was rickety.

I wonder if she's ever seen the Amazon. So many things I bet she doesn't like. What a cranky bitch.

She turned to a new page. She sketched in a steady hand, *Here's where you can go screw yourself.* She shaded in trees, broad, flat leaves, vines, and a jungle landscape came into view. Long-beaked birds rested on the branches. A biblical snake slithered down a trunk. Marshes yielded their foul gases in the distance. Her hand crafted a world onto the page, and in the thick of it, almost hidden, was a small human using leaves as camouflage. She carried a bow limply, not setting its sights on anything. The student relaxed.

"Fuck," she said. She picked up her jacket again and left for work, leaving the paradise unfinished.

Time Stops For

Time Stops For

Nobody here. Not that I can see. I hop into my car and turn on the radio: typical radio-trash bullshit. Every now and then a real song, one with gut, one with soul. But my CD's too scratched, can't rely on that, can't play "Bad Moon Rising" worth a damn. All skips and skates.

Another four hours of work left. Halfway through. I wonder if anyone would notice if I just drove away. Fuck. I could always move back with my mom. My girlfriend would hate it, but I'm so sick of this. You can only stock so many goddamned shelves.

Finally a good one comes on. One from "Dark Side of the Moon." I can feel the echoes, the haunting melody. Best investment I made, these speakers. Don't care what people say: the half hour I get for lunch is more than enough time. I crank it up a bit.

The song always makes me a bit weepy. Not like crying, you know, but that, with *that* inside. Just the thought of people divided; can't we all just get along? White versus black; rich versus poor.

I'm definitely poor.

And I light one up. It's cheap, stinks, but does the job.

Time Stops For

“That’s not what we would choose ... to do ...”

Damned fine song. Not fine smoke. Real skunk.

I look at the clock again. Still another twenty minutes. I wish I had an hour.

Floyd. Those were guys who could rock. Those were guys who had it, who had *it*. They could do anything right. They were rich, famous, they did important things. Me? I guess not. I mean, I’m not dumb. I did decent on my SATs; not so decent in college. Yeah, well, can’t live in the past. Waters probably didn’t do college. Not really into their old stuff, though.

Rebecca’s really getting on my case. Maybe it’s time to move on. I can find another girl, I always seem to. One who doesn’t nag so much. They never do, at first. Then it always seems to start. Dammit. Why can’t they just let things be?

Song’s just about over. That’s a shame.

Still have nineteen minutes, though. Clock must be slow. Can’t be late again. My phone says the same, actually.

Fuck it.

It’s a cold day today. Kind of a pain to toke up. Gotta keep cracking and closing the window a million times. Annoying.

Hey, this is kinda cool. I never heard this solo. Cool guitar, more spacey shit.

Sometimes a song just pulls you in, and that’s what Floyd’s got. They just had it, you know? Some people are lucky. It must be luck.

What else could it be? I mean, look at ... look at Donovan and Bob Dylan. Dylan had it, he had luck. Donovan didn't. He got the shit end of the stick. I hate getting the wrong end of the stick. But when God, that gray-haired bastard, when He doles you out your share, and your share's shit, well then, make—

Damn, this solo is rocking. Hell with work, I've got to hear this one through.

Nineteen minutes. That's strange. Phone says the same, too.

How cool would it be if I could just stay in the car forever? I mean, I wouldn't have to work, just rock out to good jams. Run out of weed, but you can't have it all. That's gotta be the short end of the stick right there. I think that's enough, anyway. Can't be too wasted, don't want to get fired. I'll just ride it a bit.

I think I know what I'd like to do. I'd like to be a rock star. Everyone says that, but I could do it. I could start up a band. You see, the key to being in a band isn't being great at your instrument. Sex Pistols, all good punk. Or really great at writing (though I'm pretty good at that). It's good at being together. A bit of a smoke, a few laughs, and I can keep a crew together forever. I mean, forever. Won't break up in like two years like most good bands. Gotta be careful, too, can't OD or anything either. Don't want to Jim Morrison myself or anything. And you can't burn out, that's the worst. But sometimes those guys come back. Though I never really dug Fogerty's post-Creedence stuff as much.

Time Stops For

The solo's dying down. It's just getting kinda spacey right now. Thump thump. Kinda cool drums.

Yeah, cheap skunk. But still gets the job done. I'd be a good frontman, though. And I'm pretty good at writing songs. Rebecca said so herself. She likes my stuff. Really likes it. I think.

She keeps telling me I should write more. I wonder what she'll say when I tell her I'm starting a band. Probably the usual bull, I can hear her say the same thing my mom said when I dropped out. Rebecca would probably be nice about it, though. Probably wouldn't start it off with "What's your bullshit now?"

Who knows. Maybe she will this time around.

Why do people stay together? Is it loneliness, fear? That's what I don't get. I get pretty bored pretty fast, I guess. It's not really anyone's fault. But that's the way a guy has to be. It's evolution, you know. You've always got to be chasing tail. It's just the way guys are. Not my fault.

Women. I just don't get women.

A few cracks from the drums again. Kinda lame right here, but still kinda cool. Everything Floyd does is cool, even when they're doing nothing. Strange though, still nineteen minutes.

And on my phone, too.

What if time stopped? Wouldn't that be pretty cool? Damn, think of all the things I could do with infinite time. I could write that album I always wanted. I could write a book, too. Maybe write my

own biography. God knows I've got some good stories in me.

Though who in fuck's name would really want to read about stocking shelves? Fuck that: be a rock star first, then write biography.

I think I could write a book. I should start right now. I've got some paper hanging around, maybe a pencil that's not broken. There. A pen. That'll do.

Still nineteen minutes. This is pretty cool, actually.

You know, let's start with a song. I'm going to be a rock star first, let's get that first album out of the way. Oh man! I'll go put a band together and we can record it this weekend! No, that's nuts. I'd have to teach them all the parts. I'd have to find really good guys to put it together that quick. That's really what a band comes down to, finding really good guys who can learn your stuff in a week.

Ah, hell. I'll worry about that later.

So. Song one. What should it be about?

They say "write what you know." I'm sure as shit not writing about stocking shelves. Oh wait. I should write about the time I banged two chicks. They weren't much, but no one has to know that.

"The hottest broads, in all the land,

"They were finer than ... than ..."

What the hell's going to rhyme with "land"?

It sounds cool, though, and I could get kinda a medieval sound

Time Stops For

to start with. I'd need some really good guitarist to know what I mean. Land ... land ...

Fuck. How am I going to mention there are two of them? And what's the guitar going to sound like?

The drum solo's picking up. Thanks for the vote of confidence, Nick.

You see, they always seem to get things right. Me? I just fuck them up. They say you need the stars to wink at you right; or really, maybe you need to wink at them right, get them to notice you. But I'm starting to think they don't seem to know the difference. They don't notice what a fuckup you are. But maybe that's not all that bad. I wonder if Waters was a fuckup, before all this. I mean, Floyd had some stinkers, too. I kinda like that idea. Maybe it'll go into the song.

How in hell's fuckuppery can a girl like Rebecca ever be with a loser like me?

The song ... it's getting weird. Never heard these lyrics.

"Humming along, it's a different song. The way back is all mine ..."

What? Still nineteen minutes. I only took, like, three puffs. I hope I'm not going to die or anything. Maybe I'm asleep.

They say you pinch yourself. There. Nothing. I'm still awake.

"Even the best, they're a filthy mess. No-thing is ever fine ..."

Okay, this is a little freaky. Do I just get the hell out of here and

get back to work? In the condition my condition is in? Ah, maybe I'll just drive back.

Click. Nothing.

Even these busted doors won't budge. The window opens just enough for me to keep smoking, as if I wanted to. It's nice getting some cold air. No one's around still.

I think it's time to yell. I'll look like the Typical Stoner Idiot. Freaking out over a little weed. Ah, hell with it.

"Heeeey! HEEEEYY!" My throat, ouch. "Anyone!"

Someone finally walks by. It's Amanda, kind of a pudge. Hates me. "Hey! Amanda!"

And she keeps going to her car. I shriek out the crack of the window. "Amanda! Over here!" Still nothing.

This is really freaking me out now.

I'm going to starve to death in this goddamned car.

"Life ... and Death ... it's Yin and Yang, and neither bring us rest ... again ..."

Trippy motherfucker.

Okay. So I'm stuck in this car. What do I have to do to get out of here? I've got a half-eaten sandwich. Eventually someone's got to notice; I've got to make that last.

A plastic knife. I'll smash through the window with a plastic fucking knife.

There's got to be something else. Old registration. A notepad

with some doodles. I don't think the spiral ring will do anything. A bunch of McDonald's boxes. A couple old nuggets in one. This car's a stinking mess.

How's a girl like Rebecca still with an idiot like me?

"Grand ... and small ... by their request, it's fine that both ... should fall ..."

Change. I've got change. I could use it like brass knuckles.

Well that hurts like a motherfucker. But that window has to give way somehow.

GODDAMMIT. OW.

A few chips in it, but still nothing. I've got to give it another shot.

FUCKYOUYOUFUCKINGIMPOSSIBLE

Five minutes of this, and I'm still nowhere. Just scratched up the window. Now it looks like half my CDs.

Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm going to starve to death in my car. I'm going to be literally the biggest idiot ever.

"Enter the blue, you've got a lot to do ..."

"Shut up, you miserable prick, shut up!"

"-will ever last ..."

This is it. I'm done. I'm never going to get out of here.

I think I know what it's like to be in a coffin now. I wonder if dead people feel the same way. If they feel like screaming out when they get buried. Like me right now. Like that guy they found in a glacier.

No, you lose your brain, and your nerves. You don't feel anything. Fuck! What am I even ...?

I've gotta stay together. I've got to let people know what happened to me. Nineteen minutes, just got stuck in some sort of, I don't know, time warp. I'm stuck in time. How the hell do you get unstuck? I wish I read that stupid book. About World War Something. God, college was so long ago.

This is it. I don't know what else I could do.

There's not much else I can do now. I never got to start that band.

"Here ... and there ... you must admit, it's never really—"

Fuck bands. Fuck you, Roger Waters. Fuck you.

I don't know. If I could do it all again, what would I do? I don't have a clue.

I'd probably finish college. Probably. I don't know how I'd do that, but I'd finish college.

Maybe smoke less. Smoke nothing, actually. Just finish college.

The hell with this stinking skunk! It got me here, and where's here? Nowhere. I'm nobody, a nothing. Here, taste sweet sweet ground, you dirty motherfucker.

I should've kept it. I'm going to be stuck in here forever with nothing to do.

I only have a notebook. I might as well start that album I wanted to do. Maybe do a song or something.

“Roger Waters Attacks.” I like it. I think I know how it goes.

You know, I can’t believe it. I’m twenty-five. I’m twenty-five, and I’ve done nothing with my life.

Honestly, let me die. I wasted my life. There’s nothing more for me out there.

It’s probably fitting that I got stuck in here with nineteen minutes left of my break. It’s probably fitting that I’m stuck in here, like that bug in amber from that movie. That bug has it better. My life’s a shithole, and I deserve to die. I’ve wasted it, I’ve absolutely wasted it.

I’m pretty sober now. I think I see it coming. Is that the light? No, that’s still the sun. I’m literally going to be in here forever.

Rebecca will move on. My mom probably won’t notice. Come to think of it, it’s probably a good thing for Rebecca, she won’t have to be with such a loser. She’ll probably meet a nice guy and forget all about me. That would be pretty good, actually. Not for me, obviously, but in the bigger picture, ‘the grand scheme of things,’ they say.

I’m not part of it anymore. I’m not part of any grand scheme. But you still have to think about it, you still have to consider that some things are just bigger than you. The guy probably thought the glacier was smaller than him when he went out into it. Then there’s that moment, you see it, the largeness flash before you, I guess. And now you’re a popsicle.

It's unfortunate that we don't see those moments of largeness without being small first. The things I wish I knew in college ...

What should I do?

I can do anything now. It doesn't matter. What's the first thing I should do? The last?

I don't know.

I think the first thing would be to fix up my life. But I can't do that. I'm in here. Forever.

Amanda's still rifling through her car. I was pretty mean to her. When I was in time and all. I guess that's what I'll call it.

I'm going to go insane in here. I just know it. I should figure out a way to kill myself, before that happens. Maybe that's the last thing to figure out.

The first thing: I'm going to write this song.

It's died down. Waters started howling over the thing. It sounds like the ocean he's on, some light taps from the drums. Like the wind over the ocean or something.

“Whooooooooo ... Yoooooooooooooooooooo ... Whoooooooooooo ...”

Waters on the Water.

First thing: fix my life.

I think that's what I should do. I'll do the song after that. List of things to fix:

Job

Girlfriend – relationship stuff

College

(if that's possible)

Things I'd like, too: band, book, fame. Maybe not even fame. Maybe just do something good for me, write more songs, like Rebecca said. She hated them, but it's nice of her to lie about it. I suck at it, but maybe that doesn't matter.

You know. Lists are helpful. They're stupid, but helpful. Maybe if I weren't such a smart-ass about taking good advice, I wouldn't be in such a bad spot.

(being a smart-ass, too)

I think that goes without saying. I don't know where to start, but what the hell.

Go for it.

"Amanda, I'm sorry for calling you a fat bitch!"

"What?" She turns.

What?

"You heard me?"

"Yeah."

"Ummm."

"Tell me again how much of an asshole you are?"

"Ummm." I think she's right. "I'm something of an asshole. Sorry. I shouldn't have called you fat."

"And a bitch."

"And a bitch."

What?

“Hey Amanda.”

“Yeah?”

“This will sound stupid, but could you open my door?”

“God, what a pothead you are.”

“No. Seriously.” Ummm. “I think I broke my handle.”

“Go out the other side.”

“That one, too.”

“What the hell ...?”

She comes up to my car. Mascara, poofy coat and green apron; can just make out the black Pantera tee under it. “What the hell did you do to your window?” Maybe I could tell her that my friend—
“Never mind, I don’t really care right now.

She pulls. “Your door’s locked.”

“Oh.”

She rolls her eyes. “So unlock it.”

It unlocks. I practically fall out of the door.

“Okay, you weirdo. Thanks for apologizing, I guess.”

She shrugs and goes back into work. Maybe there’s time left to make it in the big picture. Still have nineteen minutes left; not a moment to waste.

The Research

The Research

How much matter is in the universe? Unlimited

How much physics is there? Unl

How much God? Relative

How much does God care for us? Relati N

Klaus nearly finished another notebook of questions; *almost five pages today*, he noted. The stale light from the hanging fixture battered against the painted concrete. The last month was a sluggish crawl of theoretical research: he had calculated the illusion away from the third dimension, and sifted through the tendrils of the second to uncover the first. He constructed the calculations for the first dimension, but not the philosophical terms in which they spoke: there was the question somewhere, hidden and peeking through, that he had yet to discover.

He stared at the chalkboard. *Applying these formulas*—he thought.

“Applying these formulas,” he said, “we reduce the third dimension to but two; the third dimension, depth, is but what we perceive, though it is an illusion. The fourth dimension, let’s call it

the ‘hyper’ dimension, follows these rules as well. We may reduce the fourth spatial dimension to three; and hopefully three to two.”

Heinrich made brief notes.

“We apply these same formulas to the second dimension, to a different degree, and now we are down to one dimension. That is correct, no?”

“That is correct, Klaus.” Heinrich tapped at a notebook.

“Then it should be easy; but perhaps we are not trained properly,” Klaus said. “Perhaps we should have paid attention to those philosophy courses at Munich, no?” He laughed. “This is puzzling indeed.”

Klaus swiveled from his chair. He hovered over their secretary. “Anne, what are these notes you’re taking?” She typed away some more. “We have but scratched the surface! There is nothing worthy of note-taking so far.”

She continued typing. “I’m sorry, Dr. Gottstim, but I was commanded to take notes of everything.”

“Let me look at this,” he tore a paper from the typewriter. “Hyper dimensions ... disappearing dimensions ... wait, fish and wurst? No, no this last part is not what we’ve been working on today!” Klaus crumpled the paper and threw it away. “At least you have marked down our particular diets, Miss Anne. I am certain our dear leadership will want to know where their trout has been going.”

“But I am commanded to record everything that happens in

here, and furthermore, you do eat a lot of fish ...”

“They pay you for nonsense!” He slammed his hand down.

“What we need is another researcher, not some typist!”

Anne kept typing. “I apologize that I don’t have advanced degrees, Dr.—”

Klaus shook his head. “No, dear Anne, here I must stop you. Call me Klaus and end your reverence! Reverence has no place in theoretical physics—or science of any kind. That is your first lesson as a scientist. We are here to unwind nature, and it is easiest to do so when it starts naked and unblemished with the common man’s—and woman’s—reverence.”

“Of course, Dr.—I mean, Klaus.”

“Thank you, my dear.” He exhaled. “Now we have simply too much work ahead of us to finish our project.” He laughed. “This project will make *Uranverein* look like play in a sandbox.”

“This you keep saying,” Heinrich butted in, “but when is it we should expect to finish?”

“Project *Schwarze Gespenst* will be completed when I am the genius others claim I am! I am famished; let us have our lunch.”

Heinrich was a student of his at the University of Munich. Even at the age of youthful exuberance, Heinrich Brandt made almost no impression upon the brilliant professor; Heinrich acted far older

than Klaus, and acted more serious than department chairs and tenured professors. Heinrich would go out with a group of similarly serious boys, participate in nationalistic groups for young men, meet somewhat pretty girls who would talk blandly about the future of the nation. Simply put, Heinrich was dull: a slightly below-average student, Klaus' only memory of Heinrich was when the department head, a tall, almost skeletal man then (how ripe and full of life he had been when Klaus had but started!) consorted with him on the young man.

"This student," the department head, "he must be able to pass your class, no?"

"I know little of him," Klaus admitted, "other than he seems unable to do the required work."

"But there must be a way for him to pass?"

"Other than through a superior being's intervention, I do not know of one."

The department head turned a terrible expression, one that Klaus had never seen before. "A good *lehrer* would not fail his student so."

Starting the next week, Heinrich's assignments improved in both quality of thought and in handwriting. Klaus attempted to bring up the subject, but received a harsh stare from the department head, and didn't ask further questions.

Now Klaus sat across from Heinrich, who was eating two pork

chops, gravy, sauerkraut heaped on. Yesterday was steak and mash. Klaus tried to ignore that his own portion of trout had been getting smaller and smaller; baked potato (also shrinking by the day) and a pack of crackers (three instead of four). Anne ate her ham and cheese, and saved her apple until later in the day. He cleared his throat and finished his plate.

“We are on the verge of something,” Heinrich said, “something grand and incredible. Can you not feel it?”

“Terrible things were often once deemed incredible,” Klaus said.

“Terrible things are always incredible.” Heinrich swallowed a fattened piece of pork. “An earthquake, a tsunami, a tornado: these things bring awe to a man, they bring solace to his heart.”

Klaus sighed. “We have much work ahead of us yet.”

Anne returned to the typewriter. In three hours she would eat her apple. It was a green one today, which she preferred, but likely a bit too tart.

“It is not a matter of science we are faced with,” Heinrich’s face flushed, “it is a matter of state and pride! That is surely why we are here,” he turned to Anne. “Is that not the case?”

Anne was unfazed by Heinrich’s rhetoric and resumed typing.

“Of course it is science that brings us here.” Klaus banged

down on his desk. "Pure, unmitigated science; research is its own reward. We must clear our minds of ..."

The typewriter clanged. The page read: *Science is its own reward.*

"... for that will surely poison our well of knowledge. We must put everything: state, family, self; everything aside and become part of science itself."

"That is madness," Heinrich countered, "for why should science exist other than to serve? One cannot—"

"Science serves no man, it is nature in man's language! Had those years at the University taught you—"

"Are you questioning my qualifications? Keep in mind, I am your friend here; and furthermore, that you should keep that journal from me, and not allow me to ..."

Anne saw a hint of terror in Klaus' eyes. He brushed it aside and waved a hand. "I merely draw to myself, Heinrich. If you really are desirous of my idle doodles, then I can allow you that privilege. But I prefer to keep them to myself."

"These aren't doodles of dimensional structures I could help with, are they?"

"*Alcedo atthis*. The kingfisher. I am a bird man, myself. It helps me concentrate."

"Excuse me," Anne raised her hand, "but how do you spell ..."

Klaus waved a hand. "It is of no consequence," he said.

Heinrich leaned forward. “Perhaps I would like to see this bird of yours—”

“We have yet to determine what to do with this singular dimension. I, as yet, have little concept of what we have created here.” Klaus drew himself up to the board. “Should these calculations prove remotely accurate.”

“I believe they are,” Heinrich frowned.

“Then let us assume they are, that—”

“Klaus?” Anne raised her hand again.

“Yes Anne. On with it, you are no grade-schooler, here.”

“Could you explain to me again how ... the dimensions, how they ...”

Heinrich snorted.

“I just can’t seem to write it down right, it just doesn’t ...”

“Dear,” Klaus folded his hands together, “I shall explain that to you again in time. But right now, Heinrich and I must follow these errant thoughts through. Do try to follow as best as you can.”

“Of course, Klaus.”

Klaus turned to the board, studying the tightly-written calculations there. “Do not think I’ve forgotten,” Heinrich pointed, “about that blasted notebook.”

What is life’s meaning? DtKn

What are life's responsibilities? DtKn

Should there be life? Perhaps

perhaps not

"Klaus," Anne fidgeted. "Klaus."

"Not now, Anne."

"Klaus, I must ask, why do you have a gun here?"

"How do you know that?"

Anne turned away, embarrassed. "I overheard Heinrich speaking to a guard ..."

Heinrich came into the room. "Sorry for the delay. Something wasn't agreeing with me."

"Of course," Klaus said, "it is simply natural."

"Now," Heinrich said, "In the meantime, I have had something of a revelation. Perhaps, for all our intentions, there is simply no direct way to affect our enemies within the first dimension. It is simply a line, yes?"

Spatially, yes, Klaus thought. But metaphysically, a thought of—
"Yes," he said.

"Then all should be somewhere on this line, and we must simply discover where in this first dimension lies our enemies." He drew a line on the board. "All we must do, simply," he slashed a cut into it, "is to segment the line."

"Perhaps," Klaus said, "but on this line lies all the information of our reality. We should—nay, must—consider the continuity of the

line before we—”

“Nonsense.” He turned to the board again. “We must simply erase the line where it affects us negatively.” He wiped away a part of the line. “That is all, yes?”

Heinrich faced Klaus again. “It is imperative that we discover how to effect reality through this first dimension. Klaus?”

“Yes?”

“You are no fool. You understand what this entails, where we are at in the war, no?”

“I do.” Klaus bent his head down. “I do. But all our attempts at defeating the enemy have taken place in three spatial dimensions. We cannot take this lightly.”

The typewriter stopped clicking. The room was silent. “Do not stop,” Heinrich told Anne. He turned to Klaus. “This may be our last chance.”

Klaus nodded. *A being's sentience ... is perhaps related to his responsibility in the uni—*

Anne started crying. Klaus broke from his reverie and nodded to her. “Be strong, my child.” He patted her shoulder. “This is nothing you did not know.”

“I know, I know ...” she wiped at her tears. “It’s just my boyfriend ... only two weeks ago, he wrote that ... I am sorry, Dr. Gottstim.”

“This is no easy matter,” Klaus said. “We work on a theoretical

level, and translating that into something practical, that is where the trick shall lie.”

“It is possible, though.” Heinrich tapped an impatient foot.

“Correct?”

“Yes,” Klaus rubbed an arm. “Yes, it should be.”

Perhaps I have been working in the wrong dimension. Maybe there is something more basic, more elemental to these questions. A dot, a pinpoint—

“This is troubling,” Heinrich said.

“Indeed.”

“Troubling that this burden for greatness is thrust upon us, and we have not yet seized upon it.”

Should Heinrich have seen it from the bunker, the sun would have shone its last rays upon them. “The day is near an end,” Heinrich checked his wristwatch. “We still have much work ahead of us.”

“I know, I know.”

Anne yawned and stretched. The apple core stood on the desk, a bit unripe. She had eaten it greedily nonetheless.

“We must finish this project soon.” Heinrich shook his head.

“Exhaustion produces nothing but sleep.”

“Failure produces nothing but death.”

Klaus sighed.

“Even if.” Heinrich cleared his throat. “Even if this new device we are seeking does destroy the globe ...”

“Yes?”

“We may use it as a deterrent. We may tell our enemies: ‘Advance no further upon this point.’ We may hold the whole world at ransom.”

“That is true,” Klaus said.

“Whatever weapon we may devise, it will be of use to the Fatherland.”

Klaus looked down.

“Now what I don’t understand is where these equations come from. How we derive that reality is two-dimensional, how we strip the third dimension from it. Could you explain this again?”

Klaus breathed deeply. “It is simply evident from the nature of life that—”

“How so,” Heinrich asked. “We may both have invested ourselves in this project, for how many months, but yet we have our differences. There is a reason they assigned me to you.”

“And what is that?”

“They say you have split loyalties.”

“They say much.”

“Do you care to hear what I will say?”

Klaus folded his arms. “Perhaps.”

“That you are brilliant and nothing will stop that. That you are a scientist, one of the old, grand kind, and your work does not acknowledge political boundaries.” Heinrich met Klaus’ stare. “And that, my friend, is always dangerous.”

“I do not know what you speak of.”

“You cannot lie to me.”

Klaus grinned. “Perhaps.”

Heinrich stood up. “Again; once more. How do we determine the nature of the universe is truly one-dimensional?”

“I am curious as well,” Anne said, looking up.

“Let us start with reducing to the second dimension,” Klaus said. “We take an orange and peel it. Place the peel on a desk. It is flat, is it not? And on this flatness, we may travel anywhere that—”

“Nonsense!” Heinrich pounded his fist down. “I have thought about this for three days. It is the same argument the geographers in Columbus’ days used! But now you revert to them; where is your brilliance now?”

“I have simply explained the science. It is not up to me whether you understand, Heinrich.”

“There is something else you haven’t told me.”

“And what should that be?”

“Something else, something in that notebook.”

“Do you truly want to see?” He opened a page. “Here is the kingfisher for you.”

“That is not all—”

“No, there is more, too!” He opened to his latest pages. “I have been pondering philosophical questions these past five days! You are tiresome and this problem bores me so!” He threw down the notebook. He panted. “We must take a rest. It is late.”

Heinrich shook his head. “But our people are dying—”

“And there is nothing I can do about that. Not tonight.”

Heinrich clenched his fists. “Perhaps. As you might say.” He opened the door and whispered orders to the two guards. “I will tell command of our progress.”

“What pr—?” Klaus held himself back. “Very well.”

“They are anxious. I will go.”

Heinrich paused for a moment. His footfalls echoed in the hall.

Anne watched Klaus work furiously in the notebook. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead.

“Zeroth dimension ... just one more application ... but what do these calculations mean ...?”

“All this is still so complicated to me.”

Anne stretched her arms and yawned. She let down her hair, dirty blond hair brushing her shoulders; save for one of the guards, the youngest in the bunker. “I still don’t understand what you scientists do with these theories all day. The university was difficult

enough.”

“Mostly we argue, as you have seen.”

“I still have to write up a report.” Anne sighed. “What should I say?”

“That we’re making slow progress.”

“I mean, about that dimensional thing? I still don’t understand it.”

“It will come in time.”

“Please tell me. I won’t put it in the report.”

Klaus smiled. “Why, Anne, that would be treason.”

“I know.” She fidgeted. “Please.”

Klaus gave a deep breath. “That. That is the heart of a scientist, through and through.” He smiled. “A heart that seeks truth can never doubt itself. But perhaps you know this. Very well, Anne.”

Klaus thought a moment. “Do you gaze upon the stars?”

“I have been too busy to.” Anne thought. “I used to when I was a little girl.”

“Out there in the greatness of the sky, there are thousands and thousands of stars and planets. Maybe millions. In all those millions, they all work the same, like our own planet: on the surface is relatively light, not too dense material, and as you get nearer the middle, there is much density. Then the core of the planet, which is denser than what comes above it. Due to gravity.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Now imagine a kind of planet, a star really, that is so big and so dense in the middle, that it is several hundred times the size of the biggest star in the sky.”

Anne nodded.

“This kind of star has such a gravity, that instead of giving off light, it takes it in; these are dark holes in the night sky, all is darkness around them. Incredibly huge, incredibly dense stars. We are but truly learning about them now.”

“That sounds fascinating.”

“Now, these dark holes, they are so special ...” he tapped a pencil on a desk. “How do I ... well, they are so dense, that you add matter to it, material of three dimensions, and the information of the dark hole increases by a power of two. In a sense, it collapses matter, flattens it, flattens perhaps even light as well. If one were in this room, a special type of dark hole, it could flatten everything in here; make your desk but a thin piece of paper. The dark hole’s gravity is so great ...”

“You get two dimensions instead of three.”

“That is the short of it. And through it, we can work with within a flat plane’s structure—theoretically, of course—to effect ...”

“Oh.” Anne nodded slowly. “I think I understand.”

“Yes,” he said, “and if we keep folding, again, and once more again, then we get to the zeroth dimension.”

“The ... what?”

“It is ... imagine a pinpoint, no, an invisible light switch. A question, the question on which all of life, all of the universe is based.”

“I don’t quite ...” Anne shook her head. “All these theories, they are so beyond me! You discuss all day long, piece about the whatever of the world. The ... the thoughts of the air, for all I know. The only thing I know of the world is that which my mother taught me: just to mind one another. She was a good woman.”

“What was that?”

“There were five of us—I had three brothers—and she’d always be so stern, always tell us to be mindful of each other. Especially Karl, when he was a baby ...”

“So you had a responsibility to each other.”

“Of course!” Anne smiled. “How silly you bookworms get sometimes.”

Klaus coughed. “Well.”

“Yes ...?”

“God’s Principle,” Klaus said. “As they say, perhaps I have not seen the forest for the trees.”

“God’s what?”

“There was a course I had taught at Munich, long long ago, where we investigated God’s Principle. That is, the purpose, the meaning of life. How I’d forgotten those too-brief lectures! Our heated discussions ...

“I think one thing we as living things forget is that there are two principles, really. The purpose of life, yes, and the purpose of non-life. Of the inanimate; dirt, rocks, stars ...”

Anne smiled bewildered.

“The past four months, we have been trying to effect the latter of these. And those who do are often doomed to forget the former, which must necessarily guide the living. Thankfully, you have so graciously reminded me ...”

“I’m not sure how I did, or if I did,” Anne rubbed her arm, “but I’m glad to have helped.”

“You have, dear child. Just one question remains.” He sighed. “Do you have children, Anne?”

She blushed. “No, Dr. Gottstim, why ...”

“The reason I am asking, Miss Kalb, dear Miss Anne Kalb, is that if you had children, or maybe you plan to have children, you should perhaps do something for me. Do you plan to have children one day?”

Anne blushed and nodded.

“Then for their sakes, I need you to take this,” he offered the notebook, “and burn it. Do not let anyone know.”

“I did not think it was just idle thoughts and birds.” She inhaled sharply. “Dr.—I mean, Klaus, if I may ask—”

“And do not open it. I cannot tell you anything more.”

Anne bit her lip. “Okay.”

“Do you know why I have done this?”

“It is something terrible you and Heinrich have been talking about.”

“No, why I continue this research.”

Anne shook her head.

“Then you are not truly a scientist, and consider that a blessing. Goodnight, Anne.”

Klaus gave her the notebook. She took it gingerly, rubbing it like a small animal. She covered the notebook with her papers and turned to leave, pausing before the door. “Did you and your wife have any children, Klaus?”

“I am a scientist,” he said. “The human race are my children.”

Anne nodded. She rushed out of the room, bent on her mission.

Klaus sighed. The guard entered and flicked the lights for him; Klaus motioned for one moment more. He stretched and rifled through his desk. He pulled out the pistol, a thin, dull, pointed object, and checked the chamber. Empty. He sighed again. He pulled off a shoe, and took out the insole. There was a small darkness set in a depression carved into the sole. Light from the room bent into it, slightly. He squinted into the smoky element, pinched carefully in his quivering fingers.

The Richest Man in the World

The Richest Man in the World

The morning sun had yet to clear the slight mist from the leveled ground.

“He’s a banker.” The pourer spoke to his co-worker. “Got to be. There’s millions of them; you never hear about them. They just suck up all the money.”

“I think he’s just off his rocker,” said his co-worker. “I mean, why wouldn’t you invest it?”

“Invest? Hell, what’s the point?” The pourer guided the concrete into the hole. He motioned to the man in the truck. “It’s not like you’re going to take it with you when you go. Just eat nothing but steak and lobster all day.”

“For breakfast, too?”

“For breakfast too.” The pourer laughed. “Every day. Lobster for a snack, too.”

“You wouldn’t invest it or anything?”

“No.”

The co-worker smoothed the concrete with a broom. “You know what I’d do? I’d probably buy clothes for kids in Africa.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They’re starving over there, naked, it’s just miserable. You gotta feel bad for them. They probably need schools and stuff. After I take care of my son.”

The mixing truck kept twirling, spouting gravelly sounds and concrete. The construction worker motioned to him again and lifted the spout; the truck moved to the next spot, and the worker guided the spout and motioned again.

“I heard his kid is a total drunk,” the pourer said.

“I was, his age.”

“Did you ever get your stomach pumped?”

“Well ...”

The pourer adjusted his baseball cap. “How old’s your kid?”

“Six.”

“It’s a good age.”

“It is.”

“My daughter’s thirteen. Dear god, the crying!” The pourer shook his head.

“I hear boys are easier.” He laughed.

“People like him, they just don’t get it. I betcha this guy never had to wipe his kid’s ass.”

“Or his own.”

“Yeah, probably not.”

The concrete rolled out. Mist mingled in the startled air.

“How much,” the pourer said.

“Huh?”

“Don’t tell me you never thought about it. How much, you think?”

“Ones or twenties?”

“Who the hell builds a warehouse to stash singles?” The pourer wiped his nose with his sleeve. “Maybe he’s a stripper, you’re right.”

“Ha.”

“Really, though. Hundreds, obviously. Damn! How much?”

The co-worker shrugged. “I don’t care, really. Just as long as he keeps paying my bills.”

The carpenter inspected the list: two-by-fours, galvanized nails, plywood ...

The delivery man yawned.

The carpenter looked the list over one last time. “Looks good,” he said, “just have your men put it over there.”

“Okay.”

The carpenter signed the paper. “The warehouse is huge, don’t you think?”

“I just drive the truck,” said the delivery man.

“You know what this is for?”

The delivery man shrugged. "His cars. His Aston-Burtens or whatever."

The carpenter offered the clipboard back to the delivery man. "Close." He shook his head.

"What's it for?"

The rivets made horrifying sounds, metallic roars bouncing and ricocheting off of the roof and other portions of the wall. "It'll mildew," the riveter said. "Doesn't take a rocket scientist."

"No shit," said the other riveter.

"He's going to lose the whole damned thing. Shoulda bought gold, the idiot."

"No shit," the other riveter said. "Now kid Murphy ..."

"What?"

"Kid Murphy fell off a boat once. Too drunk to swim. They got the coast guard out to help him, his friends were too drunk to pull him in."

"Some friends," the riveter said.

The sky cracked and they looked up. The clouds threatened. "Old man Murphy can afford to give us a break. I'm going for lunch in a bit."

"I can't stand rich people. Them and their warehouses."

"Me neither." The drills made shredding sounds. "They have to

rub it in our faces,” the riveter yelled.

“What?”

“Rub it in our faces!”

The other riveter stopped. “What?”

The first riveter turned to him. “They have to rub it in our faces. How rich they are. I can’t stand it.”

“Well,” the other riveter said, “he’s not going to keep it long in here. It’s all going to rot.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Serves him right.”

The apprentice twisted two wires together and capped them. The electrician shook his head.

“The green’s the ground,” he said. “Come on already, you know.” He unscrewed the cap and adjusted the wires. “There,” he said.

“Like he’ll know,” the apprentice said.

“I’ll know.” The electrician sighed. “The fire department will know.”

“He can’t be that stupid, right?”

“What, to trust you?”

“I mean, all that paper,” he said. “What’s the point?”

“It’s not our place to ask those kinds of things,” the electrician said. “It’s our job to do our job right. People’s lives depend on it.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Just because he’s rich doesn’t mean he don’t burn. Like me and you, all the same.”

“He just burns after, too.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” said the apprentice.

“I know what they say. I think there’s something more to it.”

The apprentice shook his head. “This is just like buying a shirt to him. He’s probably got warehouses all over the country.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” the electrician said. “A man doesn’t just build something like this to look at all his money.”

“You don’t know rich men, then.”

“Look at you! You’re barely fifteen and talk like you know so much.”

The apprentice fumed. “Dammit, Marc! I’m not a kid!”

“Just look at it this way: the richest man in the world doesn’t do this. Only poor people would do this, or someone who’s not quite rich, anyway. There’s just something more to it.”

“I don’t think so,” the apprentice shook his head. “Mr. Murphy’s just nuts, that’s all.”

“Have you met him?”

“Don’t need to. I hear enough.”

“Check your ears, son.” The electrician picked their materials and moved to the next outlet. “I hear different things.”

The store-clerk pulled the pallet through the warehouse. “Creepy,” she said.

“Right there,” said the other clerk. “It’s all marked out on the floor.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She dropped the pallet. “Woo!” she yelled, and it echoed against the steel walls. “Weird,” she said.

“Hurry up,” he said, “we’ve got a ton more to do.”

“Why do you think someone would buy all this paper?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “He likes paper.”

“Maybe he’s a serious origami man!” The store-clerk clapped her hands. “Wouldn’t that be cool!”

“Sure.” The other clerk walked back toward the door.

“No, seriously Joey,” she laughed, “how many cranes do you think he can fold from this?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “A million.”

She laughed again. “That’s, like, one of these pallets. Wait, let me count ...”

The other clerk left toward the truck. The first clerk pointed and counted the boxes. “Hey Joey! Help me out!”

The clerk brought another pallet in. "It's forty boxes," he said.

"So how many cranes is that?"

"I don't know."

"It says ten reams per box." She counted on her fingers.

"Dammit, I hate math."

"It's a lot of cranes. Now help me out!"

"How many of those dreams do you think would come true?"

"All of them," he said. "He can buy each and every one."

Mr. Murphy turned on the lights. "Come in," he said.

The warehouse's lights flickered on. There were wooden crates in grid-formation, stretching a few hundred feet.

"Dad, I can't believe you wasted all this money."

"It's not yours."

His son muttered under his breath.

"I wish I didn't have it," Mr. Murphy said.

"Bullshit."

"Watch your tongue."

"Whatever."

Mr. Murphy sighed. "It wasn't always like this. But things ... sometimes things change. I think it'd do you good to see this."

"See what?"

"This paper!" He pushed the lid off a crate. He threw a fistful of

sheets and they fluttered uneasily to the floor. "That's all money is, it's just stupid paper!"

"Oh," his son said. "So why ..."

"Why does this paper matter so much to you?"

His son thought a moment. "I looked online. We don't have this much."

"How do you know how much I have?"

"Everyone knows. Just fifteen."

"That's fifteen million more than most people."

"So?"

Mr. Murphy shook his head. "There's more to it than that. I wanted this warehouse to ... just think of life."

"Okay." His son sighed. "Done."

"Think about all the things you can do with life your life! All the places you can go, all the things you can learn. The people you meet!"

"Most of them are boring."

"That can't be helped sometimes ..."

His son returned to his phone. Mr. Murphy patted the open pallet of paper. "I was worried, you know."

"Yeah."

"You don't understand. Really. I saw those pictures you put up. Those 'friends' of yours. You know, you could have ..."

"Yeah. Whatever."

Mr. Murphy sighed. "Life's not about champagne and women. In life, the things you do, the things you create are all that really matter."

"What?"

His son continued on his phone for a moment. He smiled at something. He looked up and his smile dissipated.

"Okay," his son said. "So, fine, you're worried. And you wasted all this money. Great. Now that you're done, can we paintball in here?"

"I wanted to show you something."

"So, paintball: yes or no?"

"You don't get it," Mr. Murphy said. "I guess it's not your fault. You're young, you've never--"

"Get what?"

"My son, my boy. For all we have in life, the only difference between me and the richest man in the world right now is about twenty gallons of ink." Mr. Murphy shook his head. "Why, kiddo, would you spend even a pint of blood on that?"

When 6 Was Nine

When 6 Was Nine

*“Once the writer in every individual comes to life (and that time is not far off),
we are in for an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding.”*

—Milan Kundera

The elec-train car hushed to a quiet halt. I got off to a trio of happy musicians, all guitarists (one with a harmonica) playing in anything but harmony, the notes mashing against each other like purple waves lapping upon purple waves. A dancer tapped along to the asymmetric rhythms, a prestidigitator juggled some colored balls. Cynthia’s apartment was still another twenty minutes away.

New York hadn’t changed much in the last fifty years, not since the Grand Governor’s Final Discovery. Even with a complete knowledge of science, there was still crime. Yes, apparently there will always be crime; and skyscrapers, and garbage dancing on the streets just before the sweepers. But poverty, no. Shortages, no. Drunkenness, old age, pollution, no (there hadn’t been pollution in almost a century).

Happiness, yes. I was happy. But now ...? It was always hard to

imagine how previous generations even survived: jobs, expenses, families. *The purpose of life is to live*, like on those billboards, continually multiplying. I can't fathom how those generations managed life, managed having to be somewhere, having to work at something unfulfilling, all while starving or being cold. War, disease; money, children ... it was my conversation with Cynthia at the beginning of the week that had me thinking.

"We used to make our own meaning, our own purpose," she had said. "In relationships, in how we interact with and, sometimes, change the world around us. But now everything's handed to us, every road there is to take is one that's provided. But, back to the way life was, that one question that lingered before the Grand Governor came along ...

"How would you change the world?"

And she was cute, too.

I almost walked into traffic and horns blared. A few metro taxis dodged around me, and I backed up onto the sidewalk again. Thoughts of a world without perfection, of a world without immortality and painlessness, with families and ... complications. You see, it was Cynthia, you know, before you came along, who started this whole thing. And in some ways, I'm glad it happened, too. It's too much to have to live a lie. Anyway, on my way to her apartment, your typical New Yorker patted me on the shoulder.

"Hi," he started, but stumbled on his tongue. "Oh! You're ...

you're ..."

"Yes ...?"

"Could you read my book, friend?"

He was youthful, with a wide grin upon his face, almost prodding me with a book card. "The new one's a fiction under 'James Mosi.'"

"What's the genre," I ask.

"Ooo, inquisitive. Murder mystery. I think you'll like it."

I declined; who has the taste for those gruesome things? "I'll look for it in the Store," I told him. The light changed, but not before he jammed the book card into my hand. I crumpled it into my pocket and he lingered on the corner.

I messaged her as soon as I reached the building. *It's underground*, I remembered her saying, *don't bother bringing your com-watch*. But I checked and the elevator didn't go any deeper. I looked around, walked around, too, and on the other side of the hall there was a rough-looking door.

It led down.

There wasn't that much light. And everything looked ... I don't know how it looked, it looked old. Clean. Neat. But old style. Boxy lamps, not inset or even rounded. I plopped my com-watch in my pocket, only twenty minutes early. One oh two ... I found it eventually. I waited around for a good while—can't be too early—and knocked on the door. It was wood.

Not only that but an old woman answered.

Have you seen anyone with gray hair? Or plain-looking glasses? It's a shock, is what. "I'm sorry, I must have the wrong place," I said.

"You're looking for Cynthia, right?" She wore an old, knit purple sweater. Her voice had a hint of a scraggle, not unlike the fuzz on her sweater.

"Uhhh—"

"Come in, come in. She will be by shortly."

I felt the crumpled card in my pocket; probably something like "The Death of Alan Whoever." Something like that. "The Death of Jason Waverly." For a second I started wishing I read murder stories so I knew what to look out for.

"You know Cynthia?"

"Yes yes," she swept her hand to offer me in, "we are quite good friends, actually." I remember what it was about the glasses. They weren't electronic. "Do come in!"

Looking at her, she couldn't beat me to a pulp. God, no. But I definitely I took the chance she didn't have a gun. At least the tracker in my com-watch ... well, they'd find the body, at any rate. "Okay," I said.

The door creaked and the apartment was a normal one: a music player, stand-up speakers, a screen and a couch, an ancient laptop off in the corner. I turned back and the old woman lurched against

the door to get it closed, which was strangely reassuring. She finally jammed it back into place.

“Come sit down. Would you care for some tea?”

I shook my head.

“Maybe later, then. You didn’t bring your com-watch, correct?”

I nodded unenthusiastically.

“Good, good, we’re trying to keep a low profile.” She sighed. “No tea, right? I figure I’d offer before we get to the crux of the matter.” She smiled and shook her head. “But I’m getting far, far ahead of myself. I’m Jenn,” she offered a seat on the couch. “I’m not usually so rude, so I hope you can forgive me.”

“Well, I’m Jason.”

“Yes, Cynthia told me.”

“Oh.”

Jenn pulled up a mug of tea to her lips and took a rather timid sip. “A bit hot yet.”

“So Jenn,” she pulled up a chair across from me, “where’s Cynthia?”

She frowned a bit. “Jason, I want to say I’m sorry. We misled you a bit. This isn’t really a date—”

“A procreative date.”

“—yessss, one of those. But when Cynthia gets here, we’ll be able to get to the heart of the matter.”

“The heart of what matter?”

She produced a piece of paper and a pen from the laptop desk. It's a flat, flat yellow sheet, if you haven't seen them; but here it seemed a waste, especially when you can write on a tab, anyway.

"Let me ask you something: could you write the number two?"

I took the pen, and wrote it.

"Plus four."

I wrote that, too. "And you want me to solve it?"

"Yes, please."

I circled the Tee, carried it down, turned the Double-U ... and there's this tricky part ...

"Nine."

She nodded once. "Let me show you something."

She took the pen and drew a weird Ess. An Aitch. And then ... I guess some sort of curl.

"No, you don't have to turn it around. It's the right way." She straightened the paper. "Have you seen any of these figures?"

I shook my head.

"Well, Jason, what would you say if Cynthia and I could show you the language of the ancients?"

I almost shook my head. "The what? No, wait—why?"

"We'll get to that, we'll get to that." She picked up the tea again and blew on it. "Cynthia's better at telling the story." The knock—it was a code. "There she is. If you may excuse me."

She threw herself into opening the jammed door, and Cynthia

stepped in, closing it for her. She wore a suit, this time, brown hair this time, shorter, too. "Jason, thank you so much for coming by." They exchanged something. Another letter maybe.

"Look, Cynthia, to be quite frank and honest, if this isn't going to be ..."

"Jason," Cynthia sat down next to me. She folded her hands around mine. "No watch, right?"

"Of course n—"

"Look, I'm sorry we somewhat misled you. But this is really, really important."

"What's this about?"

She turned to Jenn; Jenn nodded. "So she showed you the ... numerals."

And of course she had. Whatever those were.

"Jason, have you ever noticed how everyone's happy? Just ... pointlessly happy?"

Yes, I had. "You have the wrong person," I said.

"Let him go," Jenn said. "The will is everything here."

"But—"

Jenn shook her head. Cynthia stopped. "Jason, thank you for coming by. We're sorry to take your time."

"Okay," I said. "Bye."

"Bye."

But before I left, I just wanted to know one more thing ...

“Who are you, anyway?”

“Me?” Jenn shook her head; somehow, she seemed even older than the gray hairs on her head, older than her weather-worn wrinkles.

“Again, Cynthia tells the story much better. But ...” she hesitated, “honestly, and you may have no idea what this means, but I’m simply an accountant.”

Maybe some perspective is in order. Jenn’s perspective, of course.

You see, apparently she came from a world of numbers and math and science. A world forgotten when the Final Discovery came upon us some eighty years before this story, when, as my third-year teacher had said, we humans had finally discovered the last secret of the universe. With the help of the Grand Governor, of course.

“But I don’t believe that,” Jenn said. “It’s impossible to know everything there is to know about the universe, just from what little I know about mathematics. Even with the most brilliant computer at your disposal. Math, science ... these things are tools, knowledge is power, and technology is—”

And blah blah blah. So, the gray hair: you know, it’s true, people really do turn gray when they age naturally. It’s strange, huh! Strange and ...

Terrifying. Right?

She was a yammerer, you know.

“Jason,” she paced back and forth, “what Cynthia and I have recognized, and stop us if we’re wrong, is that people are creatures of growth. Without that growth, we desiccate and deform, we rot and wither, and the belief that we are invincible, even if we are unageable at this moment, that is truly ...”

True.

“... terrifying.”

But still true. “But we are invincible. We’ve conquered everything,” I said.

Jenn breathed deeply. Cynthia shook her head. “I can see we’re done here,” Jenn said. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”

I shrugged. “No problem.” I got up. “So ... Cynthia—”

“No.”

“But you don’t know what I—”

“You may not procreate with me.” Her head cocked away, almost disgusted somehow. “Didn’t you hear a single thing just now?”

“Oh. Okay.”

I stood for a second, scratched my elbow, and left.

It was dark by the time I headed back on the elec-train. “Check

out my new release in the Store?” Some long-haired musician jabbed three cards for three different musical releases at me.

“Sorry, I don’t have the ...”

Something caught the corner of my eye. A few people were watching something on the screen in the car. “What was that on there,” I asked one of them.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” the musician said, still forcing those damned cards at me. One had a picture of a frazzled cat on it. “Why don’t you just give it a try?”

“Take your miserable flea rag away from me!”

The musician withdrew. “Don’t say that about Mr. Nibbles! Don’t forget your manners; you know the penalties for crossing someone’s artistic releases ...”

Idle threats. The other people in the car were still focused on the screen. There was a gray-haired woman—probably the only gray-haired woman in the city—and the reporter continued ...

“... was apprehended earlier today. Jenn Goodings, aka Yevgenia Orgood, was a despicable cretin who plotted against the safety of the State. A so-called numeral generator and infamous propagandist, she will be prosecuted immediately with the trial expected to end with justice for ...”

My face felt warm. Nothing about Cynthia, though.

“... fair that you apologize for your slander to Mr. Nibbles.”

“What?”

“My cat. Don’t call him a ... a ... a ...”

I stared at him and another passenger shushed the musician.

“It’s only fair ...”

I got off the train at the next stop and walked my way back.

It’s hard to remember how to play Hockeyball when you think you think you may have gotten your date’s friend executed.

“Hyah!” I pitched one right past the batter. He slugged and missed it, throwing the crowd into some sort of conniptions. I raised my hands, partly to calm them, partly to not (they love that), and the next two pitches came.

Foom.

Foom. Swa—! Nothing.

Again, they were practically pulling their hair out after the third pitch. Last pitch left: these are such golden moments. The batter nodded to me. This one I had to send right down the alley, and I did, at least I thought I did, and—

Kthunk.

Missed. Unless you’d consider hitting the barrier on-target.

And the crowd went nuts, including the batter, too. Fuck! I had just fucked up the script on the last play! Just down the alley for the last strike, and then he’s going to skate to the next base, but there was that annoying execution still on my mind ...

“And Waverly pitches right down ... wait, let’s look back at that replay.” The announcer sounded nervous.

The other one sounded a bit more confident. “Do you see what I see, Tom?”

“I ... I ... what do you see, Jerry?”

“I think it was a foul.”

A foul? In Hockeyball? For Chrissakes—

“Yes, Tom, let’s put that replay back up on the board.”

And it replayed. The ball was on the alley, the replay obviously tampered with, and the batter stepped way off the base. He idled there like a total amateur.

“That was totally amateurish,” Tom said.

“I know,” Jerry said. “I think he deserves a great big booing, don’t you?”

“I do. Now the umpires are consulting the old rules. You know, a foul hasn’t been committed in almost three decades of Hockeyball? This may possibly clinch it for Waverly and his beloved Snipes in this very, very close game ...”

We stood around for a few moments while the umpires frantically came together on field. The batter mouthed all kinds of things at me, the video making him look really bad, too.

Only one thing to say in these situations. Well, fuck.

“You know,” Jerry announced, “it appears that in olden 2817 rules, a foul committed by a batter would result in his having to bat

the next twelve pitches on one leg.”

“That seems awkward.”

“Yes indeed, Tom. What a great punishment! What a magnificent history to the game! The umpires are still checking up on the latest rules ...”

The crowd was starting to grow bored; I saw a few of our fans yawning. The manager was shrieking loudly, probably on a hand-com, probably to remove my head. Which was starting to hurt. That thing in the paper—who’d want to hurt Jenn, you know? These things don’t happen.

“... is two points to the team who were fouled upon.”

“You mean to the team against whom the foul was committed?”

“You know, Tom, I’m not really sure how you say it. But quite frankly, the New York Snipes squeak out yet another surprise victory today at Zamy Stadium! Their fans are excited, with the Snipes snagging a close victory, final score ...”

Twenty-one to nineteen. I signed the newspaper—we made the headlines again—and gave it to a fan.

“Cuh-cuh-could you also sign this?” A hat.

“And this?” A sweaty shirt.

“And this?” A flat bat.

“Is this official?”

He nodded.

“Here,” I gave him a card, “we have signed flat bats in the Store.”

“Oh ... umm ...”

I brushed the fan off and ordered my drink. Four creams, two sugars. One extra caffeine shot. I took my cup, and he was still hovering.

“Actually, can I see that newspaper?”

He nodded. “Oh-oh-only if you sign my bat.”

A quick bit of math: a paper costs thirty points, a signature costs free.

I grabbed the paper. A few pages in, there she was, a picture of her, kinda sad looking.

Jenn Goodings signing a declaration of her guilt in plotting against the State.

I read the article.

Jenn Goodings, above, signed a declaration of her guilt in plotting against the State. Jenn has been found irrevocably guilty, now by her own admission, of attempting to un-educate faithful citizens with foul blasphemy. She is caught! Rejoice!

She will be executed—

Only one thing you can say in these kinds of situations.

—immediately after the season finale of Life in the Golden Age, channels One, Two and Three. Eight at night Wednesday, followed

by ...

My stomach grumbled, and I tossed the paper aside. The super-fan was still waiting with his bat. “Puh-puh-pl ...”

I took it and swung in his direction; he had the sense to get away. I was angry. When you meet a cute, brainy girl like Cynthia and you get her friend executed, you know there’s probably no way to get back in her good graces.

But luck intervened through the cafe door. This time with purple hair.

“Cynthia! Cynthia! I’m really sorry about your friend!”

Frozen: her expression a face of horror.

“I didn’t mean to get her caught! Really! I didn’t think the com-watch would—”

I could practically hear her heart beating from across the cafe. She stood in the doorway. Another patron was getting annoyed.

“I’m—I’m sorry, you must have me confused with someone else,” she said. Still carrying an old paper book.

I drew closer. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I should’ve listened to you. Cynthia, is there anything I can do to help?”

She grabbed my wrist—strong hands for a writer!—and unbuckled my com-watch. She placed it on the table. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” she said, “But it was nice meeting you.” She motioned to me outside.

We walked god knows how many blocks. Took the elec-train. Took a cab. Took another elec-train. And found ourselves at one of the dingiest, grimmest corners of the city. We were literally in an alleyway, and it smelled like—

“Dipshit,” she said panting. “You moronic dipshit. Give me one reason I shouldn’t strangle you to death right now.”

“I’m really really sorry.” I’d meant it.

“That’s your reason?” She fumed. “Not good enough.”

She wrapped her hands around my neck, which thankfully is thicker than a meat-pack. She tired and shot a death-look at me instead.

“Know this, Jason Waverly,” she said, “know that you have sealed the fate of the world to being a-a-a ...”

“I’ve had enough stuttering today,” I said. “A what?”

“I put my hopes on a jock, a stupid, worthless, worthless jock ...” She started to sniff. “You could’ve just said no, go your way, but now they’re going to ...”

“Cynthia. I’m sorry. Really.”

“You just don’t get it ...” She cleared her throat. “I don’t know why I’m even asking if you would still ...”

“Still what?”

She shook her head. “Never mind.”

I held her shoulders. It tends to work with weepy women.

“Please, Cynthia, you can—”

“Get your miserable paws off me.”

I did.

“Are you still wondering what good a jock is to us?”

I nodded.

“Well ... it’s a little hard to explain to a Hockeyball player ... but ...” She looked away, toward the opening of the alley. “All that stuff we talked about in the cafe.”

“Yes?”

“Did you really mean any of it?”

The censoring, the propaganda; the low murder rates, the high suicide rates. I sighed. “Well ... I mean ...”

“You didn’t.”

“No.”

“I thought so.”

“No,” I said, “I meant ‘no’ like ‘I did.’ I do feel like life’s missing something. I do feel that, well, too much has been given to me. Like being the star of the greatest Hockeyball team ever to have graced the game. You know, back in camp, I wasn’t even all that good at—”

“Enough about sports. Jason.”

“Yes?”

She sighed. “Look, it’s only natural that you want to make something of yourself. But what Jenn and I were talking about ... it’s a bit ...”

“Like treason?”

“Treasonous, yes. I—whatever, I’m a dead woman anyway. What we wanted to do is to destroy the Grand Governor. The computer that holds the Final Discovery and governs—”

“Yes, I know what the Grand Governor is.”

“And we need your arm.”

The arm that hardly pitched 70% accuracy in camp.

“Ummm ...”

“I know your life is pretty great and all, but can you possibly consider helping us?”

You see, in life, there are things that are given to you, things taken, and things you must make. My life was good, yes, but I’d never made anything of it. That’s what our society was missing. I was curious what life would be like, you know, the other way. I wanted to see how you’d make something of yourself.

“You know what, why not? Tell me how, and I’ll try my best.”

I’m not really sure why I said I’d help. It was a good life I had. Everything I’d be doing would be going toward destroying that life. Probably quite literally, too. Not many people had escaped even

criticism of our lifestyle with their heads.

Actually ... no one I can think of.

But there was something else, too, something nagging at me. All those things given to me: head pitcher of the best Hockeyball team, no responsibilities, never wanting for anything. On top of that, fame, women. All this wonderful, great stuff just given to me, well ... honestly, who wants that? The giving part, anyway. Cynthia was right: give a man a fish, feed him the day. Teach him to fish, and he might find his purpose.

“... we’ll need to find some sort of capsule container,” Cynthia went on, “that houses some sort of liquid.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“The purpose of this is to provide a rigid structure for your projection of what is essentially a payload of fluid. Said fluid, upon delivery into the highly guarded ventilation duct ...”

“Mmm hmm.” I took another bite of eggs.

“... will be sucked in through the duct, and hopefully cause enough damage to the nearby chip layout that ... Jason, are you following?”

I nodded and brushed a piece of breakfast off my chin.

“So ... we could manufacture such a device, but honestly, I can’t do anything without raising suspicion. The government is probably tracking all Cynthias as we speak.”

“So ... we need something rigid and liquid?”

“Yes.”

“An ice cube?”

She shook her head. “Liquid inside. And try carrying one.”

“Water balloon—oh wait, never mind.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I think we’re screwed.” I shook my head. “You sure you don’t want a bite?”

Juggling is infinitely harder than it looks. Really.

“Left, right, left, right, like this ...”

A bearded gent helped and slowed down to show me. “Mr. Waverly,” he said, “it really is an honor to ...”

Left right, left right, left, right right ... damn.

“Here, let me pick that up for you.”

They say learning to juggle is like learning to ride a bi-wheeled human-powered transporter. And it is. It’s frustrating and a frigging mystery why anyone would ever want to do it.

“Thanks,” I said. “Here, let me sign that ... ball for you.”

What with juggling and going over next week’s script, I was exhausted.

“The Grand Governor presides over each execution for

treason,” Cynthia had said a couple days before. “Maybe if you take credit for finding Jenn, you can get on the stage ...”

“And they’ll like the new me,” I had promised her. “I know crowds.”

When I came back to my apartment, I noticed the door was open.

Three neatly dressed people were in there. Dark suits, coil-coms wrapped around their necks. Two men, one (rather cute) woman. Well, cute, other than the dour expression she shared with the other two. “Umm, hello?”

The woman and a man guided their hands along my body. It was not as nice as I’m making it seem. “Mr. Waverly,” the other man said, “it seems that you have taken a special interest in the upcoming execution.”

“Me?”

The man nodded to the other two, and they finished their inspection. “No need to play coy, Mr. Waverly.” He motioned to the other man, and I took one in the gut. “Now that you’re loosened up, we have a few questions for you.”

I coughed. “Such as ...?”

“Where’s Cynthia?”

I shrugged. Another one to the gut.

“Okay,” he said, cracking his knuckles, “let’s back up a bit. Sometimes we go too fast, too fast. Now, let’s start here: why have

you been avoiding all com devices?”

“Aaah ... so I could take another punch?”

The man grinned. “Well, I’d be happy to oblige you, Mr. Waverly.”

He came in for a swing. I caught it one-handed, and tossed it aside; gave him a bit of a headbutt.

“Haha,” the other two pinioned me. “Well, I think I deserved that. I haven’t even introduced myself. How impolite.” He brushed a bit of blood from his forehead. “You may call me Agent Agnum.”

“Is that a real name?”

This time he came in quick, and deep. I couldn’t struggle against the other two, and things went black.

The helmet on me was heavy. I was tied to a seat. There was a small desk in front of me. The room was plain. My head was bleeding, too.

I heard beeps and the clicking of shoes from behind me. The door beeped open.

“Ah, Mr. Waverly,” Agent Agnum took a seat at the desk.

“Okay. Let’s try this again. So. We know you’ve been dodging com devices. Presumably to conspire with Cynthia.”

“Presumably.”

“Now what I’d like to know is, what exactly have you two been

up to these past couple days? Planning a vacation? A little sunset stroll? I'm sure you two would make a fine child."

"Ha! Thanks."

"Still with your impudence." The agent took out a control with a flat dial on it. "Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I'm not asking the right questions." A shock came through my head. My head tightened and burned.

"Not specific enough questions." Here his grin came on. He started to press a couple buttons and the helmet started to hum a bit. But his focus changed, he looked behind me, and then the hum died down. Agent Agnum stood up.

"Apparently someone else has a few questions for you, too. Quite an honor, for just a Hockeyball player."

He sighed and stood up. "You can leave us," a deepish voice said behind me. The agent got up and left.

A man sat down at the desk. A stripe of silver hair ran through; fake color, not real like Jenn's. "Now, Jason, it's okay if I call you that ...?"

I gulped.

"Jason, you know who I am."

I nodded.

"You can say it. Go ahead."

The head of the Grand Governor's council: Justice Mars. "Juh—Juh—"

“Close enough.” He pulled out the control, playing with it idly. He left the control on the desk. “You will cooperate, won’t you? With us?”

“Uhhh ... I mean ...”

“Look,” he came up and started unstrapping the helmet, “you’re an honest fellow, and I only have a few questions for you. I trust you won’t try to pull a fast one by me. Haha, no pun intended, Mr. Ace Arm.”

I shook my head.

“Okay then. Simple questions. What have you done the past few days off the radar?”

“Umm ... uhhh ...”

“Go ahead, you can say it.”

“I was ... juggling.”

A smile. “Really? A career change? I guess it makes sense.” He laughed. “You know, I could use the entertainment. Are you any good at it?”

I shook my head. “Terrible.”

“Here.” He motioned behind me. “I don’t know if these will do.” I turned around and another agent offered me a few bottles of RefreshFluid. “Oh, let me get that for you.” He untied the plastic bonds around my wrists. My legs were still in. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

My heart was pounding. I took the three bottles, and started

tossing them into the air. Left, right, left, right, just like the beating of a—

“Damn,” I dropped one.

Justice Mars clapped. “Haha, I’m sorry, we’ve got you all bound up. Go ahead, drink, drink. Agent, could you unbind this man?” I was freed. The drink was really good. “Okay, another question, if you don’t mind.”

I shook my head.

“Why did you avoid almost all comm devices the past couple days? I hope everything’s okay.”

I froze.

“Ah. Maybe it is a career change. That would be ... disastrous, wouldn’t it?”

I gulped.

“For the Snipes, anyway. To lose their key pitcher. Hrm.” He frowned. “Here,” he said, latching a perma-com on my wrist. “Trust me, we won’t tell. You may go, now, Mr. Waverly.”

I stood up. I looked at the perma-com on my wrist. But I was free otherwise.

Except I’d have to lay low, too, like Cynthia. And Jenn ... Jenn would just have to die. And we’d miss our shot ... just how to get on the stage, though ...

“Mr. ... Justice Mars?”

“Mmmm?”

I burped. "Excuse me."

"You're excused."

"I mean ... I was ... I was ..."

"Hmmm?"

I thought about it. It wasn't my brightest decision, but I told him I was plotting to destroy the Grand Governor. I would almost certainly die. And I figured that was the best way to actually destroy it, if I could count on Cynthia.

I sat in the jail cell. It was actually kind of nice: a couple monitors on, showing "Life in the Golden Age" and another reality show. It smelled really fresh, for a prison.

"Hey." There was a knock on the other side of the cell.

I got up and put my ear to the wall.

"I heard you moved in, Jason Waverly."

The voice, old, scraggly a bit. "Jenn ...?"

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be out there wowing the crowd?"

"I'm here to save you!"

"Really."

"Yes!"

She walked around in her room a bit. "Don't."

I waited for a moment for that to sink in. "But ..."

“Jason,” she said, “I think it’s a bit hard to explain. Maybe they didn’t tell you, but ... honestly ...” She stopped shuffling things around in the room. “Honestly, I’m old. Very old. I’ve had a good run of it. And if I could take back what I know now, what they told me about the—”

“About the what?”

“It makes sense. It really does. It’s just one of those things, you know ...? I don’t completely agree with what they’re doing, but I get it. I can’t come up with anything better.”

“Jenn,” I shook my head, “what the hell are you talking about?”

“Huh, Hell ...” It was a moment on the other side of the wall. “I wonder if that exists ...”

I sat down. All of this, and ... just something didn’t seem real, I suppose.

“Jason,” she continued, “I’m sorry to have dragged you into this. I wish I hadn’t. You still had some good years ahead of you.”

“Yeah, well, we have a plan. We’re going to get through it, Jenn. I think.”

“Oh, Cynthia? I hope not. I’d rather the two of you just ... just live out your lives.” She knocked on the wall softly. “Jason. Do you have children?”

“Of course.”

“Did you raise them?”

“No, the State. But what does any of this have to do—?”

“If you had to raise a child, I think you’d understand, Jason. I wouldn’t want to bring them into a world knowing ...”

“Wait! Knowing what?” I pounded on the wall. “Jenn! What did they do to you? What did they say?”

“Jason, you do what you have to. But don’t save me.”

“Wait? What’s going on? Did they tell you something? Jenn?”

I banged on the wall, but the other side was silent. And the night passed on.

“There she is, Tom, the famous traitor, Jenn Goodings, a.k.a. Yevgenia Orgood. What a weird nickname. I wonder where she got it.”

“I think it has to do with some old books, Jerry.”

“Wow. Which ones, Tom?”

“Probably *Good ... Or Grand?* That one about the programming of the Grand Governor.”

Jerry cleared his throat. “You know, that book only came out five years ago.”

“I know, Jerry, but that’s dusty enough for me.”

“You don’t read much, do you, Tom?”

“No, I certainly do not. But here comes the infamous ex-Snipes pitcher, Jason Waverly. Let’s give them both a great big booing.”

They say day of your execution is definitely a weird one. But

I was nervous. I had no idea how it'd work out; Cynthia would definitely know I'd be there. But would she show; would she be prepared? Or would Agnum catch her and then I'd go off and die ...?

The crowds that day were, ummm, jubilant, I think is the word. There was a stage for dancing. They say when you stare it in the face, death, that you see your whole life in a flash. I didn't. I was just ... a little confused. But maybe that was mostly because of Jenn.

We stood on the podium in front of what must've been a few thousand. There were cameras flying about, catching us from all angles. We stood for a moment up there, Jenn and I. The crowd really got into it.

They finally calmed down a bit when Justice Mars brought his hands up. He knows his lynching crowds. He'd've been a good ball player.

"Our State is a great state," he started, "one that is founded upon math and art and the highest science. It is founded upon freedom, an excess of freedom, freedom to create, freedom to be, freedom to live."

They were all silent. Even the dancers stopped.

"But sometimes--"

He paused. They held their breaths.

"Sometimes these freedoms are abused!" They clapped and shouted in support. "Sometimes the freedom to live includes the

freedom to die! Here we have two notorious traitors, two plotters who seek to take our freedoms from us with their excess! And here they are, willing to give up their freedom so that we may enjoy ours again.”

They applauded. They waved those monochromatic flags. They started dancing again. Justice Mars held up his hands to calm them again.

“But here again we have a willing sacrifice, so that we may live in peace again. I present to you, dear humankind, Jenn Goodings.”

It was strange. She looked like she was in another place for a moment, drifting by. But she came to, sadly, and approached the microphone. “I am Jenn Goodings.” There were gasps. “And I present to you my life.

“For long have I plotted against our State, for long have I sought to overthrow our delicate balance of peace.” She stared off into somewhere, I’m not sure where. “And I should not have. I should not have let anarchy into our delicate balance. I should not have tried to destroy the Grand Governor. And for that, I am willing to pay the price. Long endure our State! Long endure life!”

I caught her eye. Cynthia was in the crowd, panicking. She motioned to me, held up a bag, but I was too far away. *Not yet.*

I turned in time to watch Justice Mars guide her up to the throne. A woman accompanied her, and Jenn looked down upon the crowd. The Grand Governor towered above her, something

symbolic I guess. The woman fussed with a syringe tied to a clear tube, and Jenn said something to her. She took the syringe from the woman and plugged it into her neck. And then she sat limp.

The crowd burst into flames and heat. I was next.

“How grand a sacrifice,” Justice Mars said, “how noble a cause! To give oneself to preserve our peace. And now, famous Hockeyball superstar and infamous traitor, we have Jason Waverly. Mr. Waverly—”

I turned to him.

“Do you willingly give your life for the preservation of our peace?”

That was the moment. The rollercoaster moment. My gut dipping, but somehow, I had enough common sense to do the right thing. I nodded. “Of course.”

He whispered. “Into the mic.”

I cleared my throat. “Of course.”

The crowd burst apart. I raised my hands, giving them the thrill they asked of me.

“I only ask one thing, to spare my compatriot in this. It is my life I give, my foolish, foolish life that I grant to ...” I almost forgot, “oh, the Grand Governor. I was famous, but I was careless, too. And with my foolish life, I have only one final request: from me, to all of you, one last gift!”

Justice Mars’ eyes grew alarmed, and he drew his hand on the

mic. “What are you doing?”

“They want a show.”

“I am the show.”

“Too late now. We already promised them a gift.”

His grip came harsh on my shoulder. “Not on my watch.”

“Ow! Do you know how to juggle?”

I yelled into the crowd. “Cynthia!” She was a little stumped, but thank God, they were in the bag. She tossed a couple eggs up on the stage to me. One of them broke on me along the way. They laughed.

I don’t think I’ve ever made an audience laugh.

But I started juggling. The three that were left kept me hemming and hawing after them. Juggling’s a pain, you know! And then—splat—splat—right onto my head. I was a perfect clown.

They burst out whistling. I took a bow.

“Now hurry up and die,” Justice Mars whispered to me.

I took one more bow and started climbing the throne. Jenn was scooted off and lay limp on the stage. I looked up. The Grand Governor. The computer that governs our lives, and declares our deaths. What a funny little thing death is, you know. There’s an old, old saying, “this too shall pass,” but death, well, death doesn’t pass, does it? I think that’s the scary part of it.

And heights. Heights are scary, too. The crowd pulsed beneath me. The woman came up with the syringe. Justice Mars shot his eyes at me. I grinned and took the one last egg I’d saved from the juggling act. That blasted robot. *Me and you both*, I thought.

Life should be simple, but sometimes things get in the way. Complicated things. Sometimes you have to raze things before you can sift through to what's important.

I think that's why I did it. I think that's why. Regardless, you're going to have to deal with those consequences now, and I hope I made your future better in doing so.

In any case, the Grand Governor had one last trick up its sleeve. It wasn't willing to go down without a fight, apparently. As the egg seeped closer and closer in through the air duct, burning out more super-cooled circuits, it printed it. The damned thing actually printed it! The Final Discovery. It ticked it out.

"The last human falls at 3011." About twenty years out from then; five now. "The purpose of life is to live. The purpose of death is to end life. The Armada shall—"

It shuddered and went silent. I tossed the paper into the crowd. Needless to say, they went nuts.

With the approach of The Armada, there is a lot to do. A lot to prepare for, even if that's just death. We don't we ask for your forgiveness, or for your understanding, things that we do not deserve, things that we have squandered in our perfect time. Only five years, until They arrive. I know it's an unfair burden to put to you, Elias, young as you are, but I have faith that we are better prepared for Them now that you are burdened with the truth.

Snow Devils' Dance

Snow Devils' Dance

spritely
mischievous
children's toes
parade the streets
intoxicated

wind howls
a deep wolf
embraces warmly
and twirls
the nimble duet
white

Terror

I will never tell him this.

You know how it is, once it comes out, once it's there, there's no taking it back. You can make it a joke, or try to, but it will never really be one.

He's lying there.

I can see him there, on his boat—what does he call it?—his yacht, his sweet little girl. Wind on his hair, icy waves; muscles primed, ready. Antonia, yes; the lake, yes. Me, no.

And here I am. Again. Another stupid, pointless little dummy ... fuh ... I can't even say it in my head. I can say all kinds of things, but still, it's hard to say it. Fuck me, there, there it is, fuck fuck fuck fuck. I'm here, fucking fucked, another man I fucked next to me, exhausted, sleeping, and here I am. I can't tell him this, because I won't tell him this. I shouldn't. I don't. I don't.

I can tell him that. I can tell him I don't love him. That's easy.

How long? I don't know. Maybe forever. Twenty-eight years so far. Take out a few for growing up; more like twelve. Cut a

couple more out, more like seven since Eric. How long, though? I don't know. I thought things were supposed to get easier. That's what dad said. You get to know more about yourself as you grow up. He doesn't know about the boys I fucked after Eric. Boys. I didn't know more about myself then. I think I know less, actually. I definitely feel less, now.

His hair is soft; he's nice to me. Maybe I don't like nice. Maybe I'm fucked up. That was easy to say. Easy as pie. Easy as getting up and walking away, no note, no texts, no nothing. That's easy. It always has been. I am fucked up. I should be able to say it. Everyone else can. Something is wrong with me. My stomach ... it's turning. It's making me queasy.

I hope to god I never get pregnant.

I can't do it. A family. Jesus ... he'd be miserable. I'd be an awful wife. Mother. Everything.

It's easy for him. Easy for him to lie there, sleeping, not thinking the insane fucking things I'm thinking right now. Easy for him to come and fall asleep. Easy for him to pick up, no note, no kiss, and fuck another girl. But that—that's easy to think of, too. What if he—

No. I can't even say it in my head.

But he's nice to me. I still play it in my head: four hours. I can't even say exactly what we talked about. Life, love, politics, religion; it was ... it was a crash-course on myself. Everything. What if he

was lying? No, no one can read my mind like that. He was sincere.
That day, yes.

Today? Maybe. Tomorrow? Hell no.

He's going to leave me.

That's why I can never tell him.

"Hey."

He stirred a bit.

He's really handsome. I'm glad I knew him. I really am.

But these things ... they don't last. I know that by now.

I'm totally nuts.

He even remembered that crazy little dress I made. He talks about it every now and then. I forget. I don't remember those crazy colors, the flimsy pieces of paper. But he reminds me. He reminds me of the nice me.

Maybe that's ... no, I still can't say it.

"Mmmmm."

His cheek is soft, a little stubbled. Maybe I do, maybe it's possible. Maybe it's not impossible. But I would never know. Because I never have.

He's lying there. Sleeping.

I thought I have. But ... maybe I'm imagining this too. What did he call it? A grand illusion. Love-God, what a corny word—is a grand illusion. That's a movie, too, one that he's seen. I haven't. I don't think it's about love.

We're just too different.

"I ... I ...

"I think I ..."

I'm an idiot. He's asleep and I still can't say it. He turns my stomach into knots, says the most incredible things, feels what I feel; and still, I can't even say one stupid little word. Three of them, really, but only one matters.

Only one ever mattered.

"I ..."

He's waking up a bit.

And my heart's pounding.

"I ..."

He mumbles. Asks me something.

Go ahead. He won't remember anyway.

"Hector ...?"

He nods. I must look serious. Or completely insane.

"Hector ... did you know that ... that I ...?"

Many thanks to my family, my writing group, my overly busy proofreader, my many frustrated first readers, and, of course, you, for picking this up.

–Matt