LUNDBERG, JASON ERIK. Lies and Little Deaths: Stories. (Under the direction of Dr. John J. Kessel.)

This collection of stories covers a wide variety of characters and settings, which alternate (for the most part) between third- and first-person viewpoints, with the final piece, “In Jurong,” told in second person. Most of the tales take place in the mundane world of the present day, but a world that allows the magical or surreal to seep through. This blending of the realistic world with the fantastic one is of great importance to me as a writer and as a reader, as is the discussion of its merits within the broader field of literature.

These twenty-three stories explore the perils and pleasures of sex (mostly the perils), the issues of the day but twisted into satire or literalized metaphor, the slightly magical, the truly bizarre, and the constant questioning of identity and the afterlife.
LIES AND LITTLE DEATHS:
STORIES

by

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for Janet
Jason Erik Lundberg once read all of Stephen King’s *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* and got shot at in the same afternoon. He was born in Brooklyn, but has called North Carolina home for the past seventeen years. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in such places as *Strange Horizons, Fantastic Metropolis, Infinity Plus, The Green Man Review, Fishnet, Intracities, Americana, Lone Star Stories, Electric Velocipede* and the Serbian fiction magazine *Znak Sagite*. His story “Songstress” garnered an Honorable Mention in the Seventeenth Annual *Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror*, and his mosaic flash story “The Artists Pentaptych” was both a finalist in the 2004 NCSU Short-Short Story Contest and a nominee for the Speculative Literature Foundation’s 2004 Fountain Award. He is the co-author of *Four Seasons in One Day* (2003) and the editor of *Scattered, Covered, Smothered*—an anthology of food-related fiction published in December 2004 by Two Cranes Press. As publisher, in March 2005 he also produced *Off the Map*, a four-story mini-collection by *Big Fish* author Daniel Wallace. Lundberg is a graduate of the 2002 Clarion Writers’ Workshop, and is currently at work on his first novel. In March 2004, he was married to artist and writer Janet Chui, whom he met at Clarion, and they live in the Raleigh area with their three dwarf hamsters and many books. He maintains a website and online journal at jasonlundberg.net.
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There is a steadily-growing subgenre of literature which blurs the boundaries between contemporary realistic literature and fiction of the fantastic. Depending on whom you talk to, this subgenre can be referred to as Slipstream, Interstitial Art, Transrealism, or The New Weird, among several others. Slipstream fiction (which, for purposes of clarity, will be the label of this subgenre from here on in the preface) is typically set in the present day, but one where the magical or surreal can intrude. This style hearkens back to the oldest type of fiction—myth—where gods interacted with humans in everyday situations. But where myth and traditional forms of fantasy treat magic as something extraordinary which disrupts mundane reality, slipstream takes it for granted, unconcerned with the origins of the surreal landscape evoked in the fiction. According to Bruce Sterling, slipstream is “a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility.” The tone and style that typical slipstream stories employ are similar to magic realism, exemplified by such authors as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges. But where the term “magic realism” is rooted in the specific location of Latin America, “slipstream” can be applied globally and retroactively.

The twenty-three stories in *Lies and Little Deaths* fit within this subgenre of slipstream literature, usually told in a contemporary setting with fantastic elements. All of these stories draw on the traditions of both realism and the fantastic, and pay tribute to the tropes of each genre.

The purpose of this short-story collection is twofold: to add to the current body of slipstream literature, and to creatively express certain opinions or homages through fiction writing. It is an important step in the career of any writer to collect his or her fiction, to look at the common themes that tend to crop up and examine what issues are truly important. In looking
over the stories in this collection, I discovered quite a lot of sex. More than I remembered writing. It is there most notably in “Don’t Blink,” “One Big Crunch,” “Most Excellent and Lamentable” and “Skin Flute.” Sometimes there is a sexually charged atmosphere, such as Peter and Mira trapped together in an elevator in “Stuck.” Or it may be an innocent crush, like Ray’s on Consuela in “Enlightenment.”

There is also a cynicism that surprised me, a negative view of the way things are in the world. “Hair” satirizes the Bush administration’s foreign policy and attitude toward war, placing the major players in an imaginary secondary world. “Songstress” explores the ramifications of abusive relationships, while literalizing the metaphor of a singer wearing her heart on her sleeve. “The Time Traveler’s Son” shows a son’s pessimism of his father’s chosen profession. “Jury Duty” extends the waiting period in the jury selection process to absurd lengths. “Irregardless” frantically and brutally describes an awkward and uncomfortable dinner. “Hypomnesia” descends into the realm of memory and the effects of torture. “Expiation” describes an end-of-year ritual to purge the many sins a man has committed in his life.

But underneath these stories is also a small voice of optimism, the hope that things may turn out differently, that terrible things may happen in life, but good things do too. It is the hope for these good things which keeps us going, able to whistle through the blitz.

And then there’s just the bizarre. “One Less” presents the Kafka-esque possibility of completely losing your identity. “Solipsister” explores the conceit of solipsism, and the possibility that you might be the only existing person in the universe. “Night Off” plays with the idea of a sick Saint Nicholas, and of being replaced by the Buddha on the most important night of the year. “Watersnake, Firesnake” is a young adult story about a small boy and what happens when he find a very unusual egg. “The Artists Pentaptych” progresses from the fairly ordinary to the wildly strange, in its emphasis on the artist.

Ghost stories are also included: “A Night in the Great Dismal Swamp” and “Ghost Dancing.” And the final pair of stories—“Reality, Interrupted” and “In Jurong”—which should be read together, tell of the consequences of actions related to elemental magic. Questions of iden-
tity and the afterlife are also explored, as a man makes the ultimate sacrifice, and another must face the choices he has made over his long life.

Sex, cynicism, optimism, the bizarre, ghosts, and the big issues. I am a tremendously curious person, and the fact that all of these issues come up in this short collection is solid evidence of this curiosity. Nine of the stories herein have been previously published in various literary journals and anthologies, and two of those stories, “Songstress” and “The Artists Pentaptych,” have been singled out for further recognition.
SOMETIMES I’LL BE driving the Z3 on the highway and imagine my brakes cut, unexpectedly, unexplainably. And the gas pedal will get stuck, maybe with superglue, like in that Blues Brothers movie, and the speed, the speedometer keeps rising, past ninety, one-twenty, one-seventy, and the cars I’m racing past are just blurs, streaks of colors which barely register before they’re gone, and the fluid for the steering wheel has evaporated and I’m careening now, careering across lanes, across the median, and I’m heading straight for an eighteen-wheeler, knowing that when I hit that there’ll be nothing left of me to identify, no fingerprints, no teeth, just a liquefied mass that used to be a person, knowing all this but completely helpless, unable to do anything about—

But of course none of that happens. It’s a fantasy. When you’re immortal, all you can think about is death.

To Julian, I’m Lucas. He sees me as a student of the world, a wandering poet. He thinks I’m misunderstood, unappreciated in my own time. He thinks this because I want him to think this.

I write haiku and pantoums that make absolutely no sense. I fill up trendy moleskine notebooks with unintelligible, incomprehensible verse. He nods and makes interested noises while reading my “poetry,” calls me brilliant.

When I use symbols like Æ and ℓ, he looks at them thoughtfully, trying to divine importance, unaware I’m only using letters from the Cyrillic alphabet. He’s been threatening to publish a book of my poetry for years, but he never has any money.

“Lukey-duke!” he shouts as I step into Java Jive. He’s unshaven, hair all aimed to one side as if he’d been standing behind a jet engine. His clothes come from sometime in the mid-1980s, thrift store chic. Rimless eyeglasses.
I ease into the chair opposite his at the table. Julian smells vaguely of cloves.
I say, “You look happier than normal, Jules. Get laid last night?”
Julian just smiles, teeth broken and spaced too far apart.
“I see Queen Mab hath been with you,” I say.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No, no, it’s not like that. I’m in love.”
“Love?”
“The girl, the one I told you about, she came into the bookstore again today.”
“Which girl?”
“You know, the girl. Last week she bought a raggedy-ass copy of Sartre. Her.”
“Oh.”
“Today she bought Camus.”
“So?”
“Dude! She’s a deep thinker, man. She’s beautiful and she has a brain.”
“I’ve seen plenty of women like that.”
“Well, I haven’t. They’re pretty rare for me. Especially ones that dig me.”
“Hold that thought.”
I get up, walk to the counter, order a chai, pay, get the drink, and sit back down. I imagine it’s poisoned, and take a gulp.
“Okay, where were we?”
“Romy.”
“Romy?”
“That’s her name. The girl. Her name is Romy.”
“And you know this because.”
“Because I asked her out.”
“Isn’t that against the rules?”
“It’s a used books store, Lucas. No one cares if you date the customers.”

“Ah.”

“I’m taking her to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead tomorrow night. I still have my student ID, so we’ll get in cheap.”

“Beautiful?”

“Dude, she’s gorgeous.”

“Pippins and figs.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

To Romy, I’m Marc. She sees me as a painter, a refugee from the Paris art scene. She thinks I’m unconventional, controversial, willing to tear down the boundaries of realism. She thinks this because I want her to think this.

My seduction starts after Julian’s date with her, me following behind in the shadows of lampposts. Watching as Julian drops her off in his Chevette, too nervous to lean in for a kiss, talking a bit too animatedly with his hands. She gets out of the car, thanks him for the date, and disappears into her apartment building. He sits there for a moment more, then rolls home.

I emerge from the sliver of shadow, ring the bell for her apartment. She says “what” through the intercom speaker, tired, wishing the date had gone better maybe.

“I’m an itinerant seller of pigeons,” I say, giving myself a French accent.

She laughs, a sound like rain, or a river.

“Who is this, really?”

“I want to paint your portrait,” I breathe, flooding the intercom with charm, drowning her in my charisma. You know that story about the man who sells ice to the Eskimos? It isn’t a story. I did that.

“Come on up,” she says.

The first thing I notice is her eyebrows, plucked and thinned, wisps, hints of eyebrows,
memories of eyebrows. Romy is a redhead, but not a fiery red, or a deep red, more a pale red. Not strawberry blonde, not pink, but the lightest dusting of redness in her hair. Her eyebrows share this lightness, adding to the effect.

We move to the living room and stare at each other. I’m facing away from the windows. I feel the crosshairs of a sniper’s rifle on the back of my head. Those little nape hairs stand up and the base of my skull crawls, a caged animal scrabbling to get out. I can envision my brains becoming Romy’s makeup, adding color to her pale face, her eyebrows.

“It will be hard for me to trust you, Marc,” she says. “I’ve been hurt before.”

My teeth are a gentle massage. My eyes are a nice Ceylon tea. My hands are a beloved blanket, a stuffed animal plumped with security.

“If love be rough with you,” I say, “be rough with love.”

The sex is raw and uninhibited, articulated with animal primacy. I scream. She screams. We all scream. The mattress screams.

Julian’s right. She is gorgeous.

THE NEXT MORNING, leaving Romy’s place, I slide into my Z3 and turn the key in the ignition. The car explodes. Someone has planted C4 under my car. Glass, metal, plastic, and bits of me spray in all directions, an eruption of technology and humanity. We turn the street, the buildings black and red. Charred and sticky. We set off a dozen car alarms. We make the earth tremble—

I open my eyes, but I am intact. The Z3 is intact, always was intact. The street is quiet except for the birds in the trees. A bunny rabbit hops along the sidewalk.

A sigh, and I put the car in gear.

JULIAN IS MANNING the counter as I step into Bibliophiles. Dust and old paper and, faintly, cat. I sneeze.

“Hey Lucas,” he says, less emphatic than usual.

“Jules. Something wrong?”
“She won’t return my calls,” he says. “It’s been three days since we went out. I think she’s blowing me off.”

“Who?” I pretend I don’t know.

“The girl. Romy. It sucks. I bet she’s seeing someone else.”

“It’s possible. Like you said: beautiful and a brain.”

Another employee, laden with trade paperbacks, shuffles behind the counter, commences the avalanche of books, an imploded building of books. He’s Mediterranean maybe, prone to tan easily. Dark hair, cut close to the scalp. Earrings up one side and down the other. He wears a green shirt with BUCK FUSH in white block letters. His glasses have rims, thick and black.

“Hey,” I say.

He nods.

“Lucas, this is Ty,” Julian says. “He just started a few days ago. Ty, Lucas: a local poet.”

We shake hands, testing grips, measuring each other’s masculinity. I imagine his strong Mediterranean hand on my throat, squeezing, tears in his eyes, revenge for an injustice, some unintended offense, cutting off my air, crushing my voicebox, snapping my cervical vertebrae, black spots coalescing in front of my eyes, his teeth gritted so hard they crack, I’m almost gone now, a beautiful asphyxiation—

A quick pump, up-down, and we let go. He turns and heads toward the back of the shop. I hate him, abruptly, suddenly, on a cellular level.

“Maybe he’s the one,” I say to Julian.

“The one what?”

“The one who stole your girl.”

“Ty?”

“Why not? He’s a good-looking guy.”

“I don’t know, Lucas.”

“Didn’t you say he only started working here a few days ago?”

“Yeah . . .”
“And wasn’t that when you went out with Romy?”

“Yeah.”

“And isn’t it possible she saw him while she was in here, and they hooked up later?”

Julian punches the counter and the books resting there slide to the floor.

“Son of a bitch! Why would he do that to me?”

“O, he’s the courageous captain of compliments. A Prince of Cats.”

“What?”

“A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a whoreson, glass-glazing, superserviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I take a breath. “Poetry,” I say.

“Oh. Okay. Man, you’ve got to write that shit down.”

“It’s already been done.”

“Wow, you had that memorized?”

“So now we know he stole your woman,” I say. “Let’s talk about how to get even.”

An exhibit in a warehouse gallery, which I take credit for. When Romy looks at the names of the artists below each painting, she sees only my name.

“These are incredible,” she says. “They’re so textured and real. I love how you used mixed media in these. Is that from a Chinese newspaper?”

We stroll down the wall, pausing at respectable intervals, examining each piece, the deep colors, use of black, and foil, found objects like trowel blades, rusted forks, barbed wire, dental appliances, radio-controlled car motors, scissors, butcher knives, machetes.

Stopping in front of a Cornell box, filled with a clipping from the New York Times (Sep-
tember 12, 2001), a pigeon skull resting on a pile of grey feathers, a phial containing grey ash, and a die-cast toy jumbo jet suspended from the top by fishing line.

Romy gets quiet, staring into the box, peering, poring over the contents, as if the harder she looks, the more meaning she’ll glean.

“And what were you hoping to accomplish with this piece?” she asks.

The answer is one I’ve been saving for years, just waiting for the right circumstances, the right question to justify its brilliance. Romy’s eyes are the hue of a scorched sky.

“I wanted to show that after a disaster, even a cataclysmic, life-changing tragedy, art and beauty can still be made.”

We go back to Romy’s apartment after that, her running five red lights, narrowly avoiding a stray dog and three parking meters, and she’s laughing and I’m laughing, and we run upstairs and rend our garments, her wanting to be on top, and she’s squeezing her pelvic muscles right, right there, and when I come it’s a universe-creating explosion, it’s a mortiferous heart-attack, turning the little death into a big one, it’s looking into the face of Death and laughing, and yes laughing yes, and tears are trailing down my face from this unexpected apoplexy, and I never want it to stop, never, never, never, never, never!

To Ben, I’m Wile. He sees me as a filmmaker, a connoisseur of pretentious independent short films. He thinks I’m a renegade, an auteur whose works will be microscopically studied centuries from now. He thinks this because I want him to think this.

We sit in a dark booth at the back of the Hibernian Pub, and I’m showing him my latest creation on a portable DVD player: a compilation of commercials about children’s charities, spliced, edited, all hosted by that same bearded actor, sincere, imploring, wanting my money, for ten cents a day you can feed a family of four, the shots, the endless shots of impoverished kids with bloated bellies, the wide eyes, pleading for a break, for fairness in the world, knowing that ten cents a day won’t actually do shit for improving their lives, knowing that they need more, much more, and knowing that they won’t get it.
“Very powerful,” Ben says. “The guy uses almost the exact same spiel every time.”

“There are actually only a handful of separate commercials, from the poorest countries, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Cambodia, but they’re aired so often that you think there must be dozens, hundreds of different ones.”

“You talked to Julian lately?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Nope.”

Ben and Julian are first cousins, close since they were kids, but incommunicado after Julian said Ben’s wife was a cruel bitch. Turns out Julian was right, but even after the nasty divorce, they haven’t spoken a word to each other. I’ve never met Ben’s ex-wife, but the stories about her are many.

“So who are we meeting here? Some new hotties for the ravishing?”

“No. This guy Ty. We’re going to ruin him.”

“Sounds fun.”

The film is still playing on infinite loop in my hand, the endless procession of gaunt faces, faces of those who have given up, faces waiting for release, and all at once I’m exhausted, just fed up with it all, my stupid pranks, the manipulations, the whole world. In that moment, I envy those starving children, wish for the loving embrace of deprivation, madness, the slowing of the blood. I sink back into the booth, hoping, praying that I’ll continue to sink, the cushion enveloping, smothering me, pushing itself into my mouth, my nose, my eyes, cutting off the world, delivering me from life.

“You okay?”

“I’m so tired,” I say.

“You look like you ate some bad oysters.”

“What’s the point? I mean, what’s the fucking point of it all?” I turn off the DVD player.

“We all turn to dust and bones eventually. President or poet, it doesn’t matter. At some point even I’ll be gone. Whether it’s the Big Crunch or the heat death of the universe, we all go back
to atoms, to nothingness.”

“Death comes for us all someday,” Ben says.

“Life’s a tale told by an idiot,” I say, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

“Bullshit,” Ben says, smacking the table with an open palm. “I don’t buy that at all. This existence does matter, however short it might be. We all have a role to play, and it’s how we play that role that gives our lives meaning.”

“And what’s my role?” I ask.

Romy, from nowhere, maybe hiding in the shadows all along, sits down beside Ben.

“You are the Trickster,” she says. “You make sure we don’t take ourselves too seriously. You bring laughter, and mystery.”

“And what are you?” I say.

“The Beauty. That who is sought after, pursued, the object of lust.”

Julian sits beside me, and Ty stands at the edge of the table.

“The Fool,” Julian says, hand on heart, “destined to be deluded over and over again. And the Doppelgänger,” he motions to Ty, silent, pale, face smudged with clown makeup, “your opposite and equal, who always gets blamed for your actions.”

“And you?” I look to Ben.

“The Fraud. Scaramouche to your Harlequin. Your lesser version.”

This is all very familiar now, the umpteenth iteration in an endless repetition. I’ve been here before, too many times, a purgatory of repeated experience.

Romy, Julian and Ben produce painstakingly-crafted handmade half-masques from thin air, an archetypal conjuring. They tie the masques to their faces with black cloth, their mouths still visible, but something unmistakably changed in their aspects, a more-ness. Ty stands mute, his face pancaked white, a checkered dunce cap on his head.

“The dance must continue,” Julian says, another masque in his hands, my masque, my true essence in bright primary colors. I know that I can decline, deny my nature and flee the bar, live a normal life and die in my bed sixty years from now. I could give it all up, refuse to play the
cosmic game any longer, hang up my spurs.

I could, but I won’t. I just wouldn’t be myself.

I pluck the masque from Julian’s hands and tie it onto my face with a flourish. Through the eye-holes, the world looks more alive, brighter, energetic, full of sound and fury and slings and arrows, but beautiful all the same. I smile and wait for the music to start, for the amnesia to settle in, for the dance to begin once more.
“NEW TO THE building?” the well-dressed man asked in a reedy voice. He had been waiting at the elevator as Winston approached.

Winston awkwardly shifted the box in his hands and said, “Yeah. My wife and I just moved in this afternoon. Last box.”

“Very good, very good,” the man said, brushing a hand through his bright orange Einsteinian hairdo. He seemed to be in his early-forties, sharp jawline, thin lips. When the man smiled, the corners of his mouth pulled back almost to his ears. “Name’s Lucas Ettins. I’m up on ninth.”

“Winston Brown. We’re on seventh.”

“Well then,” Lucas leaned in conspiratorially, “I shall have to drop by sometime.”

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Lucas stepped inside, and Winston followed, putting the box down as the doors closed again. He stood up and winced; it felt as if every muscle in his arms and back had been strained to their limits. A large keyhole over the button for the ninth floor—presumably the penthouse—glinted in the washed out fluorescent light. Lucas pressed the button for seven and they started up.

The elevator took its time in its ascent; neither man spoke during the ride up, the tension in the air palpable, occasionally broken up by a cough or throat-clearing. After they passed the fourth floor, the hairs on the back of Winston’s neck prickled as the temperature in the elevator seemed to rise; abruptly, he felt the urge to get out of there. He wasn’t claustrophobic, but all at once, he wanted to rip the doors open and flee. He looked over and saw a wavery aura surrounding Lucas’s head and shoulders, like a heat haze; Lucas’s grinche smile stretched impossibly wide and his teeth gleamed. Winston’s breath quickened and his heart accelerated, pulsing hard in his
neck and ears. It felt like a dozen spiders were dancing along the base of his skull. Winston clenched his fists and tried to breathe slowly through his nose.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened out onto the seventh floor. Winston picked up his box and stepped into the hallway, then turned back briefly. Lucas plucked a strange-looking iron key out of a pants pocket and plugged it into the wall above the buttons. He waved goodbye with a waggle of his fingers, and the doors closed. The feeling of claustrophobia dissipated and Winston let out a long breath. He lurched down to 7C; the door was slightly ajar, and he nudged it open with the toe of his shoe. Dianne sat on the floor of the living room, unwrapping framed photographs and categorizing them neatly into stacks. Her hair was gathered into a brunette swirl at the back of her head, held together with a slim watercolor paintbrush. Fully half of the photos were ones Winston had taken, almost all in black and white, more than a few of Dianne.

The apartment was as oppressively hot as the elevator, but Dianne had already set up the box fans, which hummed and rattled and made sheets of brown wrapping paper whisper in the breeze. The fans were left over from their college days, from Winston’s un-air-conditioned graduate dorm room, and the cacophony was nearly deafening.

“Hon? When’d the super say the air conditioning was going to be fixed?”

Dianne looked over her shoulder at him. “Tomorrow, you big baby. It’s only temporary, a short in the wiring or something. You can take one day of roughing it.”

Winston put the box down with a grunt, then collapsed onto the floor in a dramatic flourish. The plush carpeting tickled his bare legs and arms. Dianne laughed and edged over.

“My husband, the he-man,” she said and bent down to kiss him. She tasted of the pineapple lip gloss she always used. He put a hand to the nape of her neck and turned the kiss into a deep one, a desire for reassurance more than anything. After the incident in the elevator, he needed the reality of Dianne’s physicality. After a few moments, they separated, both slightly out of breath. “What was that for?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” he said, his fingers tangling in her hair. “I guess I just needed it.” She
smiled and kissed him again, a quick peck.

“Well, there’s another for good measure,” she said and moved back over to the stacks of photos. The muscles of her back danced underneath her tank top as she sorted, and he caught his breath. It was little moments like these which made him realize just how much he loved her.

“I met someone strange in the elevator just now,” he said.

“Who?”

“Lucas somebody. He lives in the penthouse.” Winston sat up and groaned; he’d be sore the next day. “I don’t know, Dee, there’s something about him. Just keep an eye out, okay?”

It had been love at first sight, or more accurately, at second sight. At the prompting of his roommate Carl, Winston had gone to a party for the Dance department on Carl’s assertions that “dancers are sooooo flexible, man. Lightweights too. Wink wink.” Winston’s motivation had been to meet Erin Altan, the NCSU prima ballerina whose performances he had never missed, on account of how she moved in a leotard. Instead, after an accidental bodily collision and spillage of drinks, he came face to face with Dianne. Looking down at the spreading red wine stain on her blue skirt, Dianne had laughed and said, “Hi,” and Winston immediately and completely fell in love.

During their courtship, Winston often went to Dianne’s practices and always to her performances. She became his favorite photographic subject. Light always bent to the most flattering angles across her face and body. He took rolls and rolls of film, and one evening about three weeks into the relationship, after they had together polished off a bottle and a half of wine, she slid out of her clothes and asked to be photographed nude. Afterward, they made love for the first time, and it was as if Winston’s soul had been set on fire.

He was worried that a relationship between two artsy individuals wouldn’t last beyond the initial infatuation, but to his pleasant surprise, it deepened into something wonderful. They took a trip to Bali for summer break their last semester and he proposed on the beach of Nusa Dua. Graduation came a few months later—Winston with an M.A. in Photography and Dianne with
a B.A. in Dance—and the wedding a month after that. They lived in New York for almost three years before the city had beaten them down, and Winston had been forced to take a staff photographer job at the Raleigh News & Observer, prompting the move back to North Carolina.

Throughout it all, the thing that drew him to Dianne was her trusting nature. It wasn't that she was naïve—New York had certainly eradicated any remaining innocence they both might have had—it was her simple optimism, her belief in the goodness of others. She truly believed that people were innately good, and this simultaneously astonished Winston and made him love her more. It was a bright blue flame that glowed within her, and his biggest goal as a husband and partner in life was to make sure that flame never went out.

Lucas showed up at their door that evening, a blue pyramidal bottle in his hand. After Winston pulled away from the peephole in the front door, Dianne looked through and shrugged her shoulders. “He looks okay to me,” she whispered.

“But Dee, I never gave him our apartment number,” he whispered back. “How’d he know where we are?”

“Maybe he knocked on all the other doors first.”

“Right.”

Dianne elbowed him in the ribs. “Win, stop being a jerk and let the man in. We don't want to alienate the neighbors on the first day.” Winston exhaled and opened the door.

“Hello, Lucas,” he said.

“Hello again,” Lucas said and grinned wide. His bottom teeth were crooked in front, and his breath smelled of cinnamon.

“Come in. Lucas, this is my wife, Dianne.”

Lucas offered his hand and Dianne took it in hers. “A pleasure, madam,” he said, then bent down and kissed her knuckles. Winston’s cheeks burned briefly. “I brought over some lovely mead to apologize for my abrupt behavior earlier. I was hoping we might toast your first evening in a brand new apartment.”
“I think I know where we put a few glasses,” Dianne said, and hurried into the kitchen. Lucas stepped through into the living room and looked around at all the opened boxes and unpacked detritus that covered the floor. Winston closed the door just as Dianne walked back in, holding three plastic cups. “Looks like this is all we have at the moment,” she said.

“That will do fine.” Lucas pulled a bartender’s corkscrew out of his pocket. He stabbed down, then rotated the corkscrew five times clockwise, so fast that his hand became a blur. There was a wet plop as he yanked out the cork. Lucas took one of the cups from Dianne and poured an amber-colored liquid into it.

After the cups were distributed, Dianne and Winston sat on the couch, and Lucas perched on the edge of the coffee table. The room filled with the almost imperceptible aroma of spring, of sweet honeysuckle and jasmine and apple blossoms. “Welcome to the building,” he said, and they thwacked the cups together. The mead was unlike anything Winston had ever tasted. It was sweet with a tang, and went down smooth as milk. His jaw muscles contracted involuntarily. As the alcohol hit his stomach, he felt a supreme warmth, as if he’d just taken a shot of brandy. He looked over at Dianne and could see sweat beading on her brow and in the hollows of her collarbones, though the air in the apartment had cooled after sundown. Dianne spoke first.

“Wow, Lucas, this is amazing. Where did you get this?”

Lucas drained his glass and said, “It’s from my own private collection. I have five bottles left, and I only bring them out on special occasions. I think this qualifies.”

“Well, it’s phenomenal,” Winston said. “I’ve never tasted anything quite like it.”

“Or likely will again,” Lucas said. “My five bottles are the last anywhere in this country. The mead is Scandinavian, and is difficult to acquire.” Lucas picked up the bottle again. “Have another glass.”

“So what do you do?” Dianne asked, handing her cup back to Lucas. He poured another generous glass.

“An interesting question,” he said, passing the cup back. “We spend our lives learning many different things, broadening our cultural horizons, soaking up as much as we can. We take
interests that often have nothing to do with our day jobs so that we will not be defined as a draftsman or receptionist or technical writer. And yet, invariably, the first question we ask strangers is what they do.”

“That’s a complicated answer,” Dianne said. She swayed slightly on the couch, her cheeks flushed.

“It’s a complicated question. Do you want to know what I do for a living? Or do you want to know that I keep a pet ocelot, or collect expressionist paintings, or write epic poetry that no one will ever see? Because all of these things are a part of me, yet no one thing defines me. You are a dancer, yes?” He motioned with his head to the top photograph on the nearest floor stack, an action shot of Dianne in a leotard and tutu, captured in mid-flight across the stage, a gazelle in black and white. “But I can see from the paintbrush in your hair that you also dabble in watercolors. So would you call yourself a dancer or a painter? In truth, you are both, and much more, I am sure. Another glass?”

Dianne had emptied her second glass of mead, and Winston could tell she was well on her way to getting hammered. Lucas plucked the cup from her hand and grinned at the contented smile on Dianne’s face. She leaned against the couch, stretched her arms over her head and arched her back, thrusting her breasts forward in the process. Winston took the cup from Lucas’s hand before he could pour, and placed it down on the coffee table.

“Honey, we don’t want to drink all of this man’s extremely rare mead, do we?” Winston said. Dianne finished her stretch and shrugged. He turned to Lucas in time to see the smile falter and something strange come into the man’s eyes, only for a fraction of a second, and then the smile was back, but a clipped one without showing any teeth.

“That’s all right, Winston,” Lucas said, rising from the coffee table. He corked the bottle and moved to the door. “It was lovely to meet you both, and I hope we’ll get together again soon.”

“Sure,” Dianne said. “We’ll have to all go out together sometime.”

Winston got up off the sofa and walked Lucas to the door. The room tilted slightly to the
right, and Winston stumbled a bit before catching himself. The mead had done a number on him as well.

“Oh hey,” Dianne said as he opened the door. “You never said what you do for a living.”

Lucas grinned again and his eyes gleamed. He winked at Winston and said, “Women pay me to have sex with them,” then stepped out the doorway and disappeared down the hall.

“Wow,” Dianne mumbled into Winston’s chest, her arms wrapped around his midsection. They lay tangled up in the sheets of their bed, the sweat from strenuous lovemaking cooling on their bodies. She had been more aroused than usual, and the sex had been wild and primal. He breathed heavily and stroked her shoulder.

“I know,” he said, and kissed her on the forehead. “That was amazing. You’ll wear me out.”

He could feel Dianne’s smile against his chest. She ran a finger down his side, from armpit to hip. The faint light of the room wavered in and out of focus as he breathed, and the air itself seemed to shimmer. Stripes of yellow were painted on the ceiling from the glow of the halogen streetlight outside. She rubbed her foot against his shin and he hugged her tightly.

“So Lucas didn’t seem like such a bad guy,” she said, and pulled back to look at Winston. Flecks of light caught in her hazel eyes and sparkled.

“That’s because he was trying to get you drunk.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” she said, making a fist and chocking him lightly on the nose. “Why would he do that? He could see that we’re happily married.”

“Maybe it’s just something intrinsic to his profession.”

“Oh, man,” she said, tracing a lopsided figure-eight on his ribcage, “that was so weird. Do you really think he’s a gigolo?”

“I don’t know,” Winston said, thinking about how Dianne had warmed automatically to Lucas, as if she couldn’t help it. “Somehow I don’t doubt it.” He stroked her spine with the tip of
his index finger. She purred and arched her back, pressing hard into him, rolling him onto his shoulder blades. Her lips still tasted of the honey mead as she pushed her tongue into his mouth. He wriggled underneath her and ran his hands over her smooth back and shoulders. Just as she was settling on top of him, he looked past her and saw Lucas standing in front of the armoire in the corner of the room, arms crossed, grinch smile stretched all the way to his ears. Winston jerked up into a sitting position, reflexively clamping Dianne in a bear hug. There was no one in front of the armoire.

“Win?” Dianne said, cradling his head. “What is it? You’re trembling.”

Every muscle in his body was clenched. The air rushed in and out of his nose audibly, hissing against her right shoulder. Trembling, nothing; he was shaking like a leaf in a hurricane.

“Nothing,” he said, lying back down. “It was nothing.” Dianne rolled off and hugged him tight. Winston closed his eyes and breathed in her scent, the musky sweet smell she emitted after sex. He opened his eyes and looked back to the corner of the room, but apart from Dianne’s armoire, it was empty.

Both of them slept in the next morning. Upon waking they snuggled and talked in low voices, finally getting out of bed around noon. Winston chalked up the vision the previous night to exhaustion and an overactive imagination, and thought no more about it. They had a quick lunch of salami, wedges of cheddar, and wheat crackers—thoughtfully placed in the welcome basket that had been left in the kitchen by the landlord—then got to work. After some more unpacking, and assembling both their computers in the office, he went downstairs to the U-Haul still parked outside to return it. Since the rental place was a walkable distance away, he told Dianne not to bother following him in the Civic.

He drove the five minutes down Murphy Street to the U-Haul place, then turned off the engine and got out. The guy at the counter wore a grease-stained shirt and was engrossed in a copy of the *Hemisphere Confidential Report*. Winston cleared his throat, and after several seconds, the guy put the magazine down and looked up. His eyes were yellow and rheumy, and his sparse
brown hair was plastered to his skull with sweat.

“What kin I do fer ya?” he slurred. An invisible cloud of mint wafted over the counter, as if he’d been eating Altoids non-stop and was now sweating the aroma out of his pores.

“I just need to return this van,” Winston said. The U-Haul guy stared for a few moments before turning to look at the moving van outside.

“Ah-ight,” he said, and shambled in the direction of the back. “Gossum forms fer ya tasign.” He moved like an old man, shuffling his feet across the tiled floor instead of picking them up, his posture slightly stooped, though he looked only to be in his thirties. Winston followed him into the back office and sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair. The rheumy U-Haul guy puttered around, looking under papers and moving aside boxes. “Knowiss roun dear somere.” He edged around Winston’s seat and Winston could hear a cardboard box being lifted and put back down.

“Ah,” the guy said. “Herewego.”

A blinding pain exploded behind Winston’s eyes as something hard smashed into the back of his head. As he fell to the floor, a wave of nausea rolled over him. He somehow fought the gorge rising in his throat, and heard footsteps hurrying away. The air sloshed heavily in his lungs, and his skull felt stuffed full of cotton. The spots in front of his eyes eventually faded away, and he was able to tell that his attacker was no longer there. He put a hand to the back of his head, and it came away bloody.

Winston got to his feet on shaky legs for three seconds before a powerful dizziness sent him crashing back down against boxes and papers. It took several more tries to stand up and lean against the wall. All the strength in his body had been sapped with the head-blow, and he wasn’t even sure he could walk back home. He made his way to the small prefab desk, using its surface for support, and picked up the phone to call Dianne. The connection was dead.

He wanted more than anything to sit down, but he had the feeling that if he did, he might never get back up. He slapped himself hard to stay awake. He’d heard somewhere, perhaps in Boy Scouts, that you’re never supposed to let a concussion victim fall asleep. They could slip into
a coma and die from a torn blood vessel. Winston breathed deeply, which seemed to help a little. He noticed the phone in his hand and put it to his ear. There was no dial tone, no static. The connection was dead. He returned the phone to its cradle.

Nausea surged over him again, and he vomited for what felt like a very long time. The sour aftertaste of bile lingered in his throat and nostrils. He thought he remembered seeing a water cooler in the reception area, but couldn’t be sure. He turned to look out the doorway, but his vision took slightly longer to catch up to him, as if in slow motion. Objects were multiplied, overlaid and onion-skinned, different layers wavering around and on top of each other. Nothing would stay in focus for long. Winston started to wonder if he had permanent brain damage. There was a telephone on the desk in front of him, but when he picked it up, the connection was dead.

He stood in the middle of the reception area. A sour taste filled his mouth, as if he had been vomiting, and he noticed a water fountain in the corner of the room. He moved slowly toward it, leaning on counters and racks of tires and shelves of New Car Smell. His skull throbbed with his heartbeat. He put a hand to the back of his head, and it came away bloody. After several long minutes, he reached the fountain and rinsed his mouth out with the coolest, sweetest water he had ever tasted. He drank greedily, washing the bilious taste away, then blinked his eyes.

He leaned against the U-Haul he had tried to return. The metal van had heated up in the afternoon sun, and was painfully hot against his skin. Winston pushed off from the van, and staggered out of the parking lot. At the chain-linked gate, he overbalanced on one side and went spilling into the fence. Traffic was almost non-existent on the road in front of him, and the cars that did pass ignored him. No one offered to help or call an ambulance; in his grungy clothes and drunk behavior, he must have looked like a wino. He slowly picked himself back up and headed in the direction of his new apartment. He blinked.

He was sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk, his back to a telephone pole, watching a fuliginous black cat chew on something small and dead. Winston leaned forward and retched
again, splashing the front of his shoes and the back of the cat, which hurried a few feet away with its prey, then hissed loudly at him around the dead thing in its mouth. It stared at him for a moment longer, then slunk down the sidewalk. He blinked again.

Afternoon abruptly turned to evening. He was standing again. The Krispy Kreme across the street displayed *Hot Doughnuts Now* in orange neon from the front window, bathing the empty parking lot in a sickly ochre. Dianne must have been so worried by now; it should have taken him only twenty minutes to walk home, but it appeared that whole hours had gone missing. He blinked.

Winston stood in the entry door of his apartment building; it was night now. Cool air leached past and bled into the humid air behind him. He stepped into the foyer and stabbed the up button for the elevator, hitting it on the third try. The doors opened, and he noticed the strange iron key he'd seen Lucas use, turned to the “on” position above the button for the ninth floor. On impulse, he touched the button for 9, an irrational ball of dread in his stomach telling him that his wife wasn't in their apartment. The image of Lucas kissing Dianne's knuckles rose in his mind, along with the man's confident predatory smile.

The doors slid open, not onto a hallway, but onto large anteroom. The dim light in the room looked as if it had been filtered through red cellophane, throwing even the most benign objects into a foreboding relief. Or it could have been that Winston's brain had decided to compress all colors into scarlet duotone. He heard voices coming from somewhere further in the apartment, and followed the sound.

The penthouse apartment apparently took up the entire top floor of the building. Winston walked through a living room decorated in fine art and expensive furniture, a rec room occupied by a snooker table and a glass cage occupied by a sleeping ocelot, a home theater with a full-sized projection screen and thirty seats. Every dozen steps, his equilibrium would fail, and he would have to stand in place until the dizziness passed. After winding through room after room, following the vague murmurs of a male and female voice, Winston ended up in the bedroom.

On the four-poster bed, completely naked, his wife Dianne knelt on her hands and knees,
taking it from behind from an equally nude Lucas. She'd always deflected the idea of that position when Winston had suggested it, preferring to see his face during sex. To the side of the bed, in a plush leather chair sat the rheumy guy from the U-Haul place, watching. A second leather chair was empty. The only sound in the room was the slap of flesh against flesh; Lucas wasn't even breathing hard. On Dianne's face was an expression of utter bliss. The room was permeated with the smell of sweet honeysuckle and jasmine and apple blossoms.

“Ah, Winston,” Lucas said with a relaxed grin. “About time you showed up. I was beginning to wonder. Have a seat. Enjoy the show. Don't blink, or you might miss it.”

Winston had the momentary dislocated feeling of hovering above his own body, watching his actions but unaware he was actually doing them. He shuffled over to the empty chair and settled into it, leaning back against the comfortable leather. A black cloud intruded into the corners of his vision, and the top of his skull buzzed, as if the seams that converged there were coming loose. His wife uttered a small cry of passion. Everything went dark, and Winston welcomed the oblivion.

Winston woke up from his coma three weeks later. According to the doctor, he was very lucky to be alive. They hadn't had to operate. When the nurse came in to check his IV and jab him in the ass with a syringe, she mentioned that Dianne hadn't left his side the whole time he was unconscious.

Later that day, two detectives paid a visit, told him that he'd been found in the penthouse, sprawled out on the floor, his wallet missing, with a can of black spray paint in his hand. Scrawled over and over on every surface of the empty penthouse was the word GRENDEL. Did Winston know anything about that? He had to admit that he didn't. Did he know what it might mean? Other than remembering the monster he'd read about in Beowulf back in high school, he could offer no opinion. Did they say the penthouse was empty? Yes. Not even furniture? No sir, no furnishings at all. But there was a man living there, Lucas something. They didn't know anything about that, sir. What about the guy at the U-Haul place? The owner knows no one of
that description, sir. Don’t leave the state for a few days, in case we have further questions.

Dianne had waited at the foot of his bed while the police asked their questions, and resumed her seat next to him once they left. She held his hand and looked in his eyes, and Winston could see such pain there. Even as she smiled at him, tears tracked down her cheeks. He reached up and wiped a tear away with his thumb. “S’okay, Dee,” he said. “I’m all right.” At this, the floodgates opened and she leaned down to put her face on the bed, muffling her sobs with the blanket. Winston stroked her head and made reassuring sounds.

“Oh god, Win,” she said between hitching breaths. “I didn’t know where you were, what happened to you. I thought I’d lost you forever.” She raised her head and attempted a smile. “But you’re okay. You’re awake and all right and you’re here.”

“Tha’s right, hon. Right here.”

They kept him in the hospital for another week just to make sure he recovered. Dianne came by every morning and every evening after working her receptionist temp job. At the end of the week, Winston had exhausted the crossword puzzles she’d brought him, and daytime television drove him up the wall; he was absolutely itching to leave. Dianne didn’t say anything during the drive home. Winston was still a little woozy from being supine for a month, so she had to help him out of the car, up the elevator, and into the apartment. The coolness of air conditioning greeted him like an old friend. Despite the nurse’s statement, it appeared Dianne had found the time to finish unpacking and decorate the apartment. On the wall above the sofa hung five of Winston’s favorite personal photographs, the center one taken of a laughing Dianne during a picnic when they’d first started going out. He loved the unbridled happiness of her face in that photo, the bliss.

“I wanted to surprise you,” she said, looking expectantly at him as she helped him down to the couch.

“It looks great, Dee,” he said.

Dianne smiled and couple of tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She laughed nervously and quickly wiped them away. “Oh Win, I was so afraid you’d never wake up. I don’t
think I could ever handle that. Do you remember anything at all about being in the penthouse?"

He shook his head. “The doctor said I must have been hallucinating after the guy at the U-Haul place hit me and took my wallet.” Winston rubbed his forehead at the headache that was starting there. The doctor said he’d probably have headaches for a few months. “It felt real to me, though. So the penthouse was empty?”

“Yeah. No sign that anyone had lived there in years.”

“So what happened to Lucas?”

“Lucas? Who’s that?”

Winston abruptly yawned. He leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes. “You know, the guy who was living up there. We drank his honey mead.”

“Win, you’ve been through a lot. Maybe you should take it easy. Are you hungry?” Dianne asked. “Anything to drink?”

“No, I think I’ll just go to bed.”

She helped him into the bedroom and undressed him, pulled the sheets up to his chin. Though it was only afternoon, she undressed too and climbed in next to him. A small rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, and Dianne wrapped an arm around him. Thunderstorms always made her more than a little amorous. She kissed his neck, and the fatigue dissolved away. He wanted to lie in bed with his wife, and touch her, and reaffirm that she was real. Winston leaned over and kissed her long and slow.

When they separated, she asked, “Do you want to?”

He nodded. A butterfly fluttered in his stomach, and he couldn’t help but picture her with Lucas. “From behind.”

She looked startled for a moment, and Winston was convinced more than ever that what he’d seen in the penthouse had been a mental fabrication, but then she smiled, a grin that went all the way to her ears, and said, “Okay.”
YOU GO TO see King Walker on the morrow, so listen well. Since you are a foreigner to these lands, this story may save your life, and I tell it true.

Back when I was young lady, King Walker was only a callow prince, and he played every day on his father’s lands. The kingdom was quite different then; Walker’s father, King William, was a just and kind ruler, forever a listener. If there were conflicts with neighboring realms, Halcyon (as our kingdom was known then) was always the arbiter, the patient negotiator. When the Ecumen of North Ærin declared war on their southern brothers the Zwinglians, the king traveled for three weeks without stopping to rest in order to intervene. Not to say that King William didn’t make mistakes, he was still human same as you and me, but he owned up to them, and his charisma won him forgiveness every time. The land was rich in the oil used to light our lanterns, and there seemed to be no end to the wealth of the kingdom.

Prince Walker’s mother, Queen Verruca, was in charge of his education, and spent much time with him during his formative years, as his father was often gone arranging treaties or settling disputes. The young prince loved his mother more than anything, and craved her approval. Queen Verruca was beautiful and intelligent, and a great communicator in her own right. When Walker gave a correct answer, she would laugh and clap her hands and tousle his hair into an unruly mop. As he was only a child, her hand on his head delighted him, and he thought nothing of the condition of his hair after her disheveling touch.

But the young prince grew into a young man, an adolescent who started caring more about his appearance. He applied unguents to his skin and grew his dark hair long and thick. His baby fat melted away, and his days of riding added muscle and length to his growing body. No longer would he wear the simple garments of his youth, but ordered the finest silks from Syr and
Sino for his clothing, heavily embroidered with symbols he often did not know the meaning of; the calligraphy of Syrite writing and the pictographs of Sinoan mythology were most to his liking. Even if he stayed in at the palace for the day, he still dressed in his best finery. The ladies at court began to notice what a striking young man he had become, as well as the resemblance to his father.

His mother, however, still treated him as a child, no matter the maturity he affected. She still talked to him as if he had not surpassed her in knowledge, and when she felt he was being grumpy, would muss his hair. His outbursts and incredulity at having his hair disarrayed after spending an entire morning to make it look just so had no effect on her. The queen condescended and laughed at his sudden interest in keeping up his appearance, unaware that she was humiliating him in the eyes of the ladies he was most trying to impress.

The day after Prince Walker’s sixteenth birthday, word came of the assassination of King William during a trade negotiation in Ollso. Within a month, the king’s body was brought home and buried in the royal gardens. Halcyon mourned for a month afterward, its subjects incredulous that their beloved king no longer lived. Then, in a ceremony that rivaled the most ostentatious in the outer realms, Walker was crowned Halcyon’s sovereign. His mother the queen was the one to place the crown on his head, and had it been anyone else, the next ten years which stretched to this day would have been much different. For at the ceremony, directly before delivering his birthright, she ruffled his long hair with a smile.

The newly crowned King Walker raged, and he ordered the queen mother confined to the dungeon. Over the next week, he renamed the kingdom as Pyrrhon, and declared to his people that the realm was under imminent threat from Aqbar, a land far to the east where evil men ate the sand under their feet and craved Pyrrhon’s oil for their own purposes. The new king claimed that these men were the culprits in his father’s assassination, and he swore on his father’s name that he would bring them to justice. He did not tell his subjects that Aqbar itself was rich in lamp oil, and that they had no reason to murder the sovereign of a land in which they took no interest. King Walker ordered his entire army eastward, headed by his trusted general, Tomás of
Hillock. The King himself stayed home at the palace.

After several weeks, he traveled the stone steps down to his dungeons. The torture-master led him through a labyrinth of tunnels until he reached a small wooden door. A key was inserted and a lock sprung. Inside the cell was a woman of around forty years of age, sitting on the hard wooden bench that served as a bed, her clothing dirty and soiled with her own fluids, her hair unwashed and matted. A diet of hard black bread and silty water had resulted in a diminished frame, and the king imagined he could see the outline of ribs poking through her dress. At the clank and squeal of the opened door, the woman looked up at the king with confusion and suppressed anger in her eyes.

“Hello mother,” King Walker said.

“Your Highness,” the queen mother spat.

“So, have you yet realized why you were imprisoned here?”

She brushed dirty hair behind her ear and glared at her son. “All I see is a spoiled whelp who has let power overwhelm his common sense and filial loyalty. I see a boy who has decided to wage war against a kingdom that does not intend us harm. He sees that they have a commodity we also possess, a competitor in export, and wishes it all for himself. So he hopes to invade and take it, on the pretense that he will be avenging his father’s death. I am ashamed that you are my son.”

At this, the king stepped into the cell, and his mother shrank back against the wall in anticipation of physical violence. But instead of striking her, the king smiled. The stench in the cell was strong, as it had been forbidden that she be bathed, but the king could also smell the sharp tang of fear, and this is what put the smile upon his lips. In his teeth were the remains of a leg of mutton, and bagel crumbs peppered his wispy facial growth. The pale light coming through the small barred window at the top of one of the cell’s walls was not reflected in his eyes, making them look cold and lifeless. Verruca could no longer see any trace of the boy she had raised.

“You did not answer my question, mother,” he said. “And by this, I am to assume that you
still do not know your crime. You cannot see the truth, and I think it is because you still use your eyes incorrectly.” The king stepped back into the corridor, turned to the torture-master, and said, “Take them.”

The king found his way back up to his chambers. He was not present when the torture-master removed his mother’s eyes, and therefore could not see the torture-master crying as he went about his job. But the queen mother noticed, and also noticed that he used his finest implements to make the procedure as painless as possible. After the deed was over, she placed a hand to his sobbing face and said, “I forgive you.”

Three months later, the king once again descended to the dungeons to ask the same question. Despite her wretched living conditions, his mother looked better than the last time he had seen her. She had been washed, and fed on more than just bread and water. A grey blindfold had been tied across the upper half of her face, concealing the now empty eye sockets. She had also been supplied with half a dozen books filled with raised dots that she passed her fingers over. As the king opened the door, she looked up, though slightly to the left.

“Sootsharp? Is that you?”

“No, mother,” said the king. “Though he waits in the corridor.” The king shot a look at his torture-master, who reddened and turned his gaze toward his toes. King Walker turned back to the cell; his mother had closed the book she was reading, and placed it beside her on the bench. “Have you thought on my question?”

“Of course I have,” she said, sitting up straighter and assuming a queenly posture. “And I still can see no other answer than that you are a spoiled child, drunk on power. I have been reading these new braille texts on the Demesne of Aqbar, and have come to the conclusion that there is no possibility its inhabitants could have killed your father. They rarely leave their homeland, but more important is that they are allies with the Ollsosians. If they had conspired to murder our king in the country of one of their closest allies, an act of war would have been declared, and no such act has occurred, save by yourself. There is no logical reason that they could have had for regicide.”
“Perhaps,” said King Walker, “you have been reading too much.”

The king exited and ordered the torture-master and his assistant to the throne room. There, he relieved the torture-master of his duties, and ordered that his assistant C’Seed be named the new torture-mastrex. She was charged with performing every possible infliction on her former master, and when she was finished, to amputate the hands of the queen mother up to the wrists.

Dispatches arrived every month from Aqbar, with each letter more depressing than the last. General Hillock had succeeded in deposing the sultan, but the Aqbarian people were ruthless, and more of the general’s soldiers were dying every day. Settlements had been established on the borders of the demesne in order to extract the lamp oil found there, but what resources that weren’t destroyed by Aqbarian patrols were so polluted that it would be impossible to refine the essential oil from it. The king released reports to his public that the situation was under control, but several opposing political newspapers began spreading word about the failure to avenge the death of King William and establish superiority in the region. Unrest began to stir in the breeze like the aroma of a rich meal.

And so you have come. The travel from your sandy homeland must have been great, but the hope for peace must burn brightly in you, though I cannot see it myself. I am just a blind storyteller, but even I can sense in your voice the desire to put an end to the decade of needless bloodshed. You are young, yes? Speak well, and you may end the day without being thrown in the king’s dungeons.

What’s that? Well, some say she ultimately realized why she had been imprisoned, that she knew something about King Walker which he did not wish made public, that the product of her own loins was capable of having his father destroyed in order to gain the throne ahead of schedule. He could have kept her quiet in other ways, if not for the tousling she gave his hair at the coronation, a public humiliation which caused him to unhinge. It is entirely possible that after ten years of keeping her isolated in the dank and claustrophobic dungeons, he felt she was no longer a threat to anyone, and cast her out onto the street as a beggar.
And so I wish you the best of luck. Before you go, would you be so kind as to throw two or three coppers into the basket at my feet? That seems an honest price for a goodly-length story. I would ask you to put them in my hands, but as you can clearly see, I have none.
THE SINGER stands alone in the Great Hall, shivering. Her bare feet stick to the cool marble floor, which sends chills throughout her body. She wears a thin sleeveless shirt that is nearly translucent, and a simple green skirt that stops just above her knees. The only other article on her body is the small gold bracelet that he gave her; the charlatan, the liar. She hates him yet cannot part with his gift.

The room soon fills with men in sharp tuxedos and women in the latest finery and hairstyles. They wander into the hall, ignoring the Singer, taking their places at the cushioned seats to the far end. The air is pervaded with aimless chatter, crisp footsteps, and squeaking chair legs. As the last person sits, the Host and Hostess of the Evening enter behind the Singer. They saunter past her, flaunting their wealth in her face, making it absolutely known that they are in charge, that she is nothing. The Host smirks at the Singer and she inhales sharply, her hand involuntarily flitting to her bracelet.

The Host and Hostess take their seats in the front row, and the Master of Ceremonies steps out from behind a velvet curtain. He holds a small silver tray in his hand like a waiter; an exquisitely fashioned dagger is balanced precariously on the tray’s surface. He steps curtly over to the Singer, his boot heels like rifle shots against the polished floor. His face is grave, and he nods slightly to her, an acknowledgment of respect. He turns to the audience and gives his speech, which they have all heard before. When he finishes, he turns back to the Singer. She nods and begins to disrobe; it doesn’t take long. Once she is naked, trembling hard enough to shake her bones, the emcee places the silver tray in her hands. The Singer closes her eyes when the emcee plucks the dagger from the tray, and her breath catches in her throat as he makes the incision.

The Hostess of the Evening gasps loudly, says she’s viewed the viddies, but never seen this
in the flesh; it all seems so unnecessary. The Singer then hears the Host softly explain that this is all part of the experience, that when the performance is over, the body will knit itself back together and will appear untouched, nary a scratch to be seen. He further elucidates that the Singer feels no pain, but he is wrong. It hurts every single time. The physical rending may disappear, but it hurts all the same.

The Singer winces slightly as she feels the emcee’s delicate fingers tug gently at her heart. There is only slight resistance, then the heart comes free. This Master of Ceremonies has excellent technique. She has had emcees so harsh in their handling of her most vital organ that it would take days to recover after a performance. But she feels secure and even comfortable in the hands of this particular Master. She opens her eyes as he places her heart on the silver tray in her hands. It beats regularly and strongly, its telescopic ventricles and aortae still attached, disappearing into the small slit to the side of her left breast.

The Master of Ceremonies bows deeply, then steps to the side. The Singer treads forward confidently, displaying her heart for all to see. Several audience members put a hand to their eyes, some turn away, some gawk with mouths agape. The Singer looks unflinchingly at the Host of the Evening, her heartbeat the only audible sound in the Great Hall. The Host just stares at the Singer, his expression revealing his shock and understanding. He never attended one of her performances, no matter how she urged him when they were still together. He seems to be projecting his thoughts straight to her: I had no idea what you go through.

He lied to her then left her for another. He claimed love in the beginning, a white-hot flame that burned out too quickly for either of them. He stole every cent she owned while she was out performing, then fled without a word. And yet, all the Singer feels for her former lover is pity. He will never change; love seems to be beyond his grasp. The Singer then looks to the Hostess and realizes that if she cannot turn back the clock and save herself, she can still save another.

The Singer takes a deep breath, her lungs expanding with the extra room, then does what she does best. 🔔
I sit here in the jury lounge, waiting, waiting, waiting to be called. It’s my first time. When I arrived twenty-seven years ago, they showed us all a video narrated by Charles Kuralt, a message from beyond the grave, emphasizing the importance of civic duty. He told us what to expect in the courtroom, and how to tell if a defendant is lying. They used to pop the video in every three months to remind us. Charles Kuralt never got older, but we did.

There were thirty-two of us when I first arrived, but only seven of us remain. In the beginning, we were one big happy family, but after the strain of timeless anticipation, factions formed. When the television stopped working, war broke out. After the snack bar around the corner ran out of food, we formed a treaty.

Men and women paired off, even those who had been married before being called to service. Love bloomed, couples copulated, children were born. I fell for Amy early on, and our son Connor has just celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday. He and his and mate Belinda are expecting a child. I will be a grandfather.

A new set of numbers is called. The other six jurors are escorted out of the room to do their duty for the judicial system. I sit here alone. My wife was called nine years ago, my son and his mate last autumn. The room contains fifty-three chairs, and I rest in each of them. I have read all of the magazines at least fifteen times, and the copy of the King James Bible more than thirty. I look out the window at the people below going about their business. I turn on the television, but it is still broken. I wait. I wait.
1. batik

Komang looks on as her wares are pored over by the American tourists, as they pick through the fruits of her livelihood and determine whether she will eat this night. The American woman eyes an intricate scarf that took Komang the better part of a month to craft, running her thick indelicate fingers over the fabric, not truly appreciating the artistry that went into creating such a thing. Both the tourists reek of Western wealth and privilege, and Komang knows in her soul that they will be stingy in their purchases.

Hers is the skill of batik tulis, the artisan who works in fabric and wax. In her youth, royalty throughout the Middle East and Asia clamored for her designs. Her hand, from a very young age, was the most steady of any that had been seen in a hundred years. When she drew her canting over cotton or silk, she needed no charcoal guidelines, and her strokes and curves flowed like perfection. She would outline the leaves of bougainvillea, or trace scenes from The Ramayana, and her praises were sung throughout a dozen lands.

But those days are over. Komang is now an old woman, attempting to survive in a land racked by poverty and disease. Her artwork is only seen in the airport gift shops and her own ramshackle road stand. The American woman has picked up a batik coin purse, the least expensive product Komang has to offer. She wants to accost the tourist, tell her about the terrible living conditions all over Bali, describe the pervading air of hopelessness, implore her to give more, to share the good luck she has enjoyed. But Komang knows the argument would be fruitless, so she forces a smile, and accepts the American's pittance for the purse.

Later that evening, after she has given her day's earnings to her grandchildren so that they might buy rice for dinner, Komang sits at her stool, attempting to bring some beauty to a place
that has turned ugly. She dips her *canting*, a gift from the Sultan of Brunei, into the bowl of hot wax, peers at the rectangle of rough burlap in front of her, and begins.

**2. surrogate**

*Susan first thought* having a surrogate was great. She wasn't pregnant, like most of the couples who used surrogates, but her sex drive wasn't quite up to the level of her husband's. After five years of marriage, Brad still had the libido of a wild rabbit, and she just wasn't up to the task anymore. She needed a rest. After talking to her friend Jennifer, who was five months pregnant with her third child, Susan found the company in the phone book and made the call.

Cassie had been a regular surrogate for almost two months, coming over four times a week sometimes. She was in the house now, pleasuring Brad loudly in the upstairs bedroom while Susan tried to watch a television documentary on ocelots. Cassie had gradually gotten louder as the weeks had progressed, which set Susan's nerves on edge. If she was going to screw Brad, she could at least do it respectfully.

Then it occurred to Susan that maybe Brad liked it loud and raucous. She had always been fairly tame in the bedroom, never making much more noise than heavy breathing. When Brad tried to spank her one time, she wouldn't talk to him for a week. Maybe she didn't know her husband at all. If he liked his sex rough, what else was he hiding from her?

After the noise died down, and the special on ocelots had given way to *The Crocodile Hunter*, Susan heard two pairs of footsteps descending the stairway. Brad and Cassie stood in the living room entryway, dressed in bright colors and holding suitcases. Brad informed Susan that he and Cassie were going away, maybe to a tropical island, anywhere away from here.

Susan sighed and remembered that she was the sole breadwinner in their partnership, that it was she who supported him while he tried to make a career as a performance artist, which he always managed to screw up by laughing or scratching or moving in some way as to totally destroy the illusion. She would cancel all his credit cards later that afternoon, and transfer the funds from their joint bank account into one that was solely hers. Then, she would leaf through
the Yellow Pages again, and this time request a surrogate who was male.

3. scrumtralescent

They huddled around the rugby ball, heads down, grabbing, hitting, elbowing, anything to get possession, to feel the polyurethane kid grain and synthetic leather rubber compound material in their hands, crushing against each other, crammed so tight that molecules shifted and mingled and bled into each other. Instead of ten individual, manly, sweating testosterone factories, there was now one organism with ten heads, twenty arms, twenty legs, one hundred fingers and one hundred toes. The scrum shrieked with self-knowledge and attempted to tear itself into its ten original components, but the damage had been done.

It was then that the ball began to glow and shift and iridesce. Under those ten pairs of hands, the ball transformed to hydrated silica, infecting the scrum quickly, traveling up the fingers to the arms, coating skin with opalescent light, over chests and legs and heads, glowing and hardening and making beautiful.

And that is how we got the statue that resides in our town square. Underneath is a plaque that lists the names of the ten brave men who gave their lives in order that we continue to appreciate art.

4. lepidoptera

You pass over your credit card without a second thought, not caring how much the special exhibit in front of you will set you back, only impatient that it takes so long to make the transaction. A swipe, a smile, a rip, a hurried signature. One gentleman in a sharp Italian suit hands you the receipt as another pulls back the heavy velvet curtain and waves you through with a bow. The temperature immediately plunges twenty degrees and you shiver in your thin tee-shirt and cargo shorts. The lights are dim here as well, and bluish, reinforcing the atmosphere of coolness.

The main attraction lies in front of you, an enormous semi-permeable barrier enclosing a virtual forest. On every tree trunk, every leaf, every available surface are the iridescent purple
lepidoptera you came to see, big as a human hand, endangered and nearly extinct. Their wings open and close slowly, a false impression that they are waving at you. Despite the sign on the wall that prohibits flash photography, you dig your camera out of a hidden pocket and raise it, eager to capture these majestic creatures in halide silver. A click, a flash. The sudden intrusion of light evaporates the barrier, and the butterflies erupt from the enclosure, fastening onto your clothes, your hair, your skin, shrieking all the while, the noise pitched so high that it blinds you. They flap hard and a glittery golden dust puffs from their wings, choking you, making you sneeze until you pass out.

When you awaken in the hospital three days later, the doctors say there is nothing they can do, and when they provide a mirror you see skin purple as a bruise, eyes nothing but iris, and thin translucent wings that itch where they join the flesh of your back. If you had listened while they were scanning your credit card, you would have heard that there is a reason you shouldn’t use flash photography, that the way this species reproduces is quite special, and that if you are not careful, one day soon you will join your brothers and sisters behind the barrier, to be gawked at and trivialized.

5. matryoshka

Sergei, the last of the matryoshka masters, sat in his workshop, putting paint to his final masterpiece. He was the only artisan left in the world to craft his embedded dolls by hand, and after this one, he would retire. The post-Singularity world no longer made sense for him, where anyone could create anything by the slightest whim; art was no longer valued except as a curiosity. Things had no permanence when matter was manipulated at the nano-level.

Sergei’s grandson Nikolai burst through the front door of the workshop, audibly surrounded by a cacophony of sound, of a dozen different musical pieces being played simultaneously. Nikolai stomped over to the almost-finished matryoshka doll, rolled his eyes and exhaled.

“Aren’t you done yet?”
“Patience,” Sergei yelled to be heard over the din. “It is something you never had. Great art requires patience.”

“Not anymore,” Nikolai said. He stabbed a finger into the still wet paint, then licked it off slowly. “The days of toiling over art are over, Grandfather. Just this past month, I’ve created four new symphonies, all brilliant.”

Sergei looked up slightly. “How have you done this?”

“Brainbox upgrade.”

Sergei shook his head. “Your generation has no soul.”

“Maybe,” Nikolai said, “but your generation never did anything with theirs. What’s worse: not having a soul, or having one and wasting it?”

Sergei turned back to his work and smoothed out the paint that Nikolai had disturbed.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” Nikolai said, stomping back out the door. “Have this shit ready by then. I have ten other deliveries, and I don't want yours making me late.”

The door slammed and Sergei was alone in silence again with his creation. He would finish his last matryoshka doll, hand it over to the Mexicali Museum of Static Art, then find a sparsely-inhabited island in the Mediterranean, and live out the rest of his days in peace, hoping that someone somewhere would find value in his vision.

One last brushstroke to the outer shell of the doll, then a fine mist of anti-deconstructing lacquer, then his name laser-etched to the underside. He knew that his art would not be appreciated like it would have been had he been born even fifty years earlier, but he still took pride in his work. He boxed up the three-foot doll, left it on his porch for Nikolai to pick up in the morning, then turned out the light to his workshop, and went home. 🌊
I replaced the phone in its cradle a little more forcefully than normal and fell back onto my side of the bed. Cory moaned softly and rolled over to face me. Sleep crusted the corners of her eyes, making her beautiful German-Chinese face that more real for me. She yawned and draped an arm over my chest. It was amazing, she never had bad breath in the morning.

“Who was that?” she mumbled into her pillow.

“Jack,” I said. “He said Ian called in sick, and he needs someone in Suits today.”

Cory opened her pale brown eyes and leaned up to look at me. “Did you remind him it’s your thirtieth birthday? And that you asked for today off two weeks ago?” I nodded and Cory said, “And did you tell him that I took the day off to be with you?”

“Yeah, honey, I mentioned all that. I could take today off, but I shouldn’t bother coming back tomorrow. He said that because of the recession I’m lucky to have a job at all right now.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“He’s such an asshole.”

“Yeah.”

I kissed Cory on the tip of her small nose and rolled out of bed. She immediately shifted over to my side to snuggle into the warmth I had left behind.

After getting out of the shower, I stumbled over Plymouth lying on the bedroom floor, tipped over on his side. Plymouth was Cory’s most favorite stuffed animal, a brownish-orange triceratops she got as a present for her seventh birthday. We must have knocked him off the bed during what Cory called “my early birthday present” last night. I picked up the stuffed tricer-
atops and put him back on the headboard, ready to guard the room. His glass eyes stared at me.

Cory watched me get into my nicest suit—if I was going into work on my birthday, I was going to look amazing, dammit—then she reached up and grabbed the stuffed dinosaur from where I had placed him.

“Plymouth doesn’t want you to go either,” she said. “See?”

She squeezed his sides, and “Rrrroar,” he said in a tinny pre-recorded voice. “I’m a tricer-atops.”

I patted Plymouth on the head, then finished dressing and went into the kitchen for a bagel and some OJ. As I was choking back pulpy juice, Cory shuffled into the room wearing her green silk bathrobe. She slung her arms around my waist, buried her face in my chest, and hugged me tight.

“Are you sure you have to go?”

I smiled and hugged her back. “Yes, honey. But I’ll come over at lunch and we can eat together.” I kissed her full on the lips. “I have to go now, or I’ll be late.” I detached myself from Cory, pecked her on the tip of her nose, and left her apartment.

The beltline into Raleigh was crammed full of commuters at 8:15, and I sat absolutely still in the fast lane. Every once in a while, brake lights flickered and we moved a few inches.

At the Glenwood exit, a wave of nausea rolled over me too fast to feel it coming. I yanked the emergency brake, fumbled into neutral, opened the door and dry-heaved for several long moments. The seatbelt was still buckled, and I hung out of the car door at an odd angle, leaning out as far as I could to avoid splashing the car with vomit.

But none came. The nausea slowly abated, and I swallowed hard. My temples pounded and the sunlight suddenly seemed too bright, even through my sunglasses. I pulled myself back inside the car and stared at the steering wheel, taking deep breaths to calm myself. Then I realized that all I could hear was my ragged breathing; the sounds of other cars were absent, the rush of air each car displaced, the rattling of eighteen-wheeler, the honking of impatient motorists. All of it was gone. I looked out the windshield. All four lanes of traffic were empty, where
they had been bumper-to-bumper mere moments before. My rear view and side mirrors confirmed what I saw. Sweat broke out on my forehead and under my arms.

I put the car into drive and eased down the road.

I arrived at Peppard’s Department Store forty-five minutes after I had left Cory’s apartment, gradually seeing more traffic as I got there. I expected Jack to be at the front door, fuming at my fifteen-minute tardiness, but he was nowhere to be seen. I took the escalator to the second floor and wound around early shoppers to the Men’s Suits section. Appliances and Homeware was there instead. Had I gotten turned around? I was about to retrace my steps when I passed Charlie, who normally worked exclusively in Ties, talking to a frumpy old man about a spatula. I walked up and attempted to meet his eyes, but he wouldn’t look at me. I waved my hand in front of his face and said, “Charlie.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there. I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“Charlie. It’s me. What’s wrong with you?”

“Wrong?”

“Never mind. Where’s Jack?”

“If you mean Mr. Davis, he’s back there at the register.”

I turned and walked to the register where Jack was standing, near the refrigerators. His hair was shellacked to his skull as usual, and he wore a sharp black pinstripe suit that I didn’t recognize. As I approached, he flashed me his sharky smile and interlaced his fingers on top of the register.

“Yes, sir?” he said with enthusiasm. “Can I help you?”

“Jack, knock it off. I’m here. Where do you want me?”

The carnivorous smile remained on Jack’s face but his eyebrows rose in confusion. “Want you, sir? I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about. Do I know you?”

“Jack, goddammit, you called me in here on my day off—on my birthday—and I don’t have time for your jokes. Where do you want me today? Accessories or Sportcoats?”

Jack’s smile faded, and his brow creased. His hands were out of sight under the register.
“Sir, I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about. If you are implying that you somehow work here, you are mistaken. I’ve never seen you before in my life. Now if you don’t leave, I’ll have to have you escorted out.”

“What? Jack, what are you—”

“Sir, I’m afraid I have to insist.”

I turned around and could see Clive, the burly British security guard, making his way toward us. My face burned and I flashed a look at Jack, then tramped out of Appliances and Homeware. As I passed Clive, he crossed his arms and gave me the look I often saw him give to shoplifters. His eyes burned holes in my back as I took the escalator downstairs. I sat in a shabby wooden chair in Women’s Hosiery and looked at my shoes. My lungs felt sodden and heavy.

“You shouldn't be here.”

I looked up at the voice, but could see no one who would have spoken. My head lowered back down, but the voice repeated itself. I stood up and my heart skipped a beat. Plymouth, Cory’s plush triceratops, sat on top of the cash register and gazed in my direction.

“Something’s wrong,” he said, and I backed away. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

I ran out the door to my car, started it, and was halfway home before I turned around towards Cory’s apartment in Kildaire.

Cory lived in a subdivision where the streets were named after respectable Irish authors. It was a gated community, and I had to punch in an access code. The gates swung open and I pulled through onto Joyce Way.

I parked the car and ran up the stairs to her apartment. The wreath I had gotten her for Thanksgiving last year—the one she refused to take down because she loved how I could give her silly things like wreaths—was gone. The doormat was also different; instead of the Tasmanian Devil jumping up and down and yelling “GO AWAY!” the doormat was made of straw. Cory loved that Taz doormat; she’d never replace it with something so mundane.

My key fumbled and scraped around the lock, but wouldn’t slide in. I rang the doorbell
and knocked hard. “Cor!” I yelled into the door. “Open up, baby, it’s me. Some weird shit has been happening to me today. I really want to talk to you about it.” I counted twenty seconds of silence and was about to ring the bell again when the door cracked open an inch. The combined scent of jasmine and vanilla drifted out, the scent of the woman I loved. Cory’s beautiful face peered through the crack at me, a look of fear in her eyes. The chain was on the door.

“What do you want?” she asked, an audible quiver in her voice. “I’ve called nine-one-one and I have pepper spray.”

“Cory, don’t you recognize me? Come on, honey, let me in.”

“Mister, I don’t know you. Please leave.”

“What the hell is going on? I don’t—” I stopped as a thought entered my mind. “You’re not planning a surprise party, are you? You know I hate surprises.”

“I’ve never seen you before! Go away!” Cory slammed the door in my face. The chain made scraping noises as it rattled against the door. I stood there for a moment, dumbfounded, knowing she could see me through the peephole. I couldn’t believe it. Of all the people, I thought Cory would be the one person who I could talk to about all this, and she didn’t know me either. I walked down the stairs to my car; the space I had parked in was now occupied by a rusty VW Beetle. On the hood, Plymouth stood on all stubby fours, a plush hood ornament.

“Why are you still here?” he asked.

The tips of my fingers and earlobes tingled. I shivered despite the heat as the hairs on the nape of my neck prickled.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“To find out why you weren’t erased with the others,” he said, matter-of-fact. “You should have disappeared in a blink, instead of this fading-away mess. What makes you so special?”

I grabbed Plymouth and he had time to yell “Hey!” before I threw him across the parking lot. The Beetle wasn’t mine—it had been a Honda when I drove it here—but I had the feeling I could drive it. I tried my car key and it fit the lock. I got in and cranked the engine, then left.

I drove around for a while, my head spinning. At one point, I pulled over and fished out
the cell phone in the glove compartment, which, to my surprise, was still there. I swore that I'd only use it for emergencies—I couldn’t stand when people drove and talked on the phone at the same time—but this definitely counted as an emergency. I dialed my parents’ number in Maryland. After two minutes of trying to convince my mother who I was, she hung up on me. I threw the phone back in the glove compartment and jammed the car into gear.

I ended up back at the Glenwood exit where I had had my nausea attack. I took the exit down to Crabtree Valley Mall and parked near the food court. It was 3:00 p.m. by this time, and I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. I walked inside and the multitude of different smells hit me all at once. Fried chicken, cheeseburgers, sweet and sour pork, bratwurst. I drifted over to the Chick-Fil-A area and looked up at the menu.

“I’ll have the—”

Before I could finish my order, I was bumped aside by a tall college student with a Durham Bulls hat worn backward on his head. I glared at him, but he didn’t turn. The cashier, a young girl with frizzy blonde hair, hadn’t seemed to notice me either. She was looking directly at the college guy. I waved my hand in front of her eyes and she made a face, as if she had just smelled something foul. She looked back at the college guy, who was finishing his order.

“Hey,” I said. “I was next.”

Neither paid any attention to me, nor did the people starting to line up behind the college student. I poked the man second in line in the chest, and he started to look my way, then looked back at the menu. I pinched the woman behind him on the cheek, a haggard mother with a child under one arm and another on a retractable harness, and she barely detected it, though I had pinched hard enough to leave a mark. The man behind her I slapped in the face; he recoiled, put a hand to his cheek, then looked ahead again.

I spent the rest of the afternoon at the mall, trying to get people to notice me. At Radio Shack, I turned up all the stereos to full volume, each tuned to a different station. At Goodberry’s, I pulled down the lever on each machine at once, watching as different flavors of frozen custard oozed onto the floor. At Victoria’s Secret, I followed a woman into a changing
room and watched as she tried on a bra; she moved and stretched to accommodate the both of us, but never gave any other indication she knew I was in there. I went up and down the mall, grabbing body parts, yelling in faces, trying everything I could think of to make people perceive my existence.

I was about to give up and go home when I met Henry. I passed the Pet Korner on the way to the exit doors, and nearly got there before I heard a timid voice say, “Can you see me?” A young mother sat on a bench in front of me, eating an ice cream with her blonde daughter.

“Can you see me?”

It came from behind me. I stepped away from the mother and daughter and peered into the double-paned glass of the Pet Korner. A cage of bunnies sat in full view, containing a strange sight. In the front left corner, a small white bunny with brown spots all over stood on its hind legs, pressing into the glass like a puppy. In the back right corner, five or six other bunnies of all different colors were huddled together, shivering. I bent down and the spotted white bunny spoke again.

“Can you see me, mister?”

I shut my eyes and rubbed hard. The talking bunny was still there when I opened them again. Its whiskers trembled, and its nose twitched furiously.

“Yes,” I said, feeling like a fool. “I can see you.”

The bunny bounced off the glass and did a sort of twirling hop in the air. It made a high keening noise that sounded like an excited child.

“I am so happy! I want to dig and run around!”

“Why . . .” I cleared my throat. “Why are you so happy?”

“Because I am the last, but you can see me! I had three brothers and two sisters this morning, and now they are gone. Esmerelda and Joseph went before breakfast, and Timmy, Camus, and Radine went in the middle of afternoon nap. I am the last. My name is Henry. I do not want to go too.”

The other bunnies in the cage took no notice of our conversation, but continued shivering
as if a dog was growling directly overhead.

I walked inside the pet store and opened the bunny cage. Henry bounded out and ran laps around my ankles. He sniffed my slacks and rubbed his chin over my shoes.

“Can we go now?” he asked.

The one other person in the store, an employee, completely ignored me as I picked Henry up and left. I put him in the passenger seat of the Beetle, and he climbed around, exploring and sniffing. He jumped back up onto the seat as I started the car.

I was back on the beltline to my apartment when Henry said, “Today is my birthday, you know.”

My hands involuntarily gripped the thin steering wheel. The speedometer circled to the left and was down to 35 MPH before a horn blared behind me and woke me back up.

“Today is my birthday too,” I said, and Henry hopped into my lap.

“That means we are brothers!” Henry tilted his head up and gave my palm a quick lick. He hopped back onto the passenger seat and started cleaning himself.

“Wait a minute, your birthday? You only look a couple of months old. How can it be your birthday?”

Henry stopping licking his shoulder and said, “Bunny time is different from people time,” then went back to his bath.

“Bunny brothers,” I said and smiled. Why not? After everything else that had happened today, why not? “All right, Henry, we’ll stop at a pet supply store on the way home, get you the essentials. I’ve never had a rabbit before but you can’t be too hard to take care of, can you? Plus, you can tell me exactly what you want, instead of me having to guess. Yeah, I think this’ll be cool. What you do you say, Henry?”

When he didn't answer, I looked down. The seat was empty. Thinking he might be under the seat again, I called his name a couple more times, but he didn't answer. The car was too quiet. Henry was gone.

I cleared my throat, then gunned the accelerator for home, driving the rest of the way in
silence.

IT WAS DARK by the time I made it back to my apartment. The brutal North Carolina humidity hit me as I stepped from the car, ever-present, like walking through Jell-O. The cicadas whirred in the trees, a massive collective sound like a toy winding down.

Most of the apartment I knew was still there. My couch, my bookcase, a photo of Cory and me at Wrightsville Beach last summer. But the television was different, bigger than the one I owned, and framed art prints I had never seen before decorated the walls. I walked the short hallway to my bedroom, and saw a Queen-sized bed that I would never have been able to afford. I nearly cried when I saw Plymouth on the bedside table.

“What?” I yelled at him. “What do you want from me? Why is this happening?”

“Does everything have to have an explanation?” Plymouth asked. “It’s just happening. It’s your birthday and you’re disappearing from existence. No reason. The universe just sucks sometimes.”

As Plymouth talked, the room changed around me. The dresser grew in width, transformed from pine to mahogany, sprouted a large wall mirror. Ansel Adams prints popped into existence on one wall, a framed diploma on another. My corkboard vanished, and a movie poster for Swingers appeared in its place. I looked down at Plymouth and saw that he was changing as well, his horns shrinking, his material turning from orange-brown to green, his body and legs lengthening. I moved to pick him up and strangle him, but the world finished transforming around me, and I was no longer myself.

THE BEDROOM WAS dark, lit only by the moonlight delineated into stripes on the floor in front of the window. Satin sheets on the bed were rumpled and tossed about, the aftermath of strenuous lovemaking. The door was closed and a sliver of incandescence shone in the crack underneath. Muted voices came from the other side of the door, laughing and talking. It was a laugh I had loved in my previous life.
I stood in the corner, a silent sentinel. A conical shade was perched on my head.

The door was thrown open and in walked Cory, clad in her green silk bathrobe. Her hair was gathered in the back and held together with a tortoiseshell clip. She walked over and grabbed the copper chain that hung from my nose. She pulled downward and the bulb in my head lit up.

“Click,” I said.

Cory moved through the room, opening drawers and peeking under the bed. She picked up discarded clothing and looked underneath; she held up a dark purple bra that I particularly liked. After a few moments of searching, a shirtless man walked into the room: Ian, my former coworker. Her lover.

“You find one yet?” he asked in a drowsy tone.

“I’m looking,” she said, and her voice made me feel whole. “I know I have some more condoms around here, but I can’t find them. Did you put them somewhere?”

“Not me,” Ian said, scratching his stomach. “Are you sure they’re in here? Maybe you left them in the bathroom or something.”

“No,” she mumbled, picking up a stack of psychology books and putting them back down. “Last time I saw them they were in here.”

I knew where she had left the box, but of course couldn’t tell her. I was immobile and silent, a discarded soul. I could sense others as well, those unfortunate ones who shared my birthday. I was in contact with a chest of drawers in Nashville, an alarm clock in Charlotte. Henry the bunny was a plastic lawn ornament in Fuquay-Varina. I’d tried to extend my reach several times, but it seemed my range was limited to a few neighboring states. I knew there were scores more, now confined to the inanimate. I was one among thousands.

“Well, shit,” Cory said, standing back up. “I can’t find them. We’ll just have to go out to the drug store. I’ll drive.” She dropped the robe, once more showing me what I could no longer touch. Her curves filled my vision, blocking out all other thoughts. She threw on a shirt and some sweatpants and walked up to Ian. “I’m ready to go.”

“ Aren’t you going to turn the light off?” he said, motioning to me with his head.

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As Cory walked back over to me, he said over her shoulder, “That lamp is creepy, Cor. I don’t know why you still keep it. I always feel like it’s looking at me.”

“I don’t know,” she said, smiling at me. “There’s just something about it that makes me feel . . . safe.” She reached up and pulled on the chain from my nose again, plunging the room back into semi-darkness.

“Click.”
HOW DELIGHTFUL, PETER thought, that the most attractive young woman on the campus bus got off at his stop and now walked before him on the path toward Barnhardt Hall and the English Department. Her perfume took possession of the air around her—something with jasmine and lilac, perhaps. Completely intoxicating. She was foreign, from India or one of the countries in the neighborhood, he guessed, and she had occasioned for the last twenty minutes every hackneyed fantasy Peter had ever had about the harems of the east—the long silken ink-black hair plaited down her back, the aristocratic cheekbones, the sumptuous long lashes surrounding liquid brown eyes, and the curvaceous body of an erotic goddess who has stepped off a temple frieze in Rajasthan . . . My goodness, he thought, she's going into the English Department . . . and, indeed, she turned to hold the door for him. A moment later, he had the pleasure of holding the elevator doors open for her and asking, as they stepped into it alone, “What floor?”

“Five,” she smiled, a delicate mole at the corner of her mouth, where a dimple would be. The fifth floor, the faculty offices, his floor. His pulse quickened.

He pressed the button and stepped back. Snatching little glances, he mused on her age. Twenty? Twenty-five? He'd long ago given up trying to accurately guess the ages of the girls on campus, but she appeared older than most of his students, and more attractive by far. A graduate student? And what might this beauty, this angel be studying? The academic fields flitted through his mind: Eighteenth-Century British Lit, Linguistics, Twentieth-Century Serbian Film, Postmodern Novels, or maybe—

The elevator lurched to a halt, knocking them both off-balance. Peter reached out a hand to steady himself, an innocent gesture, all in the name of self-preservation, not wanting to look a fool in front of this stunning young woman, he reached out and grazed her left breast. He grazed. Her left breast.

STUCK
“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he said, the color, the heat rising to his face, his ears. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay,” she said, her voice melodious, practiced.

“It was an accident—”

“Really, it’s all right,” she said. “Don’t worry about it.”

The smile from before was gone, vanished, replaced with quiet discomfort. At that moment, Peter would have given anything to see that smile return, to turn back the clock thirty seconds, a minute, to relive the moment without such utter embarrassment. He wanted to beg, to drop to his knees and beg, plead for her forgiveness, her understanding, and he almost began lowering himself when she stepped forward and pushed the call button.

“Maintenance.”

“Yes,” she said, “the elevator seems to have gotten stuck.”

“Which building are you in?”

She turned to Peter, who blurted, “Barnhardt Hall. We’ve stopped between the second and third floors.”

“Okay, I’ll send out a technician right away. Keep put and do not try to force open the doors. Hopefully we’ll have you out of there within the hour.”

She released the button and dug around in her purse, produced a razor-thin flip phone, purple. “Wonderful,” she said. “I have an appointment with Dr. Quek in ten minutes and there’s no reception in here.”

Peter retrieved his own cell phone from a pants pocket. “I’ve got three bars,” he said. “You can use mine.”

She took the phone, her fingers long and tapered.

“Thanks.”

Peter listened as she explained the situation to Dr. Quek, the department head, his boss. He was grateful when she left out his breast-grazing. As she talked, he wondered why she was going to see the head of the English Department. Was she interviewing for a job? Or was she taking Dr. Quek’s class on Chinese Fiction and Social Modernity? The conversation yielded no
clues.

After she had finished, she handed the phone back to Peter. He called the department secretary and told her he would most likely miss his 10:15 class, Modern Literature of the Fantastic, his specialty. His students would be relieved. It was always like this at the end of the Spring semester, the slacking of attention, the glazing over of tired eyes, the surfeit of nod-and-jerk maneuvers.

Peter slid the cell phone, a recent gift from his wife Darja, back into his pocket. He and the young Indian woman stood in silence for a moment or two, both facing the doors, hands at their sides, the apotheosis of elevator etiquette. Then Peter turned, extended his hand, and said, with a slight quaver, "My name is Peter."

She took his hand in hers, her palm cool and soft and dry. "Peter Fierté?"

"Um, yes, how did you—"

"I'm afraid this is a bit . . . embarrassing." She plunged back into her purse and brought out a slim book, a novel, with a black and white photograph of a gothic tower on the cover. It was Peter's first novel, a novella actually. He had gotten his teaching position at the university based on the strength of that book. "I've actually been hoping to meet you," she said.

"Oh, would you look at that," he said. "I thought this was out of print." Slight scuff marks marred the cover, but other than that it looked brand new. A first edition. And he knew without looking that a photo of him appearing fifteen years younger was displayed on the back.

"eBay," she said. "You don't want to even know how much I paid for this. I tend to get very competitive with my online auctions."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Oh yes. Very much. It reminded me a little of Kafka and Calvino."

Peter smiled. "That's perceptive of you. Both those authors are big influences on my fiction, and I actually teach them in my class. The class I'll be missing today."

"Would you mind signing it for me?"

Peter took the book, again marveling at the condition, then produced a pen from his
jacket pocket. It was the Mont Blanc limited edition that Darja had bought for him before his first book tour. They had only been dating at that point, and he knew it was much more than she could afford on a doctoral candidate’s salary, but he accepted the ballpoint pen and had only used it to sign books ever since. It was the first pen he’d ever received with an instruction booklet.

He unscrewed the pen cap, opened to the title page, and stopped.

“To whom should I make this out?”

“Mira,” she said. “Mira Singh.”

Peter wrote, in broad, swift strokes: *Towers for Mira— Your pal, Peter*, then signed his name. He blew on the ink to dry it, then handed the book back. She returned it to her purse without looking at the inscription.

“Thank you very much,” she said.

“You’re very welcome.”

Another awkward pause, some shuffling of feet, an exhale.

“So,” he said, “are you taking one of Dr. Quek’s classes?”

“No, I’m actually interviewing for an adjunct position here. Which is why all this waiting is killing me right now.”

“Well, good luck with the interview. The university’s been tightening the purse strings again, but you might still be able to negotiate a decent rate. Adjuncting is hard work. I did that for a few years after leaving graduate school.”

The talk was more comfortable after that. They started to open up about their academic pasts, their fields of interest. She had just graduated from Chicago, a Ph.D. Older than Peter had thought. Her focus had been on Indian epic poetry, specifically *The Ramayana*, on which she had written her dissertation. She was hoping to travel to Hampi in order to visit the Hazar Rama Temple, which depicted the story of *The Ramayana* in detail.

“I haven’t been back there since I was young,” she said. “I was born in Chicago, but my parents thought it important my brother and I knew where we came from. All I remember is the
long plane rides, the endless relatives I never really knew, sleeping on the floor."

Peter tried to imagine Mira as a little girl, playing barefoot in the dusty Indian streets, and found it difficult.

“I resented my parents so much for taking me away from my friends here, for months at a time. It wasn’t until I got to college when I started to embrace my culture."

“Will you be going again?”
She nodded. “Next month. I won a travel grant that’ll pay for most of my expenses, and I should be over there for much of the summer. My mother is so proud.”

“And your father?”
She hesitated, and he knew unequivocally, undeniably, that he had misstepped.

“He died last year.”
Peter cleared his throat. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. It wasn’t that big of a shock. Throat cancer. But it still hurts.”

Peter found himself compelled to take Mira in his arms, to comfort her, to hug her, to tell her that everything would be all right, that the pain would someday go away, that life goes on, that it is how we deal with grief that makes us human, he wanted to soothe her with these lies and platitudes, to feel her sink into his embrace, squeeze back with all the strength in her small frame, look into his eyes, feel that spark, and her lips reach up to connect with his—

“Er . . . ”

“So,” she said, “how about you? Are you married?”

It took him a moment to recover from the change in subject. “Yes. Fourteen years.”

“How did you meet?”

“A mutual friend introduced us.”

“Fourteen years is a long time.”

“Yes, it is.”

The jasmine/lilac perfume, to which Peter had gotten accustomed, and forgotten about, abruptly intensified in the small space. Where the scent had before delighted his senses, it was
now a bit too heavy, a cloying presence in the elevator, overwhelming, a bludgeon. He coughed.

“Your perfume . . .”

“I’m not wearing perfume,” Mira said.

Peter turned and her eyes were on him, no longer polite, or detached, or sad, but hungry, ravenous, the color transmuted from deep brown to deep purple, insatiable, a violent violet. He backed away, his legs unable to work properly, stumbling into the mirrored wall, seeing a thousand thousand reflections of Mira behind her, his head stuffed, packed with cotton. A grin played across her full lips.

“What’s . . . what’s happening . . .”

“Tell me the truth, Peter,” said the myriad of Miras. “After fourteen years, does your wife still excite you?”

“What? I don’t—”

“Does she fill your thoughts, make you want to hurry home to be with her, does she satisfy your every desire? Does she set your brain afire with intellectual and sexual stimulation?”

“Why? I don’t understand what—”

“I can see unfulfilled salacity in you, Peter. You yearn for something more. Deep in your soul, you know that the only reason Darja bought the cell phone is so that she could keep track of you, make sure you don’t wander too far. You miss the intensity, the passion of those first few years of the marriage. You’re stuck, frozen in a relationship of comfort and dependability, the real fire gone for years.”

Peter wanted to tell Mira that passion is fleeting, that the physical intensity was not meant to last, that the fervor fades and softens and isn’t really what’s important anyway, that hopefully you’re left with trust and security and companionship, someone you want to grow old with. He wanted to say all this and more, but the words would not come. They caught in his throat, blocked by an invisible barrier, unable to break free.

“Darja just doesn’t do it for you anymore, does she?”

“No,” he found himself saying.
“You need something more.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you worship me?”

“Yes!”

Mira rushed forward and kissed him, hard, a sudden compression of lips and teeth and tongues. His bottom lip was bleeding, but he could not stop, locked in her embrace, drowning, asphyxiating from this inundation of desire, losing his identity in her lips, an erection stirring in his pants, the air too warm, and not enough, enough to take in, the perfume or natural scent filling every molecule of available space, the black spots dancing before his eyes, and he didn’t even notice when the elevator hummed and thrummed to life, the numbers above the doors proceeding down instead of up, and him unable to stop, to separate, to pull himself away, stuck impossibly together against his will, and she turning him so that her back was against the wall, a predicated predatory position, and the doors sliding open, ding, the ground floor. Mira pushed him away, shrieked, slapped him hard across the left cheek, bolted from the elevator, almost running down Dr. Quek, who had been patiently waiting for the last five minutes for Mira to exit the elevator, waiting to escort the young woman to her office, and the look on her face, that dropped jaw, those squinted eyes, the disbelief, the anger, and Peter knowing that not only will he be fired, but most likely brought up on charges of sexual harassment, or maybe of rape, forcing himself on a vulnerable young woman, and Darja would inform him by mail of their divorce, all of his things moved to a storage facility, and he knew that Mira had intended this all along, but unable to stop her, watching as she ran with those perfectly sculpted legs, that perfectly plaited hair streaming behind her as if from some unseen wind, running from him, down the hall, running and laughing like a sprite, a pixie, a fairy, laughing, laughing, laughing.
DASHED YELLOW LINES strobe past in my headlights, rolling to the left under the car, dividing the asphalt into neat little lanes. The trees flash by in the darkness, blurred purgatory grey. I pull the Mustang out of my lane, line up those pulsing yellow dashes dead center in my grille. I edge the wheel to the left, back to the right, taunting, teasing. The beltline around Raleigh, North Carolina is desolate at 3 a.m., free of witnesses. White Zombie roars out of the speakers: “. . . eye for an eye and a tooth for the truth . . .” I nose the Mustang past sixty, past seventy, past eighty. I’m all over the road now.

Flashing blue lights appear behind me and I smile.

I slow down and pull over to the shoulder. As I wait for the highway patrolman behind me to get out of his car, I flip open the small panel next to the clutch with the toe of my boot, exposing the red button. I unlock my seatbelt and roll down the window, inhaling all the smells of the night, brought into crystal clarity by the bitter cold.

I watch in the side mirror as the cop slams his car door and lumbers toward me. He walks with authority, his steps stiff, his arms straight down at his sides. He approaches my window with a scowl on his face, apparently annoyed just to be working at this godforsaken hour. The badge on his jacket tells me that his name is Ken Tyler. I grin up at him.

“Yes, officer?” I say in my most innocent voice. “What can I do for you?”

The outline of a bulletproof vest stretches out the cop’s thin jacket, but it won’t save him tonight. “Sir, place both your hands on the steering wheel,” he says in a rumbling tone. I do so, with a hearty slap of meat on vinyl. “Do you have any idea how fast you were going back there?”

“Absolutely none.”

“I had you clocked at eighty-two. That’s twenty-seven over the speed limit. Where were
“Nowhere in particular. Just out for a drive.”

The cop fills my window; his breathing steams in the night air, vanishing as it crosses the threshold into my car.

“License and registration please.”

When I lean over to open the glove compartment, I stomp the red button on the floorboard. I dive to the floor of the car, bruising my ribcage against the steering wheel, and cover my head with my arms. There’s a loud pop, and the car rocks to the right. The shaped charges inside the driver’s side door force the explosion outward, but I hug the floor mats anyway; shrapnel sometimes has a funny way of going where it wants. I go deaf briefly, then a harsh ringing starts in my ears.

I count to ten, sit up and look outside. The large policeman is lying halfway on the road in a spreading pool of his own blood, his legs mutilated, his chest a large red splotch. I open the car door and walk over to the cop. His gun is still in its holster, forgotten.

The cop’s wide eyes quiver in their sockets and I can hear him whispering the same word over and over: why? The same question asked by the soldiers in Vietnam and Iraq barely old enough to be considered men, the children of Hiroshima blinded and scarred by the chain-reaction of justice, the Anasazi in New Mexico right before they vanished from the Earth forever.

“You were dead already, Officer Tyler,” I whisper. “I was just making the transaction complete.”

The cop snuffles loudly as fat tears trail down his cheeks to pool in his ears. They leave streaks through the blood spattered across his face.

“You were supposed to die two months ago, in that tractor trailer explosion, remember? Your partner died instead. It wasn’t supposed to happen that way. You skipped work that day so you could have sex with your girlfriend, and Morris had to go on patrol in your place. He wasn’t scheduled to die for another ten years. You upset the balance.”

The cop is delirious; he doesn’t have much longer. I need to speed things along, make him understand before the crunch comes. “When the universal balance is upset,” I say, “I come along to set things right. I can’t bring back your partner, but I can send you to join him.”

The cop whispers something, blood bubbling through his lips, and I bend down to hear better. “Who are you?”

I smile. “I’m a symmeter, a slave to Fate. I balance the scales, equalize the equation.”

Officer Tyler’s eyes glaze over and he exhales slowly. He doesn’t inhale again.

I shiver as the LifeWeb trembles, adjusts, evens out, balances. The high is ephemeral and fleeting, but stronger than the purest cut heroin. My exhale comes out in a shudder as it passes.

I stand back up and survey the damage done to my car door; the micro-explosion of shrapnel has produced a ragged hole three feet in diameter, revealing bare frame underneath. It’s amazing what you can get in a hardware store.

I get back in the Mustang and head for home.

I pull into the parking lot of my apartment complex and take the last space on the left next to the wall, hiding the ravaged door from the casual glance. I turn off the engine and look up into the apartment on the second floor in front of me; the kitchen light is on, the blinds up, and the heavy white girl with nappy red hair is in her nightshirt, making a sandwich at the floor-to-ceiling window. I’ve passed her numerous times in the parking lot, with barely three words between the two of us.

Her name is Debra. She never was attractive, growing up awkward and overweight. Boys have stopped looking at her altogether. She has a seven-year-old beagle as her only companion, never going out at night, staying away from the world of beautiful people.

I get out of the car and slam the door, staring into Debra’s apartment. She looks out the window at the sound and meets my eyes. I stride to the stairwell and pace up to the second floor. My knock makes the metal door sound like a gong, and Debra opens it slowly. Peanut butter
crusts the side of her mouth. I lean down and lick the extra-crunchy from her face, then stand back and smile.

“May I come in?” I ask.

Debra steps aside and I enter her apartment. An ugly purple sofa sits against one wall, opposite a 32-inch television. Four tall bookshelves line the other walls, filled to overflowing with romance paperbacks and mysteries. Her beagle trots out of the bedroom and up to me, sniffs my knees. I scratch the dog behind the ears and it pants in contentment. I turn around as Debra closes the door and walks up to me.

I motion to the bedroom with my head. “Shall we?”

Inside the room I disrobe slowly, letting her stare at my thin body. When I’m completely naked, I walk over and lift her nightshirt over her head, wincing discretely at the fresh pain in my ribs. Her large breasts sag; her skin is soft and doughy. I guide her over to the bed and lay her down on her back.

I stroke her face with the back of my hand. “Don’t worry,” I say, “it will only hurt for a second.”

Debra’s thighs ripple as I pound into her, and she turns her head to the side. She bites her lower lip and lets out a small cry as her hymen gives way, her short nails digging furrows into my shoulders. The LifeWeb adjustment coincides with my orgasm, momentarily rendering me blind and mute. I sense the vastness of the Web itself, stretching far past our solar system to the four corners of God. It constantly heaves and shudders, vibrating with an infinite number of plucks from all over its endless reach. After a long moment, the feeling subsides, and I’m back in my frail human body again, lying atop Debra. I pull out and roll to the side to catch my breath.

“Do you want to hear a story?” I pant quietly, not wanting to spoil the moment.

She nods her head. Her red hair is plastered to the pillow with sweat.

“For years now,” I say, “scientists have theorized about how the universe works. Some believe that it will continue to expand until every star and planet is so far apart that journeying from one place to the next will become impossible, and we will be completely isolated.”
Debra’s breathing is steady next to me; I have her full attention.

“Others say that the universe expands and contracts, forever swinging from one side of the pendulum to the other, achieving a cosmic balance through positive and negative cancellation. My boss likes that one. But it’s not what really happens. The truth is that the universe will stop expanding and begin contracting, cramming tighter and tighter until everything is ultimately destroyed in the Big Crunch, kind of like the opposite of the Big Bang. And that makes me happy, because I won’t be needed any longer.”

Debra puts her knees down and rolls onto her side, her back to me, pulling up into a fetal position.

“That’s not much of a story,” she says in a quiet voice, tinged with a soft Southern accent.

I chuckle and lace my fingers behind my head. “No, you’re right, it’s not. But I wanted to share it with you.”

I wait until I hear Debra snoring lightly, then get out of her bed. My clothes are crumpled on the floor at the footboard; I dress quickly and leave the apartment. I want to stay and tell her all the mysteries of the universe, that she would have died alone and unloved in seven years from ovarian cancer. That perhaps now she’ll have the confidence to leave her apartment at night and meet new people, and that one of those new people might find her attractive. That maybe he’ll notice her looking pale and clammy one day and convince her to go to the hospital. I want to tell Debra how important she is, how necessary Officer Ken Tyler was tonight, in maintaining the balance. Instead, I tiptoe down the stairs and back to my own ascetic apartment.

Inside, I click on the halogen lamp. I walk over and stand before the headshot of the Prince. I had the portrait framed years ago, not long after the Master started contacting me. He always finds unusual ways of telling me what my next assignment will be. I make the sign of the Libra and descend to my knees. I press my hands to the floor, close my eyes and take a deep breath. Something in the kitchen is rotting.

A blue light fills my soul as the presence of the Master manifests; my skin prickles as all my body hairs stand on end. I gaze up at the portrait.
YOU HAVE DONE WELL TONIGHT, the voice of Fate booms through the Prince’s mustachioed mouth. The portrait’s from his Purple Rain phase. YOU EQUALIZED TWO LIVES, THOUGH THE GIRL WAS BALANCED AHEAD OF SCHEDULE.

“Yes, Master.”

YOUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT IS IN ANN ARBOR, TWO DAYS FROM NOW. YOU WILL TRAIN A NEW CONSCRIPT IN THE ARTS OF SYMMETRY. DO NOT FAIL ME.

“A new conscript? Master, I don’t think I’m ready . . . ”

YOU ARE READY ENOUGH. SHE WILL BE TRAINED.

“But Master, what about my car? And new supplies?”

YOU WILL BE PROVIDED FOR. FATE IS ALL.

“Yes, Master.”

The drive to Michigan is long and lonely. I play through all the CDs in my car—Nine Inch Nails, Led Zeppelin, Soundgarden, White Zombie and David Bowie—halfway through the first day. After it gets dark, I stop at a rest area somewhere in Ohio and sleep. The windows are one-way tinted; I can see out but you can’t see in.

That was one of the new amenities on the Mustang I discovered upon waking up that afternoon. The tinting, my repaired door, fog headlamps, and a week’s worth of beef jerky and bottled water. Inside the glove compartment was a wrist harness for a retractable blade, six inches long and serrated. The harness fits perfectly around my right wrist.

I arrive at South Main Street in Ann Arbor by 4:20 the next afternoon. The downtown area plays at being a big city; trendy restaurants, clothes shops, and chain after chain of corporate coffeehouses line the street. At night, the sidewalks will be choked with pedestrians, the restaurants full, the air buzzing with the collective need to have a good time. But I won’t be here that long.

I make several right turns and end up on Observatory Street. A big leafy oak tree spills shadow onto the road, and I park underneath it. The giant cemetery to my left sprawls out for
acres, with a wrought iron fence seven feet tall around the perimeter. I step out of the car, pat my back pocket for my wallet, then walk up to the gates.

I stroll through the graves, idly looking at the markers. Here, James Burrill Angell, dead in 1916, US Minister to China and Turkey. There, Justus McKinstry, dead in 1897, a Civil War Union general. I meander through the grasses for three hours before she appears from behind a cedar tree. Waif thin, blonde hair chopped short and severe as if she cut it herself, bedecked in a thrift-store red dress. She looks around wildly, gnaws on her fingernails, and walks like a newborn colt with pigeon toes. The new conscript. My pupil.

“Hello,” I say, and she jerks her body toward my voice. My steps are slow and careful; I don't want to spook her. The newly dead are often skittish and confused. I remember my own second birth, waking up in a Dumpster, half a block from where my life had just been terminated with the unfortunate snap of an elevator cable, though I didn't know it then. I wandered for a week, begging for change and sleeping in cold alleys, before the Master first communicated with me. I was standing in front of a bar, watching television through the window, when I realized that Ellen Degeneres was talking to me from the TV screen; I could hear her in my head. She revealed to me my name and my function and the existence of the LifeWeb, the endless sticky fibers that connect every human being to every other human being. I have since learned that the Master is not bound by gender, but manifests through either sex as he sees fit. I was about to drop to my knees in supplication when the bar owner erupted out the door and frightened me off with a crowbar. If someone had been there to guide me, the transition into symmetry would have been much smoother. At least I can use my knowledge to help along this frightened new inductee.

“Hello?” she says, her voice wavery, as if she's about to cry. “Are you real?”

I smile and take another step forward. “As real as you are.” I take my hands out of my pockets and hold them palm up so she can see they are empty.

“Who are you?”

“I'm here to help,” I say, my voice smooth as velvet.
“Are you from the institution?”

She’s confused. That or she thinks she’s crazy. “No, I’m not from the institution. I’m a friend.”

“What’s your name?” she asks, tilting her head and swatting at the air, though I can see no insects.

I tell her, then ask for hers.

“Sandrine,” she says, her gaze wandering and distracted.

“Like the industrial solvent,” I say. I’m only twenty feet away now.

“The what?”

“Never mind.”

“Can you see it?” she says, then closes her eyes. “It’s everywhere.”

“Yes, Sandrine,” I say, stepping within conversation distance. “It’s what brought me here to find you.”

She opens her eyes languidly and surprises me by not jumping at my sudden vicinity. Dark circles ring her eyes like a raccoon, and she has a small tattoo of the word PURPLE done in green ink down the left side of her neck.

“You were looking for me?”

“I was sent here by our Master to teach you. That thing you see around you is the LifeWeb. The Master brought you back from death so that you may tweak the fibers of the Web and affect symmetry, balance.”


“What?” She can’t have been put to work yet. That’s why I’m here. If she’s already adjusting the LifeWeb, the Master has been in contact with her. Then why was I sent here? My stomach drops and my skin goes cold as I realize the truth. I grab her by the arms and she whimpers and squirms in my grip. She kicks me hard in the left knee, but I remain standing.

“It’s because of Debra, isn’t it? Because I equalized her ahead of schedule. I was sent here
so that you could discipline me in His name, right? Isn’t that right, Sandrine?”

Her right arm slips from my grip and she jerks away. As I reach for her shoulder, the movement activates the spring-loaded knife in my wrist holster. The serrated blade plunges deep into her throat, severing her jugular vein and splitting the green word on her neck into PUR and PLE. Her body tenses and her eyes go wide. She collapses to the ground and tries to say something, but all that comes out is a gurgle. And soon, the gurgling stops.

My knee and my head throb in unison. There is no rush from a LifeWeb adjustment. All I feel is hollowed out and empty. I’ve done something terrible.

I’ve permanently unbalanced the universe.

TWO DAYS LATER, and I’m at a Greek pizza restaurant in East Lansing, eating a messy gyro and watching the news on a television bolted to the wall. The top story: a young woman found murdered in a cemetery near downtown Ann Arbor. Her name was Sandrine Delaterre. She was an escaped mental patient with a history of schizophrenia and dementia. The anchor finishes the report, announcing a number to call if you have tips for law enforcement, then glares into the camera, into me. His gaze is accusatory. He knows.

I turn and look at the Greek restaurant owner and the cook behind him. They stare at me and whisper words between themselves. I finish the rest of my gyro quickly and limp out of the restaurant.

My car races down Grand River Avenue, and I hide my face from the drivers who pass by, the wind whipping through the windows of the Mustang and roaring in my ears. I pass over a bridge and soon come to a shopping mall on the left. I park in front of the Schuler Bookstore, and take the mall entrance next to it. Something pulls at me, compelling me to go inside.

The corridor smells like the combined odor of a dozen clothing stores, fresh turpentine, and sour smoke. The air is warm and stale. The lighting is dim. I can hear shouting and the sounds of things breaking from further in the mall. The hairs on the nape of my neck prickle.

Emergency lights illuminate my lurching passage into the mall proper. The corridor
empties into a crossroads of shops. To the right is a Sears with the entrance cage drawn down and the glass doors sealed shut. To the left is chaos.

A young white executive helps a Hispanic boy pick up a metal trash can and throw it through a Radio Shack window. Women run out of the Saks 5th Avenue loaded down with dresses and slacks. A fire is burning in an Eckerd Drugstore. High school kids appropriate a TCBY stand and empty frozen yogurt from the tanks right onto the floor. The air is thick with panic and mayhem.

I should be overwhelmed with such a massive confluence of disorder, but my senses are numb to the LifeWeb. The rioters are blank slates, their connections to each other unknowable to me. This is the price for imbalance.

The Master will never stop searching for me. He has most likely assembled all the symmeters in the country to find me. And now the law hunts me as well, as confirmed by the news report I just saw. The forces of order pursue an agent of chaos, and there's only one ending to that scenario. I have nothing to lose by giving myself to entropy; I have already damaged the LifeWeb irreparably. It can't make any difference if I shatter a window, or set clothes afire, or bash in the face of one of the security guards attempting to control the looters. As a servant of the law, and ultimately of the Master, the guard is now my enemy.

I take a deep breath, and lose myself in the crowd.
IT WAS Wade’s seventh birthday. There were cake and ice cream and presents in the backyard, and a colorful piñata shaped like a donkey, and twenty of Wade’s friends from school, and his mom had even hired a clown, a lazy clown, and Wade could smell alcohol when the clown bent down and breathed, “Happy birthday.” Crap at balloon animals, he was winded after blowing one up, and upon failing to twist or turn or knot it into a dog or giraffe or something, he would present the sausage of air and latex with a weak flourish, “It’s a snake!”

Upstairs, in the house, Wade’s dad finished packing. The lame clown forgotten and left to wheeze on a lawn chair and nip from a cheap silver flask, Wade asked his dad where he was going, why he wasn’t down at the party.

“Important business, kiddo,” said his dad. “Time traveling business. My first mission.” He closed the suitcase and pointed out the window to the ‘84 Chevy Celebrity, bandage brown, rusted through, the fabric inside the roof coming unglued, hanging down, a drapery of obscurity.

“That’s our car,” Wade said.

“Oh no, kiddo, it’s my time machine. I can chat with Marie Curie, or punch Hitler in the face, or have tea with an archeoptyrx. I can go anywhere I want, and any when.”

“All your stuff is packed inside.”

“It’s a long trip. I may be gone for a while.”

“But if it’s a time machine, can’t you return to right after when you left?”

Wade’s dad ruffled his hair and smiled. “My son, the genius.”

“So why was Mom yelling at you and calling you names?”

“Oh, that. She’s . . . just upset because I’m leaving, kiddo. She wants me to stay. But I
can't. I've got some big responsibilities now, saving-the-world kind of responsibilities, and I don't want to shirk them.

“Two weeks from today,” said Wade’s mom from the doorway, appearing from nowhere, a better trick than blowing up non-existent balloon animals. “Like it says in the custody agreement.”

“Right, right.” Wade’s dad distracted, lost in his thoughts. “Well, I suppose I’ll be off then. Dinosaur hugs.”

Wade gripped his dad’s head, and vice versa, and they clonked foreheads, both saying, “Clonk!” at the same time.

“Happy birthday, kiddo,” said Wade’s dad, and he grabbed his suitcase. Out the door, in the car, and it sputtered and farted blue smoke, and then it was around the corner and his dad was gone.

It was Wade’s twenty-first birthday. He sat in a bar called the Café of the Asphyxiated Borough, a hole-in-the-wall near campus, decorated by a woodcut of two disembodied hands strangling a donkey, he sat on a stool made of cracked leather and got legally drunk for the first time, with his father. Splitting a pitcher of watered-down lager, eating peanuts with way too much salt, they talked about Wade’s future. A television bolted to the wall played a baseball game that everyone ignored.

“So you’re really going to be a vet, huh?”

“Yeah,” Wade said. “That’s the goal. Graduate school first, though.”

“All kinds of animals, even the little ones?”

“Especially the little ones. Even hamsters. I don’t want to be sticking my hands into cows and horses forever.”

Wade’s dad began to sing, “A horse is a horse, of course, of course . . .”

“Oh, Jesus.”
“What?”

“You’re doing it again.”

Wade’s dad smiled and signaled for another pitcher. “Yes, I always seem to be embarrassing you, don’t I?”

“Not all the time,” Wade said. “Just most of the time.”

“Like the time I took you to the natural sciences museum, and knocked over that display of stuffed birds?”

“Yeah. Like that.”

“Or the time I was in the stands at your little league game, and spilled beer all over my pants, so it looked like I peed in them?”

“You know, you really shouldn’t have had beer at a children’s baseball game in the first place.”

“Or the time I took you to the steakhouse and you told me you were a vegetarian.”

“I was a vegetarian. Am.”

“You know, I was kind of hoping you’d go into the family business.”

“Well, lawyering is all right for Mom, but it’s not really my—”

“No, no, I wasn’t talking about Mom.”

“Oh, not this again.”

“Come on! You’d get to see the world. Experience history for yourself, feel like you have purpose to your life.”

“Dad, would you cut that shit out? I’m not seven anymore. It’s just a story. A dumb story.”

Wade’s dad looked into his beer. Wade had never seen him look so old, so worn down, as if he’d already lived several lifetimes, his hair a shocking white, the crow’s feet and laugh lines etched into skin by chisel and time.


They finished the pitcher, then went their separate ways, Wade to his dorm room by campus bus, and his dad by cab to a roach-infested apartment downtown.
It was Wade’s wedding day. He was marrying a pretty Chinese girl named Xia-Qi. His mother had planned the event to perfection, driving him a bit crazy with it all actually, and his fiancée too, with the flowers and the catering and the venue and the band and the minister and the dress and the cake and all the minutiae. Wade and his fiancée wanted a small affair, but it ballooned from thirty people, to sixty, to a hundred fifty, to two hundred, and Wade didn’t even care anymore, he just wanted it all over with so he could start a life with his new bride. His mother, wanting to include Xia-Qi’s family in the celebration, since they were flying all the way from Hong Kong, had decorated the Wegener House with Chinese lanterns of red and gold, some labeled “love,” some “happiness,” some “prosperity,” and the flowers were all different vibrant colors, no white because white was a bad luck color, and they were serving green tea and egg rolls alongside the numerous other heavy hors d’oeuvres. Xia-Qi’s family seemed pleased with the references to their culture.

The ceremony over, and Wade didn’t trip over his shoes at all, and said all the right things in all the right places, and smiled a big smile after kissing his new bride on the lips, even slipping her a little tongue, and they walked back into the house from the courtyard and prepared to meet and greet the two hundred guests. Dozens of “It’s so good to see you,” “Thank you for coming,” “I’m glad you enjoyed the ceremony,” “Yes, we got the fondue pot you sent,” “I’m sorry, I don’t know where the bathroom is” and “The food is right through there.” There was hardly time to eat because everyone wanted to talk to him, or give him advice, or ask where they were going on the honeymoon (Greece). Relatives, friends, or strangers continually put drinks in his hand, and the quantity of alcohol and lack of food were producing a vertigo, a spinning room, a loss of equilibrium. And so Wade didn’t notice his father approach the table and start talking to his new wife.

“So you own a clinic?”

“Yes,” she said, “Wade and I are going to run it together.”

“You two met in veterinary school.”
“That’s right.”

“Pets?”

“Mostly pets. Dogs, cats, hamsters. The occasional turtle or rabbit. We have an iguana in a terrarium in the waiting area who likes to sun himself all day under the heat lamp.”

“You’re from Hong Kong?”

“Yes,” she said.

“So you know all about the exotic medical treatments over there?”

“Like?”

“Like dried oviduct fat of a Chinese forest frog for its curative powers,” said Wade’s dad. He said, “Ground-up deer antlers or shark bone powder to boost vitality.” He said, “Desiccated tiger penis.”

And without the slightest hesitation, she said, “Yes. I know about all of those.”

“Have you ever used any of them?”

“No. My grandparents will sometimes use the frog, but that’s about it. And since deciding to become a vet, it’s hard for me to use any animal products now. The closest would be tiger balm for sore muscles, but that’s not made from tigers.”

“Tiger blam,” Wade said, and the husband and wife smiled at a shared joke.

“It looks like you’ve picked a winner, kiddo,” said Wade’s dad. “You make sure to hang on to this one.”

Wade smiled, lightheaded, and burst out laughing.

“You know what story this man used to tell me when I was a kid?” he slurred.

“Wade,” said his dad, “I don’t think this is the time—”

“He said he was a time traveler!”

“Wade,” said his new wife, “honey, are you feeling all right?”

“A time traveler! Can you believe that? He didn’t want to admit to being a bad husband and a bad father and so he made up this story about trekking up and down the space-time continuum, making himself all important and not accepting any responsibility for hey let go o’ me!”
Wade jerked his arm away, and the contents of his champagne glass splashed over the front of his father’s ill-fitting and flyblown suit. Hushes from the crowd. The band even stopped playing, “Night Train” in mid-bar.

Wade’s father looked down at the slowly spreading stain and said, “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

Wade sat down, not quite sure what had just happened.

“I’ll leave,” said Wade’s dad.

“No, please,” Xia-Qi said. “Please don’t go. We’ll get some club soda for it.”

“No no, this was a mistake.” He turned. “Congratulations, son,” he said, and left.

It was Wade’s dad’s last day alive. The hospital stank of industrial cleanser and urine and death. The terminal ward, where his dad was kept, was a fog of depression, the air itself bringing you down. All around were the sniffles or muffled cries of the soon-to-be survivors, those left behind when loved ones passed on.

Every so often a doctor or nurse would come in, check the chart, inspect the beeping machines, do something with the I.V. Wade saw a detachment in their eyes, a coldness, a defense mechanism for the pervading climate of death they had to face every day. The candy stripers were the only perky visitors, though they had nothing of substance to say.

Diagnosis: a worn-out heart. The doctors couldn’t figure it out. “It’s like his organs are twice as old as they should be,” they said. “He’s sixty-two, but his heart shows the strain of a centenarian.”

Jet-lagged from the twenty-five hour flight from Hong Kong, Wade barely noticed when his father awoke from a deep sleep.

“Kiddo?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“When’d you get here?”

“About an hour ago. Right from the airport.”

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“Where’s your lovely wife?”

“The doctors said she shouldn’t fly at eight months. It could hurt the baby.”

“Right, right.”

“She wanted to be here.”

A weak smile. “I bet she did. Give her a kiss from me when you get back.”

“I will.”

“Sorry I won’t be around to see that new baby of yours.”

“Dad, don’t talk like that.”

“But it’s true. I’ll be surprised if I last the day.”

“Dad . . . ”

“What do you think happens?” his dad said. “You know, when we go?”

“I don’t know.”

“I read up a lot on the afterlife, even talked to some theologians and philosophers in my travels. No one seems to agree.

“There’s the Christian Heaven, or Hell, where either you have paradise and get to see your family again, or little men in red pajamas poke you with pitchforks. But then I think, what if I get to Heaven and my really annoying relatives are there, and they won’t leave me alone, and I can’t go anywhere else because, well, it’s Heaven. I’d almost prefer pitchforks to that.

“There could be Buddhist reincarnation, which I like a lot. They don’t see people as having souls, but more of a collection of sensory inputs, and that you never truly die, but change from one form to another, just like you’re not the same person as you are when you’re six years old as you are when you’re sixty, it’s the same with becoming a new person. We are reborn every day, if you think like this, with your cells constantly dying and being replaced, every seven years you’re a whole new person, and so it’s not much of a leap. Your karma determines your new body. With my luck I’d probably become a snail.

“Or there could be nothingness, annihilation. All your experiences, all your memories, gone, poof, just like that, the void of emptiness. Your body returned to the earth to feed the
worms and enrich the soil, but your soul, your identity, is just gone, lost forever.”

Wade started to cry, unable to hold it in, the exhaustion and the sadness of this place and the discussion of the afterlife just too much. He covered his face with his hands. He thought of the helpless ignorance of what lay beyond, that undiscovered country, that awfully big adventure. He rested his head on the bed, and his father patted his head.

“Shush now, don’t be sad. If I come back as a snail, I’ll visit you every day.”

Wade sniffed loudly.

“I’m sorry I called you a bad father.”

“Oh don’t worry about that. I wasn’t the best father, though I tried.”

“I know you did.”

“Besides, I’ve seen you, with your family, years from now. You speak Cantonese and your son grows up into a handsome man, a book publisher, and he visits every other weekend with his girlfriend, who becomes his wife, a beautiful woman, who looks like she should model lingerie but she’s a physicist. You and your wife grow happy and content, running the animal hospital even into your old age, revered by your community as the vets who are truly there for their patients. Your grandson, the piano prodigy, he has his father’s eyes, your eyes, my eyes, the eyes of every male in our family line. It’s the eyes, Wade, the eyes where we’ll live forever, passed on from father to son until the end of time, the eyes as immortality, as an afterlife in this world.”
BEFORE I ASKED my wife Nikki to marry me, I felt it important to get the blessings of her parents. This is how my father did it in Colombia, and his father before him, so this is how I wanted to do it. Nikki’s father was easy, very accommodating. A nice man. He always made me feel at home when I came to visit, and his hospitality was unmatched by anyone I have met before or since. He laughed and clapped me on the back and said he appreciated me asking. Nikki’s first husband did not perform this courtesy, and their marriage only lasted fourteen months. Not that I am saying there is a connection, but there you go.

So with her father’s blessing attained, I went to call on Nikki’s mother, deep in the North Carolina side of the Great Dismal Swamp. We had talked on the telephone several times—terse conversations that never amounted to much. But we had yet to meet face to face, so I was nervous. I did not know if I should bring up the marriage right away, or attempt small talk first. How do you tell a woman whom you hardly know that you want to marry her daughter?

I missed the turnoff from Route 642 the first time, and had to make a three-point turn that almost got my little Honda stuck in the mud. But I got turned around and started down a long and narrow trail through the swamp. It was only wide enough for one car at a time, and I kept praying that another car would not approach from the opposite direction. The tea-colored water was close enough on either side that I was sure it overflowed the little road during heavy rains. Cypress trees stood beyond, covered in a brownish moss, making the light eerie, purplish and flat.

After twenty or so minutes, I came to a small log cabin set off from the road, with smoke rising from the chimney, though it was springtime. I parked the car next to a rusted red pickup truck and got out. The trees were so thick there that I could only see bits of sky, and the air was
still humid though the temperature was cooler. The air smelled of living plants and decaying organic matter, tinged with sulfur. A host of dragonflies buzzed and spun around me. At certain angles, their wings caught the light and threw off a rainbow of luminescent colors.

I approached the door to the cabin and knocked. Tales of my youth came to mind, stories of witches and medicine women who lived alone in remote places, but I had never been afraid of the bruja in Colombia; one had even made a sachet to protect me when I first traveled here to the States with my parents. But possibly American witches were different. It was an irrational fear, I know this, but like I said, I had never before met a woman who willingly lived in a swamp.

Marshall, Nikki’s mother, opened the door. She was dressed in denim and plaid, and shook hands like a man, strong, testing my grip with her own. Her hair was tied back in a pony’s tail, and there were very few wrinkles on her face. She looked too young to be Nikki’s mother, but like a sibling instead. I wondered how old she had been when she had given birth to my intended. She invited me inside, and poured lemonade for the both of us.

“So you’re Luis, huh?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I have a feeling I know why you’re here,” she said.

“Really?”

“Man doesn’t drive all this way for the lemonade, tasty as it may be. You and Nikki have been together for a couple years now. You looking for my permission to marry her?”

“Yes,” I said. “I would like your blessing.”

She walked to the window and looked out at her swamp. I was struck by how many animal pelts covered the walls of her cabin: white-tailed deer mostly, but also a great black bear. There was a small cast-iron wood-burning stove in the corner, but that was the only thing that would keep her warm in the winter months.

“Do you know why I left Nikki and her father?” she asked.

I shook my head. “It is none of my business. Your reasons are your own. I know Nikki has
gotten over it."

She chuckled quietly. “You think so, do you? Somehow I doubt you ever get over being abandoned.”

“Maybe.”

She walked back over and sat down at the table again. “All right, tell you what. You stay here one night, and I’ll give you my blessing. I don’t get much company out here.”

“But I have no change of clothes.”

“Two days in the same shirt and pants aren’t going to kill you. We got a deal?”

I shook her hand again, and she sent me outside to collect firewood for the night. She had chopped it already, laid it in careful stacks against the side of the house. I gathered as many pieces as I could handle and brought them inside. She cooked us both a meal of blackened fish and rice, better than any I’d ever eaten in a restaurant.

We talked for the rest of the evening, mostly about me. She wanted to know what I was doing with my life, I think to make sure I could provide for her daughter, though her daughter was very capable of providing for herself. Marshall told me how she was named after her father, an old Southern tradition, and that every summer in the swamp, at least one hunter would get accidentally shot by another hunter. If she was close enough, she would try to help, even one time carrying a man all the way back to her house and driving him into town to the doctor. But some accidents she happened on much later, finding a rotting body slowly being consumed by the swamp.

When it was time to sleep, she made up the couch for me in the main room, then retired to her own bedroom. I was exhausted from the drive that day and from trying to be interesting that night, but my mind was active, keeping me awake. Insects and frogs made noises outside, and I could hear the wind rustling in the trees. After a long while, I managed to close my eyes.

When I opened them moments later, or what felt like moments later, everything was dead silence. There were no sounds coming from inside or outside. I cleared my throat to make sure I had not gone deaf. After slipping my shoes on as quietly as I could, I stepped out into the chilly
night. It was absolutely still. The world had become too calm. I did not know what time it was, but the stars still shone overhead, so I guessed it to be in the early hours of the morning. Though even with the starshine, the air seemed darker than it should have been, as if I were seeing it through a translucent cloth sack.

This is when I saw the canoe.

It was white, the most unearthly white I had ever seen, like bleached bone. It seemed to glow in the darkness, to give off its own illumination as it flowed through the water not fifty feet from where I stood. One moment, it appeared empty, as if a current were carrying it along, then in the next moment, a young woman sat inside, holding a lantern in front of her. Inside the lantern, the light shifted and moved, as if she had captured a handful of fireflies. She wore a brown cloth shirt and buckskin leggings, and her hair was tied into two braids on either side of her face. As she got closer, I saw that she was very pretty, a ghostly Native American beauty.

I was not scared. Back in Colombia, I had encountered spirits of the dead a number of times, and had never been harmed. She approached the shore near Marshall’s log cabin, and stepped out onto the ground. There was electricity in the air, and the hairs on my arms stiffened. The boggy smell of the swamp was replaced by the scent of orange blossoms.

She stepped lightly over to where I stood and looked deep into my face. There was such sadness in her eyes. I kept still under her scrutiny, fearing that movement might spook her, make her run away. After several long moments, she took a step back, and the expression on her face showed that I was not who she had been looking for. But then she smiled, stretched up and kissed me lightly on the cheek; it felt like the kiss of a dragonfly. A warmth spread from that spot over my entire face, a pleasant heat. Her gaze went past my right shoulder, and I turned to see Marshall standing in the doorway of her cabin, wearing a threadbare silver nightgown and holding a plate full of dandelions.

“I see you’ve met the Lady,” Marshall said. She walked over and presented the plate to the ghost lady, who took a dandelion from the top of the pile and nibbled on the fluff. As she chewed thoughtfully, Marshall said, “I’ve been feeding her every night for almost ten years now,
and she won’t eat anything else. I wish I could do more for her, maybe help in her search, but she never accepts my help.”

“Who is she looking for?”

“Her husband.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died.”

I turned back to the Lady as she was finishing the last flower on the plate, and she smiled at Marshall. Then she turned and stepped back into her canoe, once more picking up the firefly lantern. The canoe backed off of the bank, moved by unseen hands, then drifted off deeper into the swamp. She passed beyond a grove of trees and was gone from sight.

There is a break here in my memory. I woke on Marshall’s couch, with no idea how I had gotten back there. The light coming through the windows revealed the brightness of morning, and the analog clock on the wall indicated 9:15.

Marshall walked out from the bedroom and said good morning. She was already dressed and ready for the day, as if she had been up for hours. She worked quickly in the kitchen, making a pot of strong chicory coffee and frying up eggs and bacon. The smells made my stomach growl. I told Marshall about the events of the previous night as she cooked us breakfast, and she listened silently all the way to the end.

“That sounds like quite a dream,” she said.

“A dream? But it could not have been. She kissed me right here.” I pointed to a spot on my right cheek, directly beneath my eye, which still pulsed with warmth.

“Dreams can sometimes feel real,” she said. “Anyway, it appears the Lady in the Canoe liked you.”

“I got this impression also.”

“Well,” she said, placing a plate of food in front of me, covered with eggs and bacon instead of dandelions, “you kept your bargain, and I’m happy to give you my blessing. I hope you and Nikki are very happy together.”
Through her tone, it was not clear whether she truly believed it had been a dream, or whether she had been waiting for the Lady in the Canoe to approve of me before giving her blessing. I found that it did not matter; I had received the blessing. I ate my breakfast and drank my coffee, then bid Marshall goodbye. She did not ask if she would be invited to the wedding, and I did not tell her. It was not my place. If Nikki wanted her there, she would ask Marshall herself, though perhaps I would try to persuade her; sometimes, people are too stubborn to admit the truth to each other, that they miss and need one another.

In the rear view mirror of my little Honda, Marshall stood in the doorway of her cabin, arms crossed, the picture of independence. She looked for all the world as a woman not to be trifled with, but her eyes, her mouth, showed a sadness, a vulnerability similar to that of the Lady in the Canoe. Her image got smaller the farther I drove back over the one-lane path through the swamp, eventually disappearing altogether, indistinguishable from the trees.
“SOLIPSISM’S JUST SUCH an interesting concept,” Kelly said. “I can’t believe you’ve never heard of it before.”

“Yeah, well,” Raymond said. He drummed his fingers on his left leg. His stonewashed blue jeans screamed of wear: holes in both knees, color faded almost into white, cuffs frayed into little denim mustaches around his ankles. Kelly sat next to him on the courtyard bench in the bright afternoon, and wore the same things she always did: khakis, a button-up striped shirt, and a red vest. Raymond thought she wore the vest to bed.

“I mean, the whole idea that you’re the center of the universe and every single person, place or thing is there just for your benefit, all figments of your imagination . . . it’s fascinating, yeah?”

“I guess,” he mumbled.

“Say I was a solipsist. You would be nothing more than a phantom created for my amusement, not really there, just kind of floating in my mind like some vaporous ghost.”

“Sounds egotistical to me,” Raymond said.

“Ah, I got you talking,” Kelly said, smiling. “Yes, it does sound egotistical; that’s why I don’t completely subscribe to the theory. But just think of it! You could do anything!”

Raymond laid his head in his hands and massaged his temples. Kelly’s enthusiasm gave him a headache sometimes.

“If you think about it, all little kids are solipsists. Whenever they play peek-a-boo, the person they’re playing with is momentarily gone, appearing seconds later. Like if I believed in solipsism, if I turned away from you, you would no longer exist. You would only become real
when I believed that you did. Let’s try out the theory; close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Go ahead, close your eyes.”

“What if I don’t want to close my eyes?”

Kelly exhaled. “Jesus, Ray, just play along. Why do you have to make everything so diffi-
cult?”

“All right, okay, I’m closing my eyes, see?” It was a sunny afternoon, so the darkness was
not complete behind his lids. Little spots of black danced and streaked in front of him, like when
he would rub his eyelids too hard before going to sleep at night. Several long moments passed
before he realized it was quiet.

“Kelly?”

There was no response, and the hair at the base of his neck stood on end. Rationally, he
knew Kelly was just talking nonsense again, but what if she was right? What if he had just erased
her? He opened his eyes and saw the empty bench next to him. Some birds chirped in the oak
tree nearby, and the bushes behind him rustled, but Kelly was nowhere to be seen. Raymond
jumped off the bench.

“Kelly, knock it off, okay? You’re starting to freak me out.”

The bushes giggled and rustled again. Kelly popped up with her crooked smile and
laughed. Raymond sat back on the bench and Kelly joined him.

“Oh, Ray, that was the funniest damn thing. You should have seen your face.”

“Yeah. Hilarious.”

“Oh, don’t be mad. All right, now it’s my turn.”

Raymond got ready to spring off the bench when Kelly closed her eyes, to take off running
and not stop until he got back to his dorm room, to leave her there by herself. That would show
her. He tensed his legs in preparation, but as her eyelids closed, time seemed to slow and then stop, and objects lost their color, and then their shape, with Kelly and the bench and the trees and the entire courtyard losing all detail and blurring into nothingness, and then the entire world brightened to a luminous white which surrounded him on all sides. Raymond tried to look down at himself but discovered that he had no body. Reality had just been obliterated. Or maybe he was dead.

This was a situation that would normally have panicked him, or perhaps driven him insane, but there was something soothing about the whiteness. It had a comfortable womb-like quality; he felt warm and loved. Time seemed to have no meaning in this place, and Raymond was content to exist here forever.

A streak of grey flashed across his vision, and he momentarily thought it a hallucination or a remnant of his imagination, but soon another followed, then another. The streaks gathered and formed shapes, first circles, then large stars which spun erratically. The whiteness darkened to grey, while the stars glowed orange and then yellow. Raymond felt pressure against his eyes, surprised at the sensation, and realized that the jumping and spinning stars were once again the result of him rubbing his eyelids too hard. He could feel his fists being removed from his face, and his arms lowering to his sides. He opened his eyes.

The first thing he realized was that he was lying on his back, staring up at a vaulted cabin ceiling with exposed rafters. A cool breeze drifted over him from an open window. The floor underneath his back was hard, and he was developing a small ache. Raymond could smell apple pie, but could not explain how he knew it was cooling on the sill of the open window that was admitting the breeze. A man abruptly entered his field of vision, looking down at the supine Raymond with some dissatisfaction.

“Back again, eh?” the man said in a slight British accent and harrumphed. “Thought you’d last a bit longer.”
Raymond pulled himself off the floor and stood up straight. The cabin around him looked like it had been built fifty years before. The appliances and furniture all had that Ozzie-and-Harriet feeling to him, as if they were designed before people with good taste. He stood in a combination open-plan kitchen and living room, with another room located off of it, presumably the bedroom. Everything had a rustic feeling, and Raymond could see a sprawling forest out the window, and, yes, a freshly baked apple pie cooling there at the sill.

The British man leaned against the kitchen sink in a full tweed suit, thin-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. A woman stood next to him in a charcoal pantsuit, wiping her hands on a dishrag. They stared at him as if they knew him, and exuded disappointment.

“Have we met?” Raymond said.

The man sighed loudly. “We go through this every time, and frankly I’m a bit sick of it.”

“Now Reginald,” the woman said, placing a hand on her husband’s arm. “Take it easy on the boy. He obviously doesn’t remember.”

“That’s exactly the problem! He never remembers! Why do you and I have to be the only ones to welcome these poor bloody bastards every single time they return?”

“Because we’re the parents, dear. We’re expected to play host.”

“Excuse me,” Raymond said. “But could you maybe tell me what’s going on? What is this place?”

The man called Reginald threw his hands in the air and stomped out the door of the cabin, muttering obscenities under his breath. The woman turned to Raymond and smiled. “Please excuse my husband. He doesn’t have the patience that he once had. You’ve been here many times, but never recall the experience. My name is Rachel, by the way. I’m Kelly’s mother.”

Raymond shook her hand and said, “Where am I?”

“We’re not exactly sure. It could be a metaphysical plane of existence, or perhaps just a
tiny fragment of Kelly’s upper brain function. This is the holding area, where we wait until she brings us into existence.”

“So hang on, you mean all that stuff she was blabbing about being a solipsist, that was true?”

Rachel nodded. “I’m afraid so. We only exist because she thinks us up. Sometimes we wait here for years to be called. There’s no telling when you’ll go back.”

“Won’t it be when she opens her eyes again? That can’t be more than a few seconds, right?”

She shook her head. “Time runs differently here. You can understand why Reginald was so upset with you; he was hoping that the discussion about solipsism might make her realize how she has made us all prisoners here. And since we forget everything about this place once we pass the threshold to Kelly’s world, we have relearn everything when we come back. It really is not a happy life.”

Raymond sat down on one of the kitchen chairs. “This a lot to take. So how long has it been since you’ve seen her?”

Rachel thought for a moment, then said, “A very long time. Since she went away to college, we’ve seen her less and less.”

“Are we the only people here?”

Rachel laughed, a high musical sound that made Raymond feel immediately at ease. “Oh, no, dear. The holding area is quite vast; Kelly has quite an active imagination and has created many different worlds and literally hundreds of thousands of people to populate them. You could live for a billion years and never discover it all.”

“So if you’ve got such a huge reality to explore, why are you unhappy?”

Rachel sighed and looked to the ceiling. “Think of it this way: you’ve been told you’re going to die sometime soon, but not when or how. You’d be constantly looking over your shoul-
der, jumping at every unexpected noise, terrified that any moment could be the one in which you go. Being called back to Kelly’s world is death of a sort, and it pretty much takes the fun out of our time here.”

“So what do you do to pass the time?”

“Reginald and I used to travel quite a lot. But lately, we’ve taken a liking to Ombre. Would you care to play?”

He nodded. Rachel sat down at the opposite side of the circular kitchen table and dealt the Tarot-sized cards from the pack laying there. Raymond looked out the window and wondered what he would find, what Kelly’s remarkable imagining had cooked up. But he would have plenty of time for that later. He picked up his hand, and Rachel began to tell him the rules of the game; it was unlike any card game he knew, but he would have a lifetime to master it.
WHEN I was seven years old, I had a best friend named Fiona. She had bushy brown hair that stuck out all over like an exploded Brillo pad, and told me lots of stories about Ireland, where she was born. How her father had been a military man who’d gotten killed fighting the British, and how her mother had tried to get Fiona and Fiona’s brother Brian out before the bombing. But she hadn’t, and they all three got crushed when the ceiling of their rented house fell in, and Fiona had died.

She looked like a normal kid most of the time, except when she turned diaphanous and I could see through her. The first time she appeared was on the playground after some older kids made fun of my lack of a father and pushed me into the dirt. None of the kids at school liked me very much; for whatever reason, they had collectively decided that I was different. There was one kid, Derek Frazier, who let me play with his Matchbox cars one time, but the other kids made fun of him for playing with a “doo-doo head,” so he stopped.

I was crying in the dirt after the older kids had pushed me down, and Fiona appeared on top of the monkey bars next to me, sitting cross-legged and curious. “Why you crying?” she asked in a light Irish brogue.

“Some big kids were picking on me ‘cause I don’t have a daddy,” I said. “They’re mean boys.”

A fierce expression passed over her freckled face, and she looked in the direction the boys had just gone. “Don’tcha worry,” she said, “I’ll get even with those hooligans for ya.”

I smiled, stood up, and dusted myself off. I finally had an ally.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Fiona. Wanna hear a story?”
“Okay.”

“When people die, they don’t always go to Heaven or Hell. Some stick around ‘cause of unfinished business,” she said, “and some liked living so much that they couldn’t leave even if they wanted. Then there’s those like me, sent by loved ones to protect their kin. Mostly those sendin’ us are dead themselves, but not always. Sometimes we get bored, and cause mischief. Ya know, in South America, we’re mistaken for goblins. Folks down there use charms and other nonsense to protect themselves. But we aren’t goblins, just the souls of children died before their time.

“I’ve been sent here to look after you, Stephan.”

My mother called Fiona my imaginary friend, but I thought that might have been because she couldn’t see her. Fiona could become invisible to people if she wanted; she said not all ghosts could do it, but that she was talented and had been practicing since the 1920s. Sometimes she snuck around and made faces at Mom and dropped forks on the floor and hid the butter. Most of the time it was just funny, not mean.

But Fiona got me in trouble too. About a month after she’d first appeared, she wanted to show me something down by the creek in back of our apartment building. She said, “Don’t tell yer mum; ’tis a secret, trust me,” so I grabbed my jacket and went outside with her. We were having a strangely cool Spring, and I had to dress warmer than I wanted to at that point in the year. The wind made the trees hiss and shake like a nest of snakes. The sky was overcast but the light was harsh.

We went down the hill to the creek, real slow. The slope was steep, but there was a path that led down at a safe angle, cutting across the hill like a scar. Fiona ran down as fast as she could, arms outstretched, a raucous cry in her throat. I knew how easy it was to skin your knees when running down a hill and not being able to stop, so I went more slowly. The light was dim at the bottom even though it was noon, and the trees stretched up farther than I’d ever seen them, reaching for the sky. It was cold in the shade.
Fiona ran toward the sharp boulders on the creek bank and hid behind one. I tiptoed over the gravel, mud, and twigs and slipped around the rock, but Fiona wasn't there. I called her name, and she tapped me on the shoulder and yelled, “Boo!” in my ear. I fell to the ground in surprise, and she laughed at me. There was mud on my new pants now, and I'd gashed my right palm on the side of the boulder. I was about to yell at Fiona, but she bent down and blew on the surface of my palm. Her breath was like ice, and the cut tingled and itched like a dozen ants were crawling all over it. Before my eyes, the wound stopped bleeding and healed over, leaving a thin line slantways down my palm. It stopped hurting as well.

Fiona beckoned me to follow her, and started down the shore of the creek. She skipped and sang a song about Cuchulain, whom she said was a great Irish warrior, and soon she was dancing on the surface of the water. She neither fell in nor caused a splash, but the small fish swam away from where Fiona danced. She was letting the fish see her.

At the creek’s deepest point (around six feet), she trotted over to the shore and took my hand, which was very warm in her cold one. The wind rippled the surface of the creek as we approached the bank, and I abruptly broke out in goosebumps. Fiona smiled at me and once again took a step onto the water’s surface, as if it was a sheet of glass, tugging on my hand to follow her.

“But I’ll fall in,” I said, watching the fish underneath her swim up, curious about Fiona’s feet, then scurry away.

“Not if ye’re holding my hand and ya don’t look down,” she said.

I wasn’t sure if I believed her. She had an impish glint in her eye, but she sounded earnest enough to me. I took a breath, then took a step. Since I was looking in Fiona’s eyes, I couldn’t see what walking on water looked like, but it felt like stepping onto any hard flat surface. For all I felt, I could have been walking across my kitchen floor.

Fiona led me to the center of the creek, holding my hands tight. A tingling sensation traveled up from my feet and gathered at the base of my neck. The only sounds that could be heard were the gentle trickle of the creek and the twittering of birds far up in the trees. I could
smell the leafmold and loam on the banks of the creek, things damp and decaying. Something, mostly likely a brave fish, broke the surface near my right foot with a plop. My curiosity got the better of me, and I looked down to see it.

I appeared to be standing on nothing at all. The water was perfectly polarized, and no reflections greeted my gaze. I could see to the bottom of the creek bed, could pick out the rocks and twigs on the silty floor. The small fish who had come to investigate flicked its tail and sped away, seeming to swim in a weightless nothing. My legs trembled and a wave of vertigo overcame me. I overbalanced, my right hand slipped out of Fiona’s, and the creek’s surface turned back to liquid under my feet.

I plunged into the icy water, the temperature knocking the breath from my lungs like a punch to the stomach. I flailed my arms and legs, but all it did was make me sink faster to the bottom. My clothes weighed me down and tangled up my limbs. I could see Fiona above me on her hands and knees, yelling something which I couldn’t hear. My lungs burned with internal fire. Darkness crowded the edges of my vision. I distantly heard a second splash, and felt strong arms pulling me up hard, jerking me to the surface.

We broke and I sucked in air, inhaling until I thought my lungs would burst, then coughed violently. The strong arms dragged me back to the bank and deposited me onto the ground. I hacked and rasped for a full minute before regaining my breath, then looked up. A tall man with blazing red hair and sopping wet clothes looked down at me, smiled briefly, then disappeared with a small pop of displaced air. The ground where he had been standing was sodden and muddy.

Fiona walked over to me, squatted down, and shook her head. “Toldja not ta look down,” she said.

“Who was that?” I sputtered, still breathing hard.

Fiona looked away, as if hearing something that was inaudible to my ears. She stood that way for several moments before looking back at me and saying, “Gotta go.” She turned translucent before my eyes, then faded away completely.
I got to my feet and started back the way we had come, eventually making it back to the path up the hill. I trudged up the hill, then up to the apartment I shared with Mom. I went inside and closed the door behind me.

From the rear office, Mom called, “Stephan? Is that you?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, stepping into the kitchen for some milk. All the coughing had made my throat incredibly parched. I took three strong pulls from the bottle, then put it back in the refrigerator. I closed the door and Mom was standing there with her arms crossed. I looked to the floor and saw what she was angry about: I’d tracked in a definitive trail of mud, leaves, and water from the front door to the kitchen.

“Stephan, what on earth have you been doing?”

“Nothing,” I murmured. “I fell in the creek.”

Her demeanor instantly changed. She bent down and grasped me by the arms, her expression shifting to concern. “Are you all right? Did you get hurt?”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, then bent over as another wave of racking coughs overcame me. Mom slapped me on the back as my lungs squeezed themselves dry. My chest and throat felt scraped raw from within. As soon as I stopped, Mom began stripping me of my clothes, starting with my shoes.

“Let’s get you in a warm bath. You’ll feel much better after that.”

Two weeks later was Mother’s Day, and I was all excited because I’d made her a great present at school, a birdhouse constructed of popsicle sticks. It was a special day, so I’d woken up extra early to make her breakfast in bed. I pulled the orange juice out of the fridge and the bread off the counter, then the peanut butter and the pickles from the pantry. I clambered onto a chair to get the ice cream out of the freezer, since I figured she’d probably want that as well. The dishes were clean in the dishwasher, so I pulled out a glass for the orange juice. There was a thumping noise behind me, like a sack of dog food dropping on the floor, and I swivelled around. Fiona sat on the kitchen table, swinging her legs back and forth.
“Hello, Stephan,” she said. “Sorry I been away so long. How are ya?”

“Fine,” I said. “How are you?”

She didn’t say anything, just hunched her shoulders up and blew air out her mouth. She looked distracted, like something was on her mind, but she didn’t want to tell me. She also wouldn’t look directly at me, as if she were embarrassed about something.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

She sighed and said, “Oh, way away.” She didn’t say anymore so I asked her again. She was silent and still avoided my eyes. I turned around to the counter again, and Fiona asked, “Whatcha doing?”

“I’m making breakfast for Mommy since it’s Mommy’s Day.” I poured orange juice into the glass.

Fiona blew a raspberry with her lips, like an explosive fart. “Every day’s Mommy’s Day,” she said. “Why ain’t there a Kid’s Day? Or a Little Girl Ghost Day?”

“I don’t know,” I said, placing the carton of orange juice back in the refrigerator. “Maybe you should ask the person who makes up holidays.”

“I’s in Ireland talking with your da,” she said and I paused with the fridge door open. Cold air leaked out, chilling the exposed skin of my arms and my face. Fiona was smiling.

“What?”

“Your da,” she said. “We had a chat.”

“What’s a da?” I asked. She rolled her eyes and blew air out again.

“Your pappy,” she said. “Your father.”

A shivery feeling wiggled into my stomach and chest, making my legs shake. “My daddy?” I said.

“Yeah, your da. That’s where I was. He was mad about the creek thing, wanted to make sure I was taking care of ya properly. He’s the one sent me to protect ya.”

I thought about Fiona’s story of the protector ghosts. “Is he alive or is he a ghost too?”

“Oh, he’s very much alive. Having a rough time being away from you, but he’s coping.
Practically lives at the pubs now.”

“But Mommy said he was dead. He died in a big train accident when I was a baby.”

“No,” she said. “That’s a lie. Your ma didn’t want you finding out. Your da left you. He
didn’t die.”

I shook all over and curled my hands into fists; I wanted to hit Fiona in the face. My
father wouldn’t have just left me.

“You’re a liar,” I breathed. “Daddy loved me and Mommy but he got in a train accident
and now he’s dead. He’s dead!”

I turned around to grab the glass of orange juice and hurled it in her direction, but it just
passed through Fiona’s ethereal form. The glass landed on the linoleum floor and shattered into a
thousand pieces, spraying shards and pulpy orange juice.

“Shut up!” I yelled at her. “Mommy wouldn’t lie to me! I don’t want you for a friend
anymore!”

I picked up the bottle of pickles, but Mom came in at that moment and said, “Stephan,
what are you doing?”

I was sobbing now from anger. “Daddy’s dead!” I yelled again at Fiona, and Mom hugged
me tight. I hoped she’d never let go. I cried and cried until my whole body hurt.

Mom rubbed my back and hugged me and said, “Shush, shush, it’s okay. Everything’s
okay.”

“Don’t leave me like Daddy,” I mumbled into her bathrobe.

“No no, honey, I’ll never leave. I’ll always be here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I looked over Mom’s shoulder to see if Fiona was still there, but the kitchen table was
empty.

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A few days later at school, I noticed that the older boys who’d pushed me down two weeks ago
were back. Word from their mothers was that the boys had broken out in blotchy red rashes all
over their bodies, and their heads had been infested with lice. They had to be sent to a special
hospital in Raleigh. The other kids wouldn't even look at them now. At recess, I saw them on the
playground, but they turned away, like they were afraid of me.

Mom took me out of school that afternoon for a doctor's appointment. She looked par-
ticularly pretty in the car, wearing a nice black dress and the slightest amount of Chanel No. 5
that she only used for special occasions. I looked out the window when she stopped the car, but
the building was unfamiliar. The structure where my doctor held his practice was low and flat
and gray. This building was tall and bright white and had vertical stripes of opaque windows. I
couldn't see inside.

“Where are we?”

“Doctor's office,” Mom said. She had a strange look on her face, like when she saw me in
the kitchen almost throwing the pickles at Fiona, so I didn't say anything.

She held my hand and we walked into the frigidly air-conditioned building. I rubbed my
hands up my arms at the gooseflesh that had appeared. We took the elevator to the tenth floor,
then walked down a hallway and through a large wooden door. The room inside had lots of
plush, comfortable couches and chairs and Mom told me to go sit on one. I picked a couch and
hopped onto it, and sank down slow as the air hissed out. It smelled of rich leather, like Mom's
wallet.

Mom stepped over to a window set in the wall and said, “Stephan Sullivan.” Murmured
voices of the nurse at the window and my mother drifted over, though I couldn't tell what they
were saying. Mom walked back over and sat next to me on the couch. “Won't be but a minute,”
she said.

“Am I sick, Mommy?” I said.

Her face blanched slightly and she said, “No, honey. The doctor just wants to talk to you
for a bit.” She didn't say anymore, so I played the drums on my legs. “Stephan, you're being too
noisy,” she said. “Why don't you find a coloring book on the table over there in the corner?”

I jumped off the couch and ambled across the room where she was looking. There was a
kid at the table already, but I couldn't see his face because he was bent over, coloring. I sat down
next to him and picked up a coloring book. The kid looked up and I saw that it was Derek from school.

I opened the coloring book I’d picked and asked if I could share his crayons, which were in a box on the table. “They’re not mine,” he said and gave me a Blue. “They belong to the shrink’s office.”

“What’s a shrink?”

He stopped coloring and said, “Don’t you know why you’re here?” I shook my head, and he looked over at Mom, who was reading a magazine. “They think you’re crazy,” he said in a quiet voice. I didn’t know what this meant, but I was tired of feeling stupid, so I didn’t say anymore. Maybe I was here because I was stupid.

After a while, I heard Mom say my name and that they were ready for us. I put the crayon down and got up.

Derek said, “Don’t act crazy.” He looked serious, and I trusted that he knew what he was talking about.

Mom and I walked through the waiting room door and down a long white hallway. At the end was an office with lots of books, and a man with a bald head and a bushy mustache sat behind a big mahogany desk. He was looking at something in a folder, but closed it when we walked in. His smile was full of giant pearl-white teeth. He said hello to my mother.

“Stephan,” he said and I could barely see his mouth under the mustache. “Nice to meet you. Have a seat.”

I sat on a leather couch near the wall, which was not nearly as comfortable as the ones in the waiting room. Mom sat next to me and the mustache man sat in a chair in front of us. He said, “My name is Doctor Astor, Stephan, and I just want to ask you a few questions.” I grabbed Mom’s hand and nodded my head.

“Okay, Stephan. Now, I understand you threw a glass of orange juice across the kitchen the other day. Can you tell me why you did that?”

I almost told him about Fiona, but then thought of Mom not being able to see her.
Doctor Astor probably wouldn’t see her either. I said, “I was mad.”

“And why were you mad, Stephan?”

“’Cause . . . ’cause it was Mommy’s Day but Daddy wasn’t there to help me make her breakfast in bed ’cause he’s dead.”

“Do you miss your daddy?”

“Sometimes.” I shrugged.

“He died when you were just a baby, Stephan. Do you maybe miss having a daddy more than you miss your daddy?”

I shrugged again.

He looked in his folder and said, “Are you sure it wasn’t because of your imaginary friend Fiona?”

I stiffened and my hands got sweaty. “I don’t see Fiona anymore. She went away a long time ago.” I wished it were true. I didn’t want to see her anymore.

Doctor Astor smiled and stood up and said, “Thank you, Stephan. Would you go stand outside in the hall for a moment while I talk with your mother?”

I exhaled and jumped off the couch. That hadn’t been so bad. I left the room and closed the door behind me gently, then stood in the hall and walked in a circle. Mom soon came out and she was smiling. She bent down and hugged me hard.

“Sweetie, Doctor Astor liked you so much that he wants to talk to you some more, once a week. But it won’t be too bad, right? He was a nice man, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, and he had a big mustache too.”

Mom smiled. “Let’s go home now.” She took my hand and we walked out of the office. Derek was still in the corner of the waiting room coloring and I waved to him. He waved back, then someone said, “Derek Frazier,” and he stood up. Mom and I took the elevator back down, then got in the car and headed for home.

“Don’t I need to go back to school today?” I asked as we passed by all my classmates on the playground.
“No, honey, we’re going for ice cream. Won’t that be nice?”

That night, I woke up when something poked me in the shoulder. I opened my eyes and saw Fiona sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed, looking forlorn. The Mickey Mouse clock on the bedside table read 3:04. I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

“Hiya, Stephan,” Fiona said.

“How you been?” I whispered.

“I thought it’d be better if I stayed away for a while. I’m just making yer life more difficult, and you don’t need that. I’ll check in on ya every so often, make sure you’re staying safe. But I’m not sure when.”

“Good,” I said. “You always get me in trouble. Besides, Derek is my friend now.”

Fiona looked dejected, as if she’d been fishing for forgiveness. “Thought I’d bring ya something as a parting gift,” she said and opened her hand. A gold lump of metal rested on her palm, and the top flipped open when she pushed a button. It was a pocket watch, though it seemed to be broken; neither of the hands moved inside. A shiny gold chain hung down from the side of the watch.

“It’s yer da’s. It don’t work anymore. He thought ya might want it.” She closed the lid and dropped the pocket watch into my hand. I turned it over and ran my finger across the name etched into the bottom: Connor Sullivan. My father’s name.

“You take care o’ that, now,” she said and blew me a kiss. I pushed the button and the lid flipped open again. I wanted to hug her and thank her, but when I looked up again she’d disappeared completely.
THE FAT MAN turned to his wife and hocked up a gob of phlegm.

“No ho ho,” he said.

“You’re staying home tonight,” said the fat man’s wife. “I’m not letting you go out like this. Face it, you’re sick.”

The fat man groaned. When he coughed, his belly shook like a bowlful of jelly.

“We’re going to have to find someone to fill in for you,” she said.

“Whoa ho ho,” said the fat man, waving his fat hands in the air.

“Yes,” she said, “and it’ll have to be quick. Midnight’s only two hours away.”

The fat man coughed again and rolled over onto his side. He wheezed and his lungs rattled. A few thousand years of being overweight had caused innumerable cardiac and respiratory problems, but the job demanded it.

“Who can you think of to cover you?”

The fat man pondered for a moment, then said, “Lo ho ho?”

His wife frowned. “You know Loki would just cause a mess, and probably light some children on fire. Who else?”

“Pro ho ho?”

“No, Prometheus is on holiday, touring the Greek isles. Next.”

The fat man’s eyes abruptly lit up, and as he smiled, his wife could see the remains of a bag of Cheetos in his teeth and beard.

“Bo ho ho,” he said.

The fat man’s wife straightened up and adjusted her spectacles. “Do you think he’d do it?”

The fat man nodded enthusiastically. “Go ho ho.”
His wife rushed from the room and into the voluminous kitchen. She picked up the telephone and made several complicated signs in the air. The connection rang seven hundred thirty-seven times before a tingly feeling traveled from her ear to her toes. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, completely serene.

“YES?” boomed a voice from the other end, so low that the floor vibrated under her feet.

When she was able to regain her breath, she said, “Nick needs a favor.”

LITTLE RICHE SPENCER waited in his bed with his eyes closed, listening intently for the sounds of sleigh bells and reindeer on his roof. He had been lying there for three hours already, and was finding it increasingly difficult to stay awake. He sang camp songs loudly in his head, had imaginary arguments with his big brother, replayed his last Little League game. Luckily before he drifted off, his ears popped from a soft implosion of air near the foot of his bed, and he opened his eyes.

Floating two feet above his sheets in the lotus position was the Buddha, highest of all the bodhisattva. Richie recognized him from the small shrine at his friend Ravi’s house, and squeaked in surprise.

“Hello,” said the Buddha.

“Hello,” said Richie, “you’re not the fat man I was expecting.”

“I know,” said the Buddha. “Saint Nicholas has fallen ill tonight. I am filling in.”

Richie sat up and stared at the Buddha’s smiling face. “So, did you bring me presents?”

“No. Something better.” The Buddha leaned down and touched Richie lightly on the forehead with the tip of his finger. Richie stiffened, then instantly relaxed. He forgot about his conflicts with his older brother. His poor batting record no longer mattered. His need for material possessions bled away into vapor. A smile as grand and beatific as the Buddha’s grew on his face as Little Richie Spencer achieved enlightenment.
All over the world, children awoke to the Buddha’s touch. When they went downstairs in the morning, they politely refused their Christmas presents, announcing that they would be donating all their toys to charity. Those children’s parents were forced to return the gifts, creating in one day the worst holiday sales season in history. Stores went bankrupt, but the owners didn’t seem to mind.

Enlightenment spread quickly from the children to the adults, like the most communicable virus. As the need for a consumer-based economy plummeted, governments from democracies to imperialist dictatorships fell. Each person contributed to society enough to gain the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, and spent the rest of their time meditating. A new world was born.

“Nicholas!” called the fat man’s wife. “Where are you?” She had been looking for him for nearly an hour, astonished he had managed to get off the couch. She found him in the attic, swinging from a noose, his face bloated and purple. She put her hands on her hips and exhaled loudly.

“You come down from there right now,” she said. “This can’t be helping your cold.”

The fat man opened his eyes and looked at his wife. His vitreous capillaries had burst, replacing the white in his eyes with red.

“Why did you even bother with this?” asked his wife. “You know you can’t die.”

The fat man burst into tears. “Woe ho ho.”

His wife looked him up and down and said, “Well, now that you’re out of a job, I can finally put you on that diet.”

The rope around his neck creaked softly.

“Shit,” he said.
I pull my broken-down Dodge into the parking lot of my apartment complex around noon, and the scent that drifts into my car window immediately reminds me of a freshly mown baseball field. It’s one of those summer days that makes me wish I could play again, to feel the bat in my hands and the grass under my feet. Joaquin and Consuela stand on the sidewalk in front of my car, watching something behind me; their eight-year-old son Raoul sits on the curb nearby, his little league uniform dusty and his cap askew. I get out and see what they’re looking at, a U-Haul trailer being driven in reverse up the hill into the complex from the other side. Whoever is driving the trailer weaves back and forth, seeming to have very little experience attempting what he is doing. A group of Mexican men surround the truck, waving their arms and yelling in Spanish in an attempt to help.

“Hola, amigo,” I say to Joaquin, the patriarch of the family, who is smoking a sweet-smelling cigarillo. It’s a Sunday afternoon, so he’s in an undershirt and green slacks. Consuela wears a knee-length red dress which accentuates her voluptuous body; I’ve always had a bit of a crush on her, and she teases me about it every chance she gets. Raoul has his nose in a science fiction paperback; he’s constantly reading something, a habit I encourage with every trip I make to the used book stores on Hillsborough Street.

Joaquin shakes his head and smiles. “They never going to get it up that hill,” he says. “Idiots. Why they rent a trailer they no know how to drive it?”

It sounds like a rhetorical question, so I don’t reply. Joaquin Gonzalez and his family have been very good to me over the last few years. As the only white guy in an apartment complex that’s almost entirely Hispanic—nicknamed Little Mexico by some of the locals—I would normally feel a little out of place. The area of southeast Raleigh where we live is one of the poorer sections of the city, and the rent is dirt cheap. Perfect for a guy with a shitty night job and...
no wife or kids; it's the only place around that I can afford. But from the day I moved in five years ago, Joaquin has treated me as part of his family, often having me downstairs for cerveza and dinners laden with spices. He also has a way with the other tenants in the complex, making sure they know I'm cool. After a while, it started feeling like home, much to the chagrin of my parents.

“Hey Ray,” Joaquin says, turning to me and stubbing out his cigarillo on the sole of his flip-flop. “Some men in robes asking for you today. I don’t think they from around here.”

“All of them bald,” Consuela pitches in, crossing her arms over her breasts, but not taking her eyes from the U-Haul. The breeze ripples the ruffles at the bottom of her dress. “Smell funny too.”

“Did they say what they wanted?” I ask.

“Nope,” Joaquin says. “But they be back later. Sound important.”

I grunt. “Well, I guess if it’s important, they’ll find me. Braves game tonight?”

“Yeah,” Joaquin says, “but we use your TV. My reception lousy this week. Hey, you think any more about Raoul little league team? They still need a coach.”

My kneecap twinges at the memory of the car accident ten years ago that ended my baseball career before it barely got started. “I’ll have to get back to you,” I say.

I wave good-bye, then walk up to my apartment, check the messages. One from Dad: an invitation for a couple of beers and a game of pool down at Babbineau’s. It’s funny, we’ve gotten together more over the past year than the previous twenty-seven put together. Our evenings consist mostly of reminiscing about Mom; how she supported us while Dad stayed home and raised me, how she always smelled of cappuccino, how she sang along to the radio, especially if she didn’t know the words. How hard she tried to hang on the last year of the cancer.

I stab delete on the answering machine, too tired to think about another exhausting night being Dad’s shoulder to cry on, and turn on the light in the kitchen. The appliances are all relics from 1970, painted this vomit green with big yellow buttons; it always reminds me of the shag carpet when we used to go visit my grandparents, that green and gold mix.
The fridge is stark, but some leftover vegetarian lasagne sits in a plastic container on the bottom shelf. I toss the lasagne in the microwave, set the timer for a minute and a half. The cupboards are empty, so I rinse out a dirty glass in the sink, then fill it with water. One clean fork is left in the drawer, so I grab it, take the steaming lasagne and water over to the card table that serves as my dining room table, and before I can take a bite, someone knocks at the door.

A little old Asian man stands in front, with two younger guys about my age behind him. All their heads are shaved, and they wear these billowy red robes over one shoulder. None of them stand over five and a half feet, so I tower over them at six-four. The scent of exotic spices and faint body odor drifts into the apartment. Despite my knowledge that they were looking for me, the sight of these three Asian monks has struck me dumb. The younger monk on the left looks to his friend on the right and scuffs his sandal on the hallway carpet.

“Mr. Ray Heilig?” the old monk in front says, with only a trace of an accent.

I clear my throat and nod.

“May we come in?”

“Sure,” I blurt, and step aside. The trio enters and looks briefly around the apartment. Normally, I don’t just let strangers inside, but as the monks survey my surroundings, I realize that there really isn’t much to steal. Joaquin gave me the ugly purple couch, I found the armchair on the side of the road, and the ancient Zenith television—a gift from Dad—weighs roughly five thousand pounds. In the bedroom are the futon I sleep on and a week’s worth of clothes rescued from Goodwill and the Salvation Army. My old baseball bat from high school is hidden under the futon, its only function now as a scare tactic in case anyone is stupid enough to break in, since I’ll never use it again on a baseball field.

The old monk motions me to the couch and we both sit down, the young monks remaining standing. The springs gave way long ago, and the cushions are supported by a sheet of plywood.

“Mr. Heilig,” the monk says, “we have been on a long search. Our Master, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, died almost twenty-eight years ago, and a suitable replacement has
never been found. Our higher-level lamas have been ruling by committee these long years since, and despite the values of democracy taught by His Holiness, in-fighting is leading us into ruin. Factions have formed; one insisting that we return to Tibet and live under Chinese rule, the other maintaining our exile in India where we can live safely and continue to explore non-violent ways of freeing Tibet from the Chinese. We need a uniting voice to lead us again, to bring all Buddhists together.”

The young monks nod in all the right places and make grunts of encouragement, though the whole thing sounds rehearsed to me. “Wait,” I say, “I thought the Dalai Lama was still alive. Didn’t he write a bunch of books?”

The old monk shakes his head slightly. “The committee decided long ago to hide the facts of our master’s death, using trickery and deception to give the impression he was still alive. His Holiness has been dead since 1975.”

“Okay,” I say, “so what does this all have to do with me?”

“When the new reincarnation of the Bodhisattva is chosen, clues to his identity are seen in the sacred lake of Lhamo Lhatso. The last time we consulted the lake, we were given two letters, Ra and Va, and the image of a white starling amidst a bevy of quail. It has taken us many years to interpret the will of the Buddha, but we finally succeeded, and it has led us to you.”

I know I look like an idiot with my mouth hanging open like that, but something in my mind has momentarily fizzled. The monks wait patiently while I stare at them. The apartment abruptly feels too hot. “You’re saying . . . are you telling me you think I’m the next Dalai Lama?”

The monks nod as one.


“Your birthday for one,” the old monk says. “The moment our Master died, the soul of the Buddha was immediately reborn. The number of people in the world born in that instant was seven hundred and three. We closely monitored them for a number of years, looking for the inherent qualities a Dalai Lama must possess: patience, poverty, kindness. Concern for the well-being of others.”
“Monitored? How? Are you guys working with the FBI or something?”

The old monk’s lips involuntarily twitch up into a smile. “We have our resources. We slowly whittled the number down, until we were left with you. Plus, there was this.”

For my fifteenth birthday, I got a great ballpoint pen, the shaft made entirely of wood, as a reward for my good grades in English. I loaned the pen to a girl I liked the following year in my algebra class, and never saw it again. I loved that pen, so different from the slick ubiquitous metal pens that were everywhere. It’s this same pen that the monk draws out from under his robes and holds before me.

“Where did you find this?” I ask, seizing the pen and stroking the barrel. A hairline crack has formed along the length, but it otherwise looks exactly the same. “I lost this years ago. It was my favorite.”

The monk smiles and looks at his underlings; they break out in identical grins, looking in that moment like twins. “It belonged to our Master,” the old monk says to me. “He wrote all of his works longhand with that pen. It was his favorite as well. Through the will of the Buddha, it made its way to you in your youth. Then when your identity was confirmed, it found its way back to our ashram. Only the presence of our dead master would have led the pen to you.” The old monk pats my knee and stands up. “You are the reincarnated soul of the living Buddha, His Holiness the Fifteenth Dalai Lama. We will leave you now to consider this. Please expect us back in the morning. We have a flight leaving for Dharamsala, India at 9 a.m., and an extra ticket for you.”

I stay glued to the sofa as the three monks walk toward the door.

“No,” I say.

The old monk turns. “Pardon me?”

“No. I don’t accept this. I can’t be your Dalai Lama.”

He walks back over to the sofa and stands over me. “There is no choice in this. You are the chosen one. You must accept.”

I hand the pen back to the monk. “I’m sorry,” I say. “You’ve traveled a long way, but you’re
wrong. I don’t know anything about being a spiritual leader. You’ve got the wrong guy.”

The monk exhales in exasperation. “Do you think the previous Dalai Lamas automatically knew how to rule as well? There is training, and schooling. We will help you. Please.”

“Sorry,” I say, standing up. “I realize this may be a huge mistake, but I just can’t go with you. I’d never be accepted, and I’d be too far from my family.” I think about Dad, how I’m one of his few remaining lifelines to this world. I think about Joaquin and his family, and how they embraced me without question. This is my home, and I’m not ready to leave. “Plus,” I say, “the Braves are doing too well this season for me to miss it.”

The old monk sighs and turns to go. I walk the dejected monks to the door, and close it behind them. I almost hope to hear cursing in Chinese from the hallway, but there’s only silence.

A few hours later, the Gonzalez family troupes up to my apartment for the game. Joaquin tunes the TV to FOX for the Braves while Raoul plops crossed-legged on the floor and reads his book. Consuela takes me aside into the kitchen.

“Ray,” she says, “you okay? Those men find you?”

I smile. “Yeah, they found me.”

“Well? What they want?”

I glance into the living room at the other members of my adopted family. “Nothing. I wasn’t the person they were looking for.”

Consuela makes this harrumphing noise in her throat, but then goes out to the couch to join her family. Joaquin says, “You know, those guys never make it with that U-Haul. They park down at the street and carry the stuff up the hill. Stupid. If they asked me, I do it right.” He turns from the TV and looks at me. “You coming?”

“In a minute,” I say, picking up the phone and dialing Dad’s number to invite him to join us for the baseball game. As I look at Raoul sitting on the floor of my apartment, his gaze finally torn from his book to watch his heroes, I realize I have something yet to give. Maybe I’ll look into that coaching job after all. I don’t have the skills to lead an entire nation, but I can probably handle a group of eight-year-olds. 🏆
There was a boy named Chan who loved his parents, though they did not love him back; he was not even given a first name. He had been born in the wrong month, during the wrong phase of the moon, his parents told him, and had brought them nothing but bad luck. The promotion at the factory promised to his father was taken away at the last moment. The garden his mother worked in nearly every day never produced anything more than the most meager of weeds since Chan’s birth. It was often sunny in the little Chinese village, but there was an almost constant gloom over their house, as if a rogue cloud were blocking the sun only over their property. And his parents, of course, blamed Chan for everything.

He was small for his age, and usually quiet. He liked to listen to people instead of talking, filling himself with stories. He was a good boy and always did as he was told, and could see the good in his parents, even if others couldn’t. Every so often, his mother would allow him a sweet, or his father would bring home an origami folding kit. They didn’t like to show it to others, but his parents could be kind. Chan was patient and knew they would love him eventually.

He was digging one day between the fence and the west side of the house for grubs to feed to his pet chameleon, Rainbow. It was a warm July day not long after his tenth birthday. He often went there because it was cool and damp from the shade of the trees, and the worms seemed to like it there. He never took more than he needed, then he thanked the grubs for sacrificing their lives so that Rainbow could remain living and being his pet. Chan was very kind-hearted when it came to grubs.

As Chan was digging with his stick, he hit something hard and it made a loud clang. He brought the stick down again and heard the same metal noise. Chan thought it might be treasure, since his aunt had found a jewelry box filled with pearls in her garden last year. He
scrabbled and dug for ten more minutes before uncovering the egg. It was heavier than it looked.

The egg was the size of a goose egg, but black with flecks of silver and red running across its surface. When he held it, a warmth spread throughout his body, and he had the momentary impression of flying. It seemed to be unbreakable as well, since it remained whole after Chan tripped over his own shoes and dropped it on the ground.

He snuck back to his room and set the egg on a small pillow, then surrounded it with old shirts and socks so that it would be warm. Then he placed the pillow in the top drawer of his dresser. He would peek at the egg every chance he got, which wasn't much because of all his chores. But on those occasions, he would look at the egg, and stroke it with a finger, and all the hairs on the back of his neck would stand on end.

After three weeks of having the egg, strangers came to call. Chan's mother was ripping out the weeds in the back garden and didn't hear the knock, so Chan answered the door. Before him stood a dark man with a bald head and a serious look on his face, and a beautiful woman with brown hair and a brilliant smile. The woman looked slightly Asian, but her skin was paler, nearly translucent in places, revealing strong blue veins underneath. Her grey eyes were round instead of almond, and she wore deep blue robes. The man had skin the color of burnt umber, and was dressed in a white shirt and dark green slacks; Chan guessed he came from Hong Kong, since most Westerners in the area lived or visited there.

“Greetings, Master Chan,” the woman said in perfect Mandarin. “I understand you have just unearthed something rather valuable.”

The man next to her smiled briefly, then placed his hands in his pockets.

“I’m sorry?” Chan said. His voice shook slightly.

“I believe you have found a rare egg that we have been searching for,” the woman said. “It is a very precious item, that egg. May we see it?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” said Chan. He was always told never to talk to strangers, let alone bring them into the house. He had already broken the first rule, and his mother would be upset enough about that . . . “No, I’m sorry.”
The woman’s smile dropped slightly. “But Master Chan, we could compensate you for it. Our Master is very wealthy and would like to reward you. We have a mirror edged with the finest gold scripting that was given to the Emperor as a gift from the Czar of Russia.”

“No, thank you.”

“We have a maple seedling that will grow and spread and will never die. It will be the envy of the entire neighborhood.”

“No.”

“We have gold, enough gold that your family will never be hungry.”

Just then, Chan’s mother, having heard the voices from the back yard, appeared in the doorway behind Chan, looming over him.

“Can I help you?” she said in a voice that indicated how much she disliked strangers who came to call unannounced.

“Yes, my lady,” the woman with blue robes said. “I believe your son has discovered something of great worth to myself and my brother.” She indicated the dark man next to her with her head. Chan found it difficult to believe they were related. “An egg, quite a rare one.”

“My son has found no such egg,” Chan’s mother said. “Have you, boy?”

Chan shook his head. He had not told his parents about the egg, and he was sure to be punished if they found out. They might even take the egg away from him.

“There, you see?” his mother said. “Now if you have no further business here, I will bid you a good day.”

The woman’s smile disappeared and she turned to her brother, who was clenching his fists. “Very well,” she said. “We will be on our way. Thank you for your time, my lady.” The man and woman turned and walked past the gate to the street, and then were gone from view.

Chan’s mother stepped back inside the house and said, “Get back to your chores,” before disappearing into the back garden again. Chan picked up the small broom he had left against the wall and began sweeping the front room again. He thought about the strangers, about the beautiful smile on the woman, about the big strong hands of the dark man, and started to shiver.
How had they known about his egg?

A week later, Chan had just blown out the candle and was preparing to sleep when he heard a small scurrying sound from the corner of his room. He looked up, but his eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark. The sound from the corner came again, and he leapt out of bed to push the window up and out on its hinge. Moonlight flooded into the room and lit upon a large figure clothed entirely in black, peering into the bottom drawer of his dresser. Chan let out a loud yelp and backed against the wall. The robber turned quickly at the sound, then burst into a brilliant green flame and disappeared. A scorched outline of the intruder stained the wall next to the dresser, then faded away in a wisp of smoke.

Chan’s mother and father entered the room a moment later, put out and sleepy.

“What’s the matter?” his father said in a thick voice.

“A man!” Chan shouted. “A man was in my room!”

Chan’s father looked in every corner of the room, underneath things and behind things, then said. “There’s no one here.”

“No, he’s not here anymore,” Chan said. “He caught on fire and went away.”

Chan’s father looked at his mother, who gave an exasperated sigh. “You were having a nightmare,” she said.

“No, I wasn’t! There really was a man in here!”

Chan’s father made for the door with his mother behind him. “It was a bad dream, boy. Go back to sleep.” And then, Chan was alone again.

He couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night, jerking upright at every little sound. He dozed off just as the faint glow of daylight seeped through the cracks in the window. In the morning, his mother came in two hours after he was supposed to wake, and chided him for staying in bed, for wasting the day away. She pulled him out of bed, spanked him twice for his laziness, then told him to get dressed.

Before he went out to cook breakfast, he opened the top drawer of his dresser and looked inside. The egg still lay bundled in the nest of shirts and socks, but a small crack had appeared
lengthwise on the surface. Chan frowned. The robber must have jostled the dresser and knocked the egg against the walls of the drawer. But then Chan remembered how the egg didn’t break when he accidentally dropped it. If the robber hadn’t cracked the egg, then it must be starting to hatch.

After he was done with his chores, Chan went into his room for Rainbow, so that he could take the lizard outside to run around and get some fresh air. Rainbow curled up in Chan’s front pocket, then ran in great circles once released into the back yard. Chan laughed as he scurried up and down trees and over every bit of land in the yard. Rainbow was the most curious lizard Chan had ever seen.

Chan stopped laughing when he saw Rainbow at the edge of the small pond in the back corner. It was Rainbow’s favorite place to go, where he could swim around, or sun himself on a large flat rock, or munch leaves. But he wasn’t going in. He stared at the water and bobbed his head up and down a few times. Then with a furious rush, he leapt into the water and bit at its surface.

The pond exploded in a geyser of water, leaves, twigs, and rocks. Chan heard something like a burbling scream as the rush of solid water streamed at him, then turned away at the last second. The living water twisted and writhed and rose into the sky, higher and higher until it was nothing but a dot, then nothing at all.

Chan found Rainbow by the side of the ruined pond, weak and breathing quickly, but otherwise all right. The pond itself was a mess. Mud and rocks had been thrown everywhere. Chan held Rainbow and stroked his head and told him what a good chameleon he was. Then Chan’s mother surged out of the back door, and Chan knew he was in for the worst spanking of his life. Even if the garden had never been successful, Chan’s mother still took pride in the work she did. And as Chan guessed, she was furious about the state it was in now.

Chan was sent to bed early, with only a bit of rice and some water for his dinner. He curled up on his bed and listened to his parents arguing down the hall in the kitchen, and tried to sleep. Eventually, he got up and went to his dresser drawer. The crack in the black egg had
lengthened, and produced many other cracks that splintered off in all directions. He touched a finger to the main crack, and instead of the warmth he normally felt, it was as if his insides had caught fire. He no longer felt like Chan, but like a magnificent bird, soaring high above the earth and trailing fire behind him in the sky. Wind rippled through his hair and feathers, and the sweet smell of burning leaves filled his nostrils. He was free from responsibilities, from chores, from his parents. Free.

He came back to his body as his finger left the crack in the egg, and he breathed hard. He walked over to his homemade wooden and glass terrarium and lifted up the lid, but Rainbow shrank from his touch. Chan closed the lid and looked inside. Rainbow shook like a leaf in the wind. Chan sighed, then crawled back into bed. By the time his head touched the pillow, he was asleep.

The next day, he was put to cleaning the mess left behind at the pond. There was no water left, except for that which had turned the ground to mud, so Chan straightened up the area as best he could. After four hours, the dent in the ground had come to somewhat resemble a pond again, and his mother let him inside for lunch.

After eating, he stole to his bedroom to check on the egg. The crack was much larger, and chips of eggshell lay on the shirts surrounding the egg. As Chan watched, the egg moved slightly. It was time.

Chan crept out to the kitchen, but his mother was no longer there. He could hear faint snores coming from his parents’ bedroom, and guessed she had gone in to take a nap. He went back to his room, scooped up the egg in its shirt nest, and took it outside.

He watched it for hours. The sun slowly made its way downward, and by evening, the egg still had not finished hatching. The entire surface was now covered with tiny cracks. It was extremely hot to the touch, and the heat radiated outward. Chan could feel it from where he was sitting, three feet away. He hoped that what hatched would be interesting; a tortoise maybe, or another chameleon as a playmate for Rainbow.

Footsteps landed behind him, and Chan expected to see his parents. He flinched, knowing
that they would be upset. He turned around and prepared to face his punishment.

It wasn’t his parents. Instead, the strange man and woman from a week ago stood there. The woman’s blue robes dripped water in a constant dribble, as if the water was coming from within her. And the man’s skin seemed to glow with a green light, which flickered and wavered, giving the impression of a low fire.

Chan stood up and backed away.

“So, Master Chan,” the woman said, taking a step toward him. “It appears you lied to us.”

“No . . . ”

“Give us the egg, or we will kill your parents,” the man said, the first words Chan had ever heard him say. “We have them bound to their bed, and will slit their throats. We have killed before, and will have no trouble doing it again.”

A shiver traveled the length of Chan’s body and settled at the base of his neck. He could just imagine his parents tied up and helpless, and he almost started crying.

“You must give us ownership of the egg willingly,” the dark man said, his voice deep and rumbling. “We will have the phoenix bird, and control the fate of the world. It is the key to releasing our Master. Give it to us, now!”

Chan shook his head, wishing his parents were there. The strange man and woman advanced on him, and Chan took another step back, not paying attention to where he was going. He stepped on the egg, which gave slightly with a crunching sound, then, overbalanced, Chan toppled onto his back. He looked up in time to see the man and woman stop, their faces frozen in surprise.

And in that moment, the egg hatched.

A burst of flame erupted from the egg, and shot into the sky. It circled the house three times, taking the form of a great bird, then descended toward Chan. Chan screamed and threw his arms in front of his face, ready to be burned alive. But all he felt was a slight thump as a very large bird landed on his shoulder. Chan opened his eyes. The bird’s feathers were the bright reds, oranges, and yellows of flame. As it gripped his shoulder, Chan realized it was talking to him, a
birdlike voice in his head.

“What do you wish of me, my master?” it trilled.

Chan looked over as the man and woman shimmered. A bright light seemed to unfurl from the both of them, lengthening and growing until they were twenty feet in length. They hovered over the ground, and as their faces resolved, and whiskers sprouted from their elongated muzzles, Chan understood that they were dragons, but not the kind he was used to hearing about. Chinese dragons were usually benevolent, and protected mankind, while these two definitely wanted to hurt him. Maybe foreign dragons were not supposed to be good. The woman had transformed into a snake-like dragon made entirely of water, and the man a dragon of green fire. They snapped their jaws open and shut several times, then flew like loose ribbons toward the house. Chan saw where they were headed and yelled to the phoenix bird on his shoulder.

“Save my parents!” he commanded, and the phoenix lifted off, igniting in mid-air. It streaked toward the two dragons, and rained fire upon them. The water dragon hissed and spat as its form sizzled, and the green fire dragon howled as the phoenix fire burned through it own flames. The phoenix pecked and dove, and lured the dragons away from the house. The three creatures lifted high into the sky, and disappeared into the clouds. Chan could see bursts of flame like lightning within the clouds, and the air filled with electricity. The fine hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. The battle seemed to go on for hours, then things went quiet, and Chan could sense no activity above him. A solitary speck drifted down from the clouds, gliding down and down and landing with a hard thump on the ground at Chan’s feet. It was the phoenix. It had won.

Chan picked the phoenix up and cradled it in his arms. Its feathers had been singed badly, and large gashes appeared on its chest and head. Its breath rattled in its throat.

“Thank you, phoenix,” Chan said, carrying it across the yard.

“They will not be back,” the phoenix warbled in Chan’s head. “It is time for me to die, but do not fear. You will need me again, and when the time is right, I will return to you.” It exhaled
one more time, then was still. Chan placed it on the ground and watched as it burst into flame
one final time, reducing its body to ashes. After the flames had died down, Chan saw that an egg
peeked through the ashes on the ground, identical to the last egg. A small sprout of green stuck
out of the ashes as well, no longer than the length of his thumb; a single spark of plant life in his
mother’s fallow garden. He picked the egg up and held it to his chest. A pleasant warmth wiggled
from the tips of his fingers to the tips of his toes. He took the egg inside, and placed it back in
his dresser drawer.

Chan closed the drawer, and walked across the hall to his parents’ bedroom. They lay on
the bed with their arms behind their backs and their feet bound together. Dirty rags had been
stuffed in their mouths. And instead of looking happy to see Chan, their eyes blazed with anger.
If he freed them, he would still be punished; they had not seen that he had saved their lives with
the phoenix. He would show the small sprout to his mother later, and hope that she would
believe that her luck in the garden had changed. Chan briefly wondered how much better his life
would be if he left his parents like this. A smile crept across his face, then he sighed, and began
loosening the nearest rope. 🐦
I never realized I had a musical penis until my third date with Angelina D’Ambrosi. The third date; that all-expectant societal road sign that if sex is going to happen, it should happen here. And yeah, I had to admit, I really wanted to take her to bed; it had been four years since the last time I’d had sex, and I was frankly ready to pop. It wasn’t as if she oozed sexuality like the other girls I saw in the clubs; a whole generation of women wearing hip huggers that revealed thong underwear, strange chemises that had no back but were tied up in bikini straps, or skirts so short that buttcheek was visible. Angelina wasn’t like that; she tended to wear more normal clothes, but man could she wear them. Britney Spears on her best day couldn’t look this good.

I took Angelina to a showing of Amélie at the art house theatre near my apartment that night, because it was romantic, but also for the similar features she shared with the movie’s lead, Audrey Tautou, about whom I fantasized sometimes. She had the same big brown eyes, the slender figure, the great kissable lips. Angelina’s breasts looked slightly smaller from the quick glances I managed to catch when she wasn’t looking, but that wasn’t a big deal; I was an Ass Man.

“How many times have you seen this now?” she asked me.

I blushed in the darkened theatre. “Seven.” I turned and Angelina was smiling.

“So you are a goofy romantic.” She squeezed my knee, then wrapped an arm around mine, leaning into my shoulder. The heat from her petite frame radiated into me, and I hoped I wasn’t going to start sweating. It had been a long time that I’d even gotten to a third date with a woman; the ones I’d been physically attracted to had nothing in common with me, and rarely even had anything interesting to say. I wanted a woman I could connect with physically, emotionally, and intellectually; a big challenge.
We'd met in a chat room for those into Irish music. That first night of our cyber-meeting, we talked until two in the morning about The Chieftains, Kornog, Altan, The Corrs. And as it turned out, we both even played a little; she said she was pretty good on the tin whistle, and I could manage not to sound too horrible on acoustic guitar. Our first in-person meeting was nerve-wracking; I'd had some bad experiences in the past with this, where women I'd talked to online were completely different in person. I got to Java Jive ten minutes early, and paced outside, my palms sweating and my heart pounding. But once she got there and smiled that beautiful smile, I started to relax. Our conversation ranged from Irish music to literature to films to philosophy as we sipped mochas and listened to Nordic fiddle music gently drifting down from the speakers. Her favorite authors were Poe and Kafka. She liked well-written independent films. She was perfect.

Back on the screen, Mathieu Kassovitz kissed Audrey Tautou on the neck, and Angelina snuggled into my arm. This was her first time watching the movie, and I envied that first viewing. She was getting the story fresh, laughing and experiencing it with innocent eyes.

After the movie, we walked the short block to Pallas Athena, my favorite Greek restaurant in town. I ordered a gyro and Angelina got a souvlaki. We split a plate of dolmades, and at her insistence, took turns feeding each other the stuffed grape leaves. Soon, both our lips were shiny from olive oil.

We worked off some of the dinner strolling back to my apartment, seven blocks north, talking about Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s other films, and his eye for cinematography and color. The apartment appeared before either of us realized it, and we both became as nervous as before our first date. She waited expectantly for me to say something, and all I could manage was “So, here we are.”

“Yep,” she said. “Here we are.”

We’d kissed goodnight after the second date—a nice dinner at the swanky La Bisque restaurant—a hurried brush of the lips that had made me smile all the next day. Angelina looked around briefly, stuffing her hands in her pockets, and I could tell from past experience that this
was the moment she’d say something like, “Well, I guess I should be getting home . . .” I thought of Amélie and her fear of taking risks.

“Would you like to come inside?”

Angelina’s face brightened, and her smile made my legs feel rubbery. “Sure.”

I took her hand and led her up to the second floor. My keys tangled, but after a moment I found the right one and let us both inside. I had cleaned in the event that she would actually be coming in, and felt the better for it. Angelina glided around my living room, taking in the framed prints and Ansel Adams posters, while I turned the stereo on to NPR; I’d planned our getting home to coincide with *Thistle and Shamrock*, the hour they played Irish music.

“All right,” she said, “no Satanic altars, no remains of old girlfriends,” she peered at my CD tower, “no top 40 bands. Good.” She stepped over and hugged me tight. I squeezed back and inhaled the peachy scent of her shampoo.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Oh, no reason. I’ve just been wanting to do that all evening.” She pulled back to look at me, her hands still locked around my back, and I nearly lost my identity in her brown eyes. My breath quickened, and I could feel the stirrings of an erection. She was so beautiful.

And then, something happened. A shimmering of air, maybe, or the greasy Greek food playing tricks with my senses. Because in that moment, she not only resembled Audrey Tautou, she was my cinematic fantasy made flesh. The way the light bent toward her face, the subtle arch of her eyebrows, the fullness of lips, the eyes wide as a doe’s. Even her hairstyle shifted to that recognizable Amélie cut, part Cleopatra, part 1920’s flapper, part pageboy, part pixie.

Stepping back, I could see that her body was also different. Her breasts were slightly bigger, and she seemed to be taller as well. Angelina/Audrey smiled, and even her imperfect teeth were perfect.

“What’s going on?”

“Oui, c’est moi,” she said, her accent spot on. She turned in a circle. “You like?”

Despite myself, I nodded. “But I don’t understand.”
“It is simple,” she said. “I am your fantasy. It was so obvious, your reactions during the movie. You lust after her, though you know her to be a construction, unreal. You wish to have her as Nino had her in the film. You want to ravish her, and have her do things to you. She is the perfect woman for you, yes? You wish to have her all to yourself.”

“But how?” The blood had rushed from my face, and the room swam, as if I were about to pass out. I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly dry.

“The how is not important,” she said. “A great opportunity is being presented to you. Will you take it?”

I cleared my throat and nodded.

“No matter the cost?”

What would she ask for? Indentured servitude? My first-born child? The little toe on each foot? I looked at Audrey’s beautiful face, her body the altar at which I could worship for the rest of my days. I shivered with pent-up lust, and realized I would give anything, my very soul, to be with her.

“Yes.”

“Very good,” she said, the statement lighting up her face.

Audrey pulled me to her, her touch invigorating. I felt strong, and my body quivered with the abrupt rush of energy. I leaned down and kissed her soft lips deeply, inhaling sharply through my nose at the sudden arousal. She pushed her tongue gently into my mouth. Her fingers twined in the short hair at the nape of my neck. I sank into the kiss, loving the feel of her mouth on mine, the taste of her breath: mint mixed with Greek food. She moaned lightly. My cock strained inside my jeans. I squeezed her buttocks, and mashed her crotch against mine. Though the air conditioning hissed, the room was inconceivably way too hot.

Her skirt dropped with a whisper to the floor, and I pulled her blouse up over her head. I planted little kisses from her earlobe down her neck and over her red lace bra, proceeding downward further to lick at her wrinkle of a belly button. Her slender fingers stroked my scalp and messed up my hair as I pulled at the waistband of her panties with my teeth. She smelled of
lilacs, and of sweat, and of longing. I wanted her so badly that I was afraid my heart would explode within my chest.

Audrey pushed me down on the couch, and told me to strip as she stood over me, hands on slender hips. I yanked off my shirt and was fumbling with the zipper on my jeans when she said, “Non, mon amour, do it slowly.” She wanted a show as well.

The belt escaped the loops on my pants with a hushed whisper, dropped to the floor. Unbutton, then unzip, a flash of very unsexy grey boxer-briefs, along with a slowly-spread ing come stain. Wriggle the hips and arch the pelvis, and the unmistakable intake of breath, Audrey getting turned on by my fumbling striptease. I pushed the jeans to the floor, and slowly moved down the boxer-briefs, my erect penis springing to life, free of its cage.

In contrast, Audrey whipped off her bra and panties as if with a gun to her head. She stood there glorious, the light playing over her beautiful naked body, her nipples dark as chocolate, her breath of pubic hair trimmed into a neat triangle.

Audrey seized my cock in one hand, climbed on top of me and guided me inside her. She was already wet, and I slid into her easily—the other times, I had to work a little more for this, spend twenty minutes or more on foreplay. We both gasped at the sudden connection, the insertion of part of my body into part of hers. She rested her hands on my shoulders and slowly raised then lowered herself, squeezing lightly with her pubic muscles. As she moved on top of me, I matched her rhythm, pushing into her deeper and deeper. Each time she came down, I died and was reborn.

I grabbed Audrey by the hips and slowed her down. “We’re unprotected,” I said. “I need to put a condom on.”

She smiled lazily at me, her eyes sly as a cat’s. “You did not think I was that irresponsible?” She still slid up and down, keeping me inside her. If she didn’t stop soon, I’d be done. “I never would have let it go that far,” she purred, and abruptly clambered off of me, my penis springing back with a slap, leaving a spot of lubrication on my stomach. Audrey knelt down and gripped my red and aching member in her hand, squeezed a single drop of semen from the tip of my
penis, which rolled down over her knuckles. My penis was crying. “Besides, _mon cher_,” she said, “I want to taste you.”

She traced the track of the semen trail up to the hole, her licks achingly slow. Every muscle in my body simultaneously contracted as she closed her lips over the head of my penis, then slowly took me all the way into her mouth. I was extraordinarily sensitive, and had to grip the sofa pillows and grit my teeth as she sucked me. Her head bobbed faster and faster, exposing every nerve ending in my body until I could feel even individual molecules in the air. My cock was on fire. I cried out at the moment of orgasm, losing myself in the oblivion of the little death, scattering my identity to the winds. Several long moments, later, I came back to myself, breathless and aching.

“Wow,” I exhaled.

“Yes?” said Audrey, smiling. Her bottom lip and chin were shiny.

“Yeah,” I said. “That was amazing.”

She stood up slowly, letting me see all her muscles moving against each other, then padded back to the bathroom. A brief hiss of water from the sink, then a low gargling. I tried getting up from the sofa, but all my energy was gone. My penis remained erect, refusing to soften back to flaccidity, and it beat lightly along with my pulse. Audrey walked back into the living room with a predatory smile, and I started to shiver.

“How was I?” she said, almost as a challenge.

The skin at the base of my neck crawled and I desperately wanted to move, but was pinned there on the couch like a nightmare. “G-Great,” I stuttered. “You were p-perfect.”

“You know,” she said, kneeling down between my legs again, “not all men get to fuck their fantasies. You should feel very fortunate.” Audrey squeezed my penis and I groaned, still aroused despite my fear, or maybe because of it. “You got your wish tonight, _mon brave_. However, if fairy stories have taught us anything, it is that wishes are granted at a price.”

Audrey placed her lips softly on the head of my penis and I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. She inhaled lightly through her nose, and blew into my urethra. There was a mo-
ment of discomfort from the entire lower half of my body, then a faint middle-pitched note sounded from far away. She glanced up at me, grinning around the head of my cock, then blew another note while squeezing the vein that ran along the underside of the shaft: a different pitch. The Irish music on NPR, which had faded into my subconscious as we fucked, started up “The Minstrel Boy.” She positioned her fingers in the places where the holes of a tin whistle would go, and played the slow melody along with the radio.

Audrey leaned back up, admiring my musical penis like a piece of jewelry. “Good tone. Durable. Pliant. I will take it.” She squeezed harder and began to pull, and I knew that if she kept tugging, it would come right off and I would most likely bleed to death. My flesh screamed.

I grabbed at her arms, but her skin was live wire, molten hot and full of electricity. The contact threw me back against the couch, twitching and shivering. Her grip increased, slowly tightening like a vice, and I tried to push her away, slap her, even punch her in the face, but my strength was gone. The air had also fled my lungs; I couldn’t even yell for help.

“Wait!” I whispered. “I’ll bet you for it.”

She stopped pulling but continued holding my member in a death grip. Her eyes had turned purple, as well as her nipples, and she no longer smiled. “You have nothing of value I would wager against.”

“What if I play you for it?” It was the first thing I could think of, my guitar, dusty and out of tune in my bedroom closet. “We play, together. First one to stop, loses. The winner gets to keep my thing.”

She pondered for a moment, then lightened her grip on my cock. Her smile was feline and contained no humor. “Very well. The bet starts now.” There was a small dizzying lurch, as if the world had just shifted out of phase with itself, and my small Spanish guitar rested on my stomach.

Audrey or Angelina or whatever her real name was, glided over and deftly turned off the radio, then dropped back down and settled her lips into position on my musical organ. Her eyes drilled into me over the body of the guitar. “The Drunken Sailor,” she mumbled. “Ready?”
I sighed. Of course I wasn't ready, but what choice did I have? I leaned up, finally able to move again, and clutched the guitar by the neck. It had been a year since I had played it last, and the callouses on the tips of my fingers had softened. After twenty minutes they would hurt; after an hour they would bleed. I flexed my fingers, settled them into the D minor chord, and said, “Ready.”
DAMN YOU FOR doing this to me, for bringing me to this backwards little restaurant in this backwards little town. Why would you possibly think that having dinner with an ex-girlfriend of yours and her husband would be a good time for me? I’m stressed out enough dealing with your mother, who still seems to regard you as her little baby boy, her first-born, who treats you as though you were still in grammar school, making comments about your clothes or your hair, and all the while eyeing me, looking me over, judging, disapproving, dismayed that her daughter-in-law is Asian.

And it’s bad enough that she’s making me jump through hoops for a wedding ceremony I don’t want. You and I, we’re already married, can’t she accept that? Husband and wife for six months, but no, she has to plan another ceremony, one for your side of the family, one that will be a hundred times more extravagant and formal than the one in Singapore. Why?

So not only am I dealing with that, but having to plaster on a smile, a grimace really, for a girl you dated in high school in your backwards little town and her husband at the table right now, at a point when I’d rather just be soaking in the bath, or taking a walk somewhere. And the husband keeps looking at me, this look, this hunger in his eyes, a wanting that maybe his wife is unable to satiate, her being pregnant, very pregnant, the intensity of sex drives no longer balanced between them maybe, and maybe he’s looking elsewhere to slake himself. He keeps touching his wife’s arms and shoulders, his pregnant wife, your former girlfriend, stroking her back or rubbing her shoulders, and sneaking looks at me, at my chest, at the red silk cheongsam I’m wearing for the occasion, the dress a wedding present from my mother—you remember?—given before our real wedding.

Can’t you see how uncomfortable I am here? How much I abhor being asked where we
met or what I do for a living or why Singapore isn’t in China, isn’t even remotely close to China. I fidget and tap my toes under the table, but you don’t notice, too caught up in the good old days with the blonde planet across the table, and I’m wondering what you ever saw in this woman, and I’m wondering if maybe she’s not pregnant but just fat. This woman with the shrill laugh and loud questions, each more irritating than the last, a voice like a hyena, like a kook-aburra, vapid, empty, trying to fill the silence with inane chatter. Her questions never beyond the surface level, unconcerned with the real truth, just scooping up the facts as fast as she can. Quantity, not quality. I’m starting to see why her husband might want to stray.

But what really gets me is you, the change in you, your personality, your interests, they’ve changed around this obstreperous woman and her slimy husband. I can see you mutating into one of them, your Southern accent coming back on certain words, the return of “y’all,” the chopping off of Gs, the shoppin’ and gettin’ and goin’ peppering your speech now, and how your English students back in Singapore would have a field day with you right now, this lapse into patois, underlying everything you tell them about diction and enunciation and clarity. Your words slur together like you’ve been drinking, though all you’ve had tonight is a sweet tea.

There you sit, devolving by the second into the little hick boy I see in the pictures your mother has shown me, teeth falling out of your mouth and onto your empty plate like pebbles, clothes becoming dirty, stained with mud and grass, and the smell, that little child smell of not having washed in several days. Your hair is greasy now, scalp flaky with improper care, and no, no I don’t even want to see the lice squirming around, it’s just all too much now, this window into your past, but I turn and the vision extends to your ex-girlfriend, and she’s just as gap-toothed and unwashed as you are, and her laugh has risen into little-girl shrillness, a donkey on helium, a braying idiotic brainless—

The entrées arrive, braised duck all around. It smells almost as good as the Peking duck back home, the kind you and I had that weekend when you met my parents. You remember that weekend, don’t you? You were so nervous, but they accepted you right away, enfolded you into the family as if you always belonged there. Such a different experience from meeting your
mother, but— The duck smells so good, and you look dashing in your blue suit, and maybe your ex-girlfriend’s voice isn’t so bad after all, her laugh perhaps more . . . contagious than I first thought, and her husband doesn’t look so oily now as he kisses his wife, an expression of pure love. You smile at me and I smile back. The duck is delicious. 🦆
WARNER NEVER EXPECTED the Dear John phone call, to be told, thanks, it was fun while it lasted but I’ve met someone else, someone who really does it for me, he’s a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist, unlike you, you talentless hack. He’d always considered himself a fairly attractive guy, upwardly mobile in the textbook publishing biz, but as he cradled the silent phone in his hands like a baby, his left eye pulsing like someone was poking it from the inside, he had to wonder.

A blaring mwanh! mwanh! mwanh! mwanh! shattered the normally muted quiet of the office. Warner looked down at the phone, puzzled, as if a dead trout had materialized there. He stared a few moments longer, then gently replaced the receiver in its cradle. The office was plunged into silence again, broken only by the subtle whisper of the AC vent in the ceiling.

Warner crossed his arms on his desk, elbowing a stack of unread manuscripts to the side, and rested his head on top of his wrists. The desk—one of those ubiquitous pseudo-wood numbers—was cool under his arms. His abdomen contracted painfully, and a spasm ripped itself from his stomach, producing a strange-sounding bark from his lips. At that moment, a small knock came from his office door.

When he didn’t answer, the door creaked open, and the faint tinge of Chanel drifted into the room. Warner kept his forehead on his arms, staring intently at the patterns in the faux wood—here the face of a crone, there a hovering vulture—and bit his tongue. The tears had stopped halfway up, caught in his midsection. Warner clenched his jaw and said nothing. The perfume was the same kind his newly-former fiancée had used, but he knew that it wasn’t Terri, it had to be Shelley.

“Mr. Warner?” said the voice of his secretary. “Sir? Are you all right?”

Warner took a deep breath and pushed the tears back down, enough for him to breathe
out a “Fine,” barely above the hiss of the AC. The fake wood grain swirled in front of his eyes.

“Are you sure, sir? You don’t look—”

“I’m fine, Shelley. Please go.”

“But sir, um . . . ” Warner could hear an insistence in her voice, like Sir, I don’t want to be a bother, sir, I mean, I can see how you’re obviously devastated from something, maybe, I don’t know, maybe from a phone call, but, sir, there’s something really important I have to tell you, sir. He heard this in his mind, and more out of irritation than curiosity, he raised his head.

Standing in the doorway next to Shelley—who was wearing a wrinkled red skirt, pantyhose with a run in the left leg, and too much makeup—was a girl no more than sixteen, dressed in faded jeans and a hooded green sweatshirt. In the girl’s arms was a large portfolio case, looking like it belonged in someone’s trash can. The girl’s stringy brown hair was pulled back, but a few strands had gotten loose, covering the tops of her ears.

“What is it?” Warner said between clenched teeth.

“Sir, this young lady would like to speak to you. She’s come a long way and just wants five minutes of your time.”

“This really isn’t a good time, Shelley.”

“But Mr. Warner, she’s already gone to all the other editors on this floor, and she’s not asking much, just—”

“Shelley,” he said, his jaw muscles jumping, “I just can’t do this right now.”

“Sir,” the young hooded girl said with a hint of brogue, “I have no home, no money. I don’t want to disgrace you by beggin for your pocket change. That would demean me and yourself, sir. What I would like to do is show you my paintings and explain their cultural significance, how they grow from the myth and folklore of my native land. It wouldn’t take more than five or six minutes, and all I would ask in exchange is five dollars. It isn’t a handout, because you’re getting something for your money. Now what do you say to that, sir?” The girl dropped one hand to the zipper of her case, ready to rip it open at Warner’s okay.

“Get out,” he said.
The girl’s hand froze at the zipper, the color gone out of her face. She blinked twice, and Warner’s anger grew. Shelley stepped into the room, a hand out, always the diplomat, and as she did, the Chanel followed her in. The perfume saturated the room, and suddenly, the office was way too small for three people. Warner rose from his chair and slammed his fists down on the desk.

“I said, get out! Get out! Am I making myself clear? Get the fuck out of my office!”

This startled the Irish girl out of her paralysis, and she immediately backed out of the room, looking as angry as Warner felt. But what right did she have to feel angry? She wasn’t the one who had just been dumped by her fiancée. What right did she have?

As the girl backed out the door, Shelley stood there with her fingers shivering in front of her face, her eyes wide as moons.

“And you, stop spending all your money on perfume and buy some decent goddamn clothes. Take a personal day for all I care. You’re supposed to represent me, and you’re a fucking disgrace!”

Tears welled at the corners of Shelley’s eyes, threatening to spill over. She turned quietly and shuffled out of the office, pulling the door closed behind her. Before it clicked, Warner heard a faint, “Sorry.”

With the door closed, the adrenaline evaporated from Warner’s blood, and all the strength went out of his legs. He collapsed into his chair and sat staring at the door for several long moments. Then, the blockade in his chest crumbled, and the tears flooded through. He inhaled loudly, and let out a long bullfrog croak. He put his head back down on the desk and let the shivering spasms rack him dry.

The rest of the day was not much better. Without a secretary, he was forced to field unscreened calls from the printers, the graphic artists, and one enraged author convinced that Warner’s rejection of his psychology text about incest (*My Daddy and Me*) had ruined the man’s career. Warner made a mental note to send Shelley some flowers and a big apology letter.
As Warner hung up with a talkative copyeditor from two floors down, an interoffice email popped up on his computer. It was from Conrad Kohl, Editor-in-Chief at Byzantine Press, and Warner’s boss. Kohl was a big bear of a man who normally looked like he’d be more at home chopping wood next to a blue ox than editing textbooks. The email sent Warner’s stomach spiraling down toward his shoes:

Warner, Heard about Shelley. We need to talk. Tomorrow.

Kohl

Warner locked the door and plodded through three history manuscripts, each one worse than the last, eventually throwing them all in the trash. He frequently stared out the window at downtown Kildaire, his gaze passing through buildings and people into some faraway distance. At three o’clock, his stomach complained loudly; he had still been too sore physically at noon to even attempt to eat something. Most of a ham & swiss was tucked in his top drawer, left over from the day before. After a few bites, he threw the sandwich in the trash with the manuscripts.

He tried to take a nap on the small, uncomfortable sofa in the corner of the office, one of the perks of being an associate editor. After twenty minutes of squirming and fidgeting, he gave up. He almost called Terri, then stopped himself, knowing she was gone forever. That got the waterworks flowing again.

At one point, Warner looked up and realized it was six o’clock. He looked out the windows and saw downtown dimmed by shadow, the streetlights beginning to flicker on. The haze of the day had now dissipated with the lowering of the sun, the viscous North Carolina humidity reduced from a health threat to a mere annoyance. Warner grabbed his empty briefcase from under his desk, more out of habit than anything else, and left his office, locking it behind him. The rest of the floor was empty, everyone else having left an hour earlier. He trudged down the hallway, his feet leaving a small trail in the woven pattern of the plush carpet. The lifts were at the end of the hall, and they both arrived simultaneously with a ding! Warner stepped inside the left one and hit P.

Warner reached the parking level shortly, the keys to his ‘91 Suburban already in his hand.
The massive car was at the end of the row, and his shoes made clopping noises on the concrete, reminding him of the horses he had grown up with on his parents’ farm. He missed the smell of hay, and the strong, musky odor of the horses themselves, a smell he had always associated with power.

Life had been so much simpler then, never worrying about money, running barefoot through the woods, playing for the sheer joy of it. Then his mother had died, when Warner was only ten. He hadn’t known the meaning of the words “cancer” and “terminal”; all he’d known was that his Mommy was never coming home. His father had turned to the bottle, and though he’d never struck Warner, life became hell. Warner would make up any excuse to avoid going home after school. Summers had been the worst. Then they’d lost the farm, and when Warner was old enough, he moved as far away as he could. And without realizing it, he had transformed from that carefree boy, heedless of the future, into a middle-aged shell of a man. There were so many things he had never gotten to do. He had wanted to paint. He’d never learned to whistle.

Warner reached his car and slid his key into the door, then hissed as something sharp pressed into his back. It hadn’t penetrated flesh, not yet, but its presence was insistent. A small hand gripped his left shoulder, and Warner was surprised by how strong it was. The briefcase dropped out of his limp hand, and clattered to the ground.

“Get the feck out of my office, he says,” said the voice behind him, somewhat recognizable, on the tip of his petrified brain. “I ate out of a fecking dumpster this afternoon, you shite. I ate the stuff the rats wouldn’t touch, so if you open your fecking gob, I swear to Saint Francis I’ll stick this knife so far into you, they’ll have to hire an excavation crew to find it. Am I making myself clear?”

Warner nodded furiously, as if the muscles in his neck had suddenly stopped working. He realized who the voice belonged to. Sweat broke out on his back and under his arms, instantly soaking him. Warner then did something that startled both himself and the Irish girl.

He laughed.

It was high-pitched and squeaky, and sounded like a Chihuahua barking, but it was a
laugh. Warner was about to die and he was laughing.

The pressure lessened slightly on his shoulder—he could tell the girl was stepping back in surprise—and an inner voice screeched at him to run, she no longer had him, get out of there. But something else told Warner that if he tried, he wouldn’t get more than a millimeter before the girl skewered him. He knew she was that fast.

“What’s so funny?” the girl asked, caution in her voice.


“Then why did you laugh just now?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” he said.

“People don’t just laugh for no reason. Unless they’re funny in the head.”

Warner wiggled his toes in his shoes, trying to adjust the pressure on the balls of his feet. He wondered what to tell her. “I’m not crazy,” he said. “At least, I don’t think I am.”

The pressure on Warner’s shoulder increased. Back to business. “Give me your money,” the girl said.

“I can’t,” Warner said, not believing what was coming out of his mouth.

“What?”

“I can’t give you my money. I need it.”

“I could stab you in the back and take it from you,” the girl whispered, her voice close, her breath tickling Warner’s ear.

“Yes, you could do that,” Warner said, “but I think if that were true, you would have done it already. I don’t think you want to hurt me.”

“You don’t know what I think.”

“No, that’s true. I’m just guessing here, but I’m hoping I’m right.”

The hand abruptly withdrew from Warner’s shoulder, and the knife from his back. The muscles in his lower back stung and he placed his hands on the car to redistribute his weight. He exhaled in a shudder and turned around.

The Irish girl stomped into the concrete of the parking garage, pumped her arms and
yelled, “SHITE!” The walls of the parking garage mocked in echo, OITE, oite, ite... She threw her switchblade at the ground, and the knife skittered along the concrete, bumping to a stop at the right rear tire of a BMW convertible. “Of all the people I hafta pick! Anyone else woulda just given me the fecking money and scampered away. But you! You laugh!” She walked over to a pylon and leaned her back against it. She slid down to the ground and wrapped her arms around her knees. The gesture made her look very young.

“Get out of here, you cheap-arse. You’re free to go.”

The inborn panic response crept up on him again, the one telling him to run. But there was something so sad about the way the girl sat there, leaning against the pylon like a little kid. He took a step toward her.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Don’t start actin all concerned now,” she said, her voice little more than a croak. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“No, really. Are you going to be okay?”

“Just go.”

“Listen.” Warner stuck his hands in his pockets, “why don’t I buy you a cup of coffee or something?”

“I don’t take charity, remember?”

“But you’ll steal from people and threaten to kill them?”

The girl said nothing.

“Come on. It’s the least I can do for yelling at you and booting you out of my office this morning.”

The girl looked up at Warner, her eyes blazing the clearest cobalt blue he had ever seen. He could tell she was torn between hunger and pride. She exhaled and said, “One cup of coffee.”

The stroll to the coffee house was awkward and silent. The Irish girl walked a few paces behind Warner, easily keeping step with him, her portfolio case banging against her leg every
now and then, making the leather of the case groan and squeak. He felt extremely vulnerable with his back to her, even though her knife was gone. But she could have another one hidden in her boot, or her back pocket, or— Warner took a deep breath. It was important that he show a modicum of trust, though for the life of him, he could not have said why. He felt like he was taking a karmic pop-quiz, and he wanted to ace it badly.

They reached Java Jive shortly, and Warner held the door open for the girl. The girl looked blankly up at Warner. After a moment, he stepped through, the girl catching the door before it closed. The walls of Java Jive were decorated in an assortment of African art and sculpture, and faint Nordic fiddle music drifted down from the ceiling. There were lots of plush booths, packed with college students and young urban professionals, but there was also a modest counter, with four empty backless stools, the cushions made of a sparkly red plastic. Warner walked past the board displaying the day’s specials and the words HELP: DISHWASHER WANTED in bright pink chalk, and took the stool closest to the bathroom; coffee this late in the day raced right through him. The girl took the stool farthest from him.

The redhead behind the counter walked cheerfully over to Warner. “Hiya, Mr. Warner. You want your usual?”

Warner smiled back. The redhead’s name was Traci-with-an-i, and she wore an extremely tight pink t-shirt, with the word ADORABLE in a shallow arc directly over her small breasts. Warner cleared his throat. “Yes, Traci. The usual. And whatever the lady wants.” He nodded at the Irish girl.

Traci looked over and disapproval pulled down her pretty face. Warner knew what she must be thinking: a man your age, with a girl that young! Though Traci flirted heavily with him, every time he came in. Maybe she was jealous.

Maybe Warner had too many fantasies.

“Coffee. Black, please,” the girl said.

“That it?” Traci asked, looking to Warner.

“Yes, thank you, Traci.”
Traci left to fill the order, and the Irish girl put her portfolio case down against the counter. Now that Warner could really see what she looked like, he was surprised by how beautiful she was. She had yet to crack a smile, but her eyes were the most gorgeous he had ever seen, blazing with blue fire.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Caer,” she said in a whisper. Ky-air. She tucked the hair behind her ear, revealing a small point at the tip top of it. “Caer Ibormeith.”

“Brian Warner,” he said, placing his hand out to shake. “Nice to meet you properly.” Caer looked at his hand, not even attempting to place her own inside it, and Warner put it back on the counter. “Caer. That’s a very pretty name.”

“I was named after my mother,” she said.

“I’m sure she’s as beautiful as you are.”

“She was,” Caer said dreamily, as if lost in memory. “Her hair was the finest white, her neck long, like a swan. She could sing the song of a thousand hearts mourning, or of a hundred thousand hearts rejoicing. She was quite magical.”

“Coffee, black.”

Warner and Caer looked up simultaneously as Traci put the coffee on the counter. She had a smirk on her face, like she was happy she had broken up their conversation. “And chai for you, Mr. Warner.” She placed the cup down with a wink, then sashayed to the other end of the counter, a swing in her hips.

“She died a long time ago,” Caer was saying.

“Sorry?”

“My mother. She died a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Warner said, taking a sip from the scalding chai. “My mother died when I was very young too.”

Caer raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you think I was very young when she died?”

“Well, I mean, you can’t be more than sixteen or seventeen, and if she died a long time
ago, you would have been very young.”

Caer smiled then, a smile that went all the way to her eyes. “Yes. That would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

Warner inhaled the steaming chai, the smells of cinnamon and exotic spices filling his sinuses. “You know, I always wanted to learn how to paint.” Caer said nothing, sipping delicately, as if waiting for him to continue. “I’d trade places with you in a second.”

Caer stopped suddenly, placing her cup on the counter with a slight rattle. She looked at Warner with the most serious face he had ever seen. “Really?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I make a pretty good living, but I haven’t been happy in a really long time. My life seems so empty. Not a lot of meaning. Sometimes I wish I could get back to basics.”

Caer beamed. She looked like she was about to cry. “Thank you,” she said.

“No problem. I mean, I know the coffee’s not much, but—”

“No. I mean, thank you.”

Warner grinned back. “You’re welcome.” A cramp suddenly jabbed him in the side, and he stood up. “Be right back.”

Warner walked swiftly into the bathroom, unzipping his fly as he passed through the door. He barely made it to the urinal as a painful stream of piss erupted from him, nearly drilling a hole through the porcelain. After finishing with a loud exhale, he zipped himself back up and washed his hands. He dried off quickly and stepped back out into the coffee house.

Caer was gone. Her case was still propped against the counter, abandoned and alone. He walked to the counter and called to Traci. She plodded over to Warner, looking annoyed.

“Traci, what happened to that girl that was in here with me? Do you know where she went?”

Traci folded her arms and glared at Warner. “Ms. Ibormeith paid for her coffee and your chai, then left. She didn’t say where she was going.”

Warner could feel his eyebrows furrow. “Paid? With what? She’s broke.”
“Excuse me, Mr. Whoever-You-Are, but Ms. Ibormeith is one of our best customers. The only one broke here is you. Now why don’t you take your shabby-ass clothes and walk on out of here, okay?”

Warner was about to ask, “What the hell are you talking about?” but the words died in his mouth. He looked down at himself. His suit (a birthday present from Terri) had gone from clean and relatively new to wrinkled and frumpy, as if he had been wearing it for a year straight. His shoes were scuffed a colorless grey. He reached up to slap himself, and felt a week’s worth of stubble on his face. Besides, he wasn’t dreaming. He could tell.

His body felt different as well. The constant arthritic pain in his hands was gone, as was the dull ache in his lower back from years of bad posture. His clothes felt looser. A buzzing feeling traveled from the base of his neck to the top of his head, where all the seams in his skull met. He wondered, if he went back into the bathroom and looked in the mirror, would his sixteen-year-old face look back at him?

His possibilities seemed endless, but he had spent too many years being practical. He knew his car and apartment were gone, along with his job and the rest of his life. He hoped Caer had a better time with it than he had.

Warner was almost to the front door when Traci came running up to him, the portfolio case carried gingerly in her hands, as if she might catch something from it. “Hey! Hey, you forgot your case.”

Warner took the case from her, and as she was walking away, he set it on the floor. He unzipped carefully from left to right, the metal teeth sounding ancient. Two canvases rested inside, the top one completely blank. A box of assorted Tempera paints and two small brushes were tucked into the bottom right corner, clean and new. A piece of paper with odd writing on it was taped to the top of the blank canvas, and Warner carefully pulled it off. As he squinted at it, he found that he could actually understand it. It read:

*Once upon a time, there was a princess of Faery who gormandized on everything: food, wealth, jewels, men. She used her faery magic to make her life comfortable and opulent. But inadvertently, she*
siphoned off of all the other faeries in the kingdom, no matter how rich or poor they happened to be. The King found out, returned the stolen magic to its proper owners, and as punishment, placed a curse on his daughter, forbidding her to possess but the merest of currency, barely enough to survive. As a slap in the face, he banished her to the human world, making it impossible to draw even the slightest bit of magic for herself. The only way for the curse to be broken was for a total stranger to willingly trade places with her.

That curse has lasted for 517 years, and has been hell every single day. Your life may not be as extravagant as I would like, but I have had a long time to get good at many things. I’ll be in the lap of luxury soon. You, on the other hand, are “back to basics,” just like you wanted. Be careful what you wish for, Mr. Warner.

He placed the paper back inside the case, and tipped back the blank canvas to look at the second one. An eerily realistic portrait of Caer was painted on it: she was driving his Suburban, the window down, her arm out, middle finger extended. A big shit-eating grin was on her face, like she had gotten away with a bank robbery.

But as Warner stared, the colors in the painting swirled, reshaping into something else. In mere moments, the painting had transfigured into a lush farm landscape, the foreground dominated by a large Appaloosan munching on grass. Warner recognized it as Aristotle, his favorite horse from his childhood.

He chuckled to himself and closed the case. He looked up and his eye caught the pink from the chalkboard above the counter. He walked back over to Traci, the case gripped firmly in his hands.

Traci exhaled loudly, stuffed her hands in her pockets, and said, “What?”

Warner motioned to the board with his chin. “I know how to wash dishes,” he said.

After three weeks, Warner became intimately familiar with the downtown thrift stores. It was always a treasure hunt, picking through stained and ripped garments to find the odd jewel. His wallet only allowed him five dollars a day, and he learned to spend it frugally.
Reluctantly, and only after he assured her that he wasn't going to rape her or kill her, Traci let him move in with her. She had a small studio apartment only ten minutes' walk from Java Jive, and an antediluvian fold-out couch that he could sleep on. Besides the rod in the sofa-bed that pressed uncomfortably into his back no matter how he shifted, and the fact that Traci kept the apartment a scant degree or two above zero Kelvin, he couldn't complain. He washed dishes from 8 to 5, secluded in the back of the coffee house, alone with his thoughts. He liked the peace and quiet, the simple repetition of wash, rinse, dry.

At night, he set up the wobbly wooden easel he'd found in the alley behind Traci's apartment, and learned to paint. As he finished his first work—a clunky perspective of his former office—the instant he acknowledged that it was done, the image shimmered, and faded completely back to white. He looked to the floor, and his paints had refilled to the tops, like new. The brush in his hand was absolutely clean, as if it had never touched paint before. Warner laughed, then howled, then roared. He would never have to buy another canvas, or new supplies. The realization made him giddy beyond belief.

One day at work, as the water hissed and the soap bubbles overflowed the small sink, a clamor began out in the coffee house. Warner had been thinking about his next composition—something that incorporated Aristotle the horse, Traci the waitress, and a giant snake in a traveling carnival—and was ejected from his thoughts as the shouting breached the kitchen. Warner turned and saw Traci in the doorway, ineffectually trying to keep out a fuming middle-aged woman in a bland green pantsuit. As soon as the woman saw Warner, her arm shot out and she pointed right at him.

“You!” she growled. “You did this to me!”

Warner slowly and deliberately turned off both hot and cold water knobs, then wiped his hands on a dishrag. “I believe, ma'am,” he said, with bite on the last word, “that you did this to yourself.”

“Hey, Brian,” Traci said, “you want me to call the cops?”

“No,” Warner said, folding his arms loosely and leaning against the metal sink. “I don’t
think that’ll be necessary.”

Traci scowled at Caer. “And to think I used to like you.” She stepped back out into the coffee house, leaving the two of them alone. Warner was struck by how different Caer looked. Dark bags dangled under her eyes, and crow’s feet stretched back to her temples. She was still relatively thin, but her cheeks had begun to sag, and her skin was blanched. There was now a slight stoop in her posture.

“Look at me!” Caer said. “I’m a crone! I ache in the strangest places! And my job is horrendous!”

Warner grinned. “Really?”

“This enormous bloke in a flannel shirt threatened to fire me if I didn’t treat my secretary nicer. And some ignorant perverted shite keeps calling me about his incest book. I’ve a mind to just unplug my phone.”

“Look,” Warner said, taking a deep breath, “you knew what you were in for. I can only assume it was your winning personality that prevented you from this switch before now, so don’t complain. You’re free of your curse. Now,” he said, pivoting back around and turning on the water, “I have lots of dishes to wash. So, if you don’t mind.”

He could feel her eyes burning holes in his back for several long moments, then the feeling abated, and he looked over his shoulder. Caer was gone, and, he suspected, for good. As he scrubbed the crud off plates and glasses, a Simon and Garfunkle song from his youth, “Scarborough Fair,” popped into his head. He inhaled deeply and started to whistle. The sound was erratic and insubstantial, mostly just air rushing through his teeth, but he managed to hit a few weak notes.

It wasn’t much, but it would do for now.
WE SIT HERE, you and I, together in this cell, unknowing, unaware. I watch your jerky movements, spastic, the twitches of thousands of misfired neurons. I do not remember you, and from your blank look I can see that the feeling is mutual. I do know that I loved you, even if your identity is gone, like mine.

The dry cake they feed us, delivered once a day through a wall tube, crumbles like ash, tasteless, void of nutritional value. Water drips somewhere, but I cannot locate its source. I am thirsty, my lips cracked, my skin parchment. I know nothing other than this cell, and you.

Why do they, whoever “they” are, keep us here? Flashes of intelligence secrets linger in my hippocampus, though nothing I can grab on to, vaporous and ephemeral in the eye of my mind. Information important to the opposition, to the rebels. Haven’t we given them everything they want to know?

Whatever procedure they used to delete my memories seems to have overloaded your poor brain, and you can only communicate now in grunts, reversed down the evolutionary chain to your simian ancestors. Your movements become more erratic every day, and I fear you will turn violent.

Perhaps they have forgotten about us, now that they know everything we know. Maybe our side attacked, and is unaware we are here. Or you were actually the interrogator, and I fought back. Or maybe the reverse is true. It’s impossible to know for sure.

The air grows thin. I have lost all hope of being released from this place. Either I will starve, or you will kill me in ignorant rage. I do hope it happens quickly. The one thing I hang on to is the knowledge—perhaps false, perhaps true—that at one time, long ago, I held you in my arms and kissed you, and you kissed me back.
I step to the river’s edge, the basket of plum blossoms swinging from my arm. The water at my feet moves at a lazy trickle, such a difference from my youth, when I would sit at its banks and watch the rush of current for hours, the silver and red fish leaping high into the air for the enjoyment of it, of living in a mad torrent. It’s no more than a creek now, its source dammed up by the Autarch, so that we, the common people, only get as much as absolutely necessary.

I reach into the basket and pull out the first blossom, drop it to the river’s surface. When I did this as a boy, the river swept away my offerings greedily, speeding them downstream faster than I could discern, but now the plum blossom makes its way like an old man, a man who has seen too much, done too much. A man who feels the breath of the Border Guide on the back of his neck.

I drop another plum blossom, and another, picked fresh that morning from the forest on the edge of town. The first is for my wife, for the way I spoke to her last week, the way I treated her. The second for my son, and the way I drove him away years ago, for what I said to the woman he chose for his wife. The third is for that boy, the one so long ago, whose face I still see in my nightmares, eyes open, lifeless, staring forever with mouth unhinged, and knowing I took his life. A boy with the unfortunate destiny of being born in the country of the Autarch’s enemy, just doing what he was being told, following orders, like me, only I’d been faster and a more accurate shot, and he ended up with the hole in his forehead, a third eye, unblinking for all time.

More blossoms into the river, faster and faster, I grab them in clumps now, the tears starting down my face, dripping down my nose and cheeks and joining with the river, this clump of blossoms for the girl I shunned as a teenager because she was not pretty enough, that clump
for the apprentice I berated until he hanged himself in shame. All my sins, each one relived with
the offering of the plum blossoms, a meager expiation for my many sins, and I’m on my knees
now, in the mud, the memories swirling about my head, threatening to drown me in knowing,
and I sob into my hands, and beg for forgiveness.

After a long while, a hand touches my shoulder. My wife, still beautiful. She smiles and
asks if I have finished. I wipe the tears from my face and nod, weakly. She helps me up and
supports me as we make our way back to the house. This woman who has shared my life for
more years than I can count, knows my need for an end-of-year scourging. She thinks I’m too
hard on myself. As we approach, I smell the goat slaughtered that morning being roasted over
our fire, and the sounds of my son and daughter-in-law, and their twin girls, and I know in my
heart that I don’t deserve such happiness, but am grateful for it all the same.
Blue sipped at her hazelnut-flavored Italian soda and glanced at her Mickey Mouse watch for the third time. Short arm on the twelve, long arm on the three. Goran was late again. Lack of punctuality was one of Blue’s pet peeves, and she got increasingly irritated with each subsequent tick of Mickey’s tail. She had witnessed human beings systematically attempt to capture time throughout the ages, measuring in ever-finier increments of micro, nano, pico, femto, but as those measurements grew increasingly exact, it seemed to Blue that people found more and more ways to be late.

The other patrons of the Brooklyn coffee shop chatted and devoured mocha lattés or other espresso drinks, oblivious to Blue’s growing frustration. Leather-clad students in the corner discussed Baudrillard. Three men with nearly identical shaved heads and biker tattoos lamented their slow wireless networks. A man and a woman in spiky purple haircuts whispered intently, close enough to taste each other’s breath. Shopping bags littered the floor next to all the trendy footwear, bags from Beacon’s Closet, Century 21, Daffy’s, Keith’s Organic Produce, 7th Avenue Records, Straight From the Crate, and as Blue looked at these people, she didn’t see their diversity, but instead saw a roomful of corpses. She saw their deaths, some sooner than others.

Goran Velicković was eighteen minutes late upon his grand arrival through the front door. He swept into the café with a flourish, his long black leather coat billowing out behind him like a cape. Everything about the man was bigger than life; he tended toward Armani and Gucci, and when he laughed, each person within a square block could hear it. He almost always wore an enormous smile, which he had to bleach periodically to remove the stains from habitual clove cigarette use.
He dropped into the seat opposite Blue with a dramatic sigh. “I am tardy, I know,” he said, a waft of sweet-smelling cloves drifting across the table. “These fucking subway trains, yeah?”

“Sure, Goran. But I still managed to be on time.”

Goran flashed his famous smile, the smile seen weekly on national television, the smile made eternal by that toothpaste commercial, the one with Heidi Klum, the smile that led to admittance into any club in the city, the smile that charmed the pants off of whatever young-lady-of-the-moment he happened to be chasing. It was a smile that made most people, especially women, forgive him instantly. Fortunately, Blue was not most people.

“It’s not going to work, Goran,” she said.

“Vrlo dobro, draga,” he said. Very well, my dear. He leaned back in his chair and shrugged. “I apologize for being late. Please excuse this most grievous transgression.”

Despite herself, the corners of Blue’s mouth turned up. The man was damn charming.

“Apology accepted,” she said. “You want to order anything before we get to why I called you here?”

“Yes indeed. I have been craving a chai since this morning.” Goran pushed himself up, slid out of his leather coat, gently placed the coat on the back of his chair, then glided over to the counter. Blue watched the muscles in his back move underneath his grey sweater while he fidgeted in line, and was reminded of how his muscles moved without any clothes at all. They had been lovers only briefly, a two-week fling amid the falling bombs and scattered gunfire in the last days of Slobodan Milosević’s reign.

After a moment, Goran walked back over to the table with a slice of chocolate espresso cake and a cup of steaming chai, and sipped liberally at the tea. “This shit,” he said. “They do not know how to make chai in this country. Kod Konja in Belgrade, now there was a place could make you think you were drinking Heaven.” He sipped again and made a face. “Fuck.” A sigh. “I met Milena in that café, you know.”

Goran normally didn’t talk about his dead wife. “Really?”

“Yes,” he said. “I never told you this?”

“No.”

“Well, it was long ago. We were both very young, still at university. I went to the café after class to meet some friends, but was early. She sat two tables in front of me, so beautiful in the sunlight.” Goran sighed and took another sip of chai. He smiled briefly, an involuntary reflex, and continued. “She wore a pony’s tail back then, so her hair was out of her face. But I remember one piece hanging down, here.” He motioned to an area around his right eye. “She was looking out the window, her eyes so sad. If I had brought my camera, she would have been a masterpiece.”

Goran sat silent for several moments. “It was not meant to last,” he said. “A car crash with a drunk driver and I am made single again. But for six years, we were happy as anyone I have ever known. You remind me of her sometimes.”

“I do?” Blue was fairly certain she couldn’t pass for Serbian. If anything, she appeared Chinese. It was a look that had served her well in recent years as the American fascination with Asia had risen sharply.

“Something in the eyes,” Goran said. “You express a similar sadness. Your eyes are brown and Milena’s were blue, but sadness knows all races equally. It might be this is what drew me to you in the first place.”

Blue coughed briefly into her fist. “Goran, the reason I called you here . . . I saw you on Young America last week.”

Goran clapped once and sat up straighter. “Yes! My newest reality show!”

“Reality-based show,” Blue interrupted. “That show is based on reality, and shows only a passing resemblance to it. Anyway, I saw you last week and did some digging. It’s the third show you’ve been on in two years.”

Goran nodded and shrugged, an expression of false humility. “Yes. What can I say? The American public, they love my face. They cannot resist my charisma.”

The door to the café opened and in walked a tall, svelte black man with a bald head and no eyebrows. He wore a light olive sweater, though the temperature outside was in the mid-
forties, and he took a seat near the door.

“Do you remember your life prior to meeting me?” Blue asked.

“Of course, *draga,*” Goran said. “The world did not begin with you, you know.”

“How was your love life back then? As busy as it is now?”

“I *was* married, if you remember.”

“Yes, but how long did it take to start that relationship?”

Goran’s eyebrows furrowed and he looked sidelong at Blue. “Two years. You know this.”

“That’s right, it took two years of wearing her down, right? Two years of wooing, of being considered only a friend. Two years before your first kiss.”

“She had other suitors. Plus, we were both deep in our studies. Why do you bring this up?”

“Isn’t it odd that it took so long to win Milena’s heart, when only a smile and wink is enough for pretty blonde things to spread their legs for you now? That is, if the stories you’ve told me are true.”

“Yes,” Goran said, “all true. I can almost snap my fingers and a girl is sucking me off in the middle of Central Park. I had not thought on it, but I suppose I assumed it God’s compensation for taking Milena from me. No?”

“No,” Blue said. “Think back, Goran. Try to remember when your luck started to change, when people began to respond differently to you.”

Goran frowned and folded his arms together. “I do not like where this conversation has turned. What point are you trying to make?”

“Just think for a moment.”

Goran looked toward the exposed ductwork suspended from the ceiling. Next to his cup of chai sat his slice of cake, uneaten, the smell of chocolate making Blue’s stomach grumble. “I suppose it was when I was helping to fight Milosević. When I met you.”

“Exactly. Something happened when we were together, when we were intimate. A part of me was transferred to you. Since then, you’ve been living on borrowed charisma, sponged natural
magic. You’ve been getting in the beds of young women and on television because of me.”

Goran shook his head. “I do not understand.”

Blue motioned to his half-empty cup of chai. “Watch.”

The liquid in the cup trembled, then began to swirl counter-clockwise all by itself. The swirl inverted and twisted up into a braided cone, which rose several inches above the lip of the cup. A droplet detached itself from the top of the cone and hovered in a perfect milky sphere in front of Goran’s eyes. He stood up quickly and backed away, knocking his chair over with a clatter. At his abrupt movement, the chai in the cup returned to its normal placid state, and the sphere dropped to the table’s surface with a quiet plish. Goran’s mouth hung open.

“How?”

“How is this possible?” Goran breathed. “This should not be so.”

“Like I said, natural magic. In you, it manifested as charisma and self-confidence. But others handle it differently.”

“There are others?”

Blue nodded. “Many others. Most of them you wouldn’t know about, since they don’t go around broadcasting their gifts on national television.”

“So.” Goran cleared his throat, picked up his fork, then put it back down. “So what happens now?”

“The magic you’re carrying? I need it back.”

“But . . . but if what you say is true, if I return this magic to you, I will no longer attract women. I will lose my place on my show, be kicked into the gutter.”
“Not exactly. In order for me to get the magic back, you have to die.”

Goran lurched to his feet and shoved his arms into his leather coat. “I do not accept this. However I got this gift, it is mine now. Have I not earned it for all the suffering I have seen?”

Blue leaned forward in her chair and touched Goran’s fingers with her own, looked him dead in the eyes. “It doesn’t belong to you. We can do this easy or hard, it’s your choice. If you give it back willingly, we can make it much less painful, blissful even. If we’re forced to track you down—and we will—I can’t guarantee anything other than unimaginable agony.”

Goran took a step toward the door, breaking contact with her touch. “Goodbye, Blue. I do not think we shall speak again.”

Blue sighed and nodded to the bald black man at the door. “No, Goran, we won’t.”

Before Goran could take another step, small green flames sprouted from the toes of his expensive shoes. He yelped in surprise and attempted to stamp the flames out, but they grew and traveled up his legs to his torso, his arms, his face. The eyes of the black man seated by the door blazed as green as the fire engulfing the shrieking Serbian. Several customers leapt out of their seats—the purple-headed duo, one of the bikers, two of the students—and tackled Goran onto the floor in an attempt to smother the unearthly fire, but were consumed themselves. The remaining patrons screamed and fled the coffeehouse. Blue sighed again as Goran and the good Samaritans were immolated in front of her, then took the fork off the table and cut a piece out of the cake. The combined flavor of coffee and chocolate tasted like regret, power, and inevitability.

II.

A confusion of colors, swirling, twirling, bursting apart then fusing back together, a Jackson Pollock gone horribly wrong. A hundred thousand cans of paint splattered over the canvas of Goran’s existence. No eyes to speak of, but a part of him marveled at the kaleidoscopic display to which he was the sole audience. That eruption of yellows and oranges: the bombs and explosions in the skies above Belgrade. This slow languid dribble of purples and reds: the profile of his dead wife before he introduced himself in that café. The intense inertia of the greens and blues: the
form of a man and woman hurrying away from a building fire that they caused. All other colors faded away, and Goran could feel whatever part of him that still existed being drawn toward the green man, or perhaps dragged behind him.

The violent screeching of uncountable nails on chalkboards, the rustiest of swing sets, the white noise of an infinite number of television sets and clothes washing machines. A cacophony of every sound ever created, all at once, assaulting Goran, penetrating the fabric of his being, a hellish mechanical malevolence. The crackle of flame, the piercing shrill of police sirens, the blat of car horns.

And then, abruptly, the sounds softened and the colors resolved. Goran drifted roughly twenty feet above the striding form of the bald black man who had killed him. A translucent umbilicus originating from the man’s head reached up and connected somewhere in Goran’s midsection, though he could not perceive exactly where. His own body remained hidden to him, though he could once again sense his arms and legs. As he concentrated, other vinelike threads became visible, sprouting upward from the bald man’s head like a forest of writhing translucent tubes, extending upwards into the space surrounding Goran. The air shimmered as from the heat above a bombed-out car. Shapes drifted in the haze of his peripheral vision, but dispersed when he attempted to focus on them.

Below him, the bald man was speaking. “That seemed a bit excessive, my sister. Are you sure it was absolutely necessary?”

The woman walking next to him turned her head. “You know it had to be done, Dane,” Blue said to the black man. “You’re not getting squeamish, are you?”

“Of course not,” Dane said. Goran could smell the faint acrid tang of smoke emanating from the man, as if it lived in his skin. A dim green glow surrounded his body, flickering and wavering, giving the impression of a low fire. “Just a shame, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s one more down,” Blue said. “I would have been happier had he given it back willingly, especially since it would have meant sex with him one more time, but you saw his reaction.”
Goran wasn’t sure how he could hear them so clearly, but discovered that the same was
true if he concentrated on anyone on the street below him. The street vendors, the pedestrians,
the self-proclaimed asphalt preachers. People he originally would have thought talking to them-
selves were in actuality having conversations with ghostly interlocutors that no one else could see. Ghosts were everywhere in fact, whispering in ears, tripping up feet, lifting up skirts in an
imagined breeze, talking incessantly, the street and sky packed with spirits, choked with the dead.

Had he known about this constant claustrophobic profusion of ghosts in the everyday
world, taking up any available space, chattering endlessly to those who seemed not to listen, he
might have gone mad. As it was, he was now one of them, floating helplessly behind his mur-
derer, wishing he could pass into the afterlife and be with his beloved Milena again. He was
abruptly and overwhelmingly furious at Blue for destroying his life, for passing her magic to him
in the first place. He still would have had many years left, and there were places he wished to
visit, no longer possible to see. His rage was a palpable thing, boiling out of him, a physical
force, and the air darkened around him and sparked with electricity. He howled his anger and
impotent rage, and the dogs below pissed themselves involuntarily and whimpered at their
masters. The eruption from his unseen and unfelt lungs brought the world further into focus,
more solid, more real. And in that moment, he was jolted from his helpless floating position and
drawn past dozens, hundreds of other umbilici, pulled inextricably to another connected soul, a
formless shape which quickly took the form of a small man, the two of them drawn together like
opposite magnetic forces, together and through and within.

Goran was within the other man’s soul.

He stood in the middle of a small rustic library, aware again of physical corporeal sensa-
tions. He wore a Hawai’ian shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts, an outfit he never would have
comprehended while he was alive. But they suited him here, in this place. Apart from the books
on the shelves and the carpet on the floor, the room was bare. And he had a hard time describing
the objects that were there in his mind; adjectives eluded him. The books were neither tall nor
short, red nor blue nor yellow; they were simply . . . books. The carpet under his feet was not
plush, flat, mangy, or comfortable. It just was. Goran glanced at the titles on the shelves in front of him, but could not read them. The letters were standard Roman type, but the words they formed were gibberish, no language he had ever seen, the alphanumerics shifting positions as he looked, constantly changing meaning.

A door behind him opened, and he turned. Into the room walked a short hairy man, wearing identical clothes. But where the colors and patterns on Goran's clothing remained static, on the small man they moved constantly, dizzyingly, a hundred lava lamps thrown together. The small man smiled and opened his mouth to talk; out poured what Goran imagined the written type he had seen on the spines of the books would sound like out loud, an innumerable amount of voices all talking at once. Goran winced and the small man stopped talking. He beckoned Goran forward with his hands, motioning for Goran to follow him.

They stepped into the hallway outside the door, and followed it until it ended, at an identical door. It opened onto an identical hallway, which they took to its end. This door opened onto another identical hallway. Goran and the small man entered hallway after hallway, their path discretely linear, though after forty or fifty doors, Goran began sensing a direction change, a constant turning of rights. Time had no meaning in this place, in this immortal soul; they walked on and on, always another door, always another hallway, until Goran felt he had never been anywhere else. He had always existed in this space, the hallways were all that ever were.

Goran touched the small man on the shoulder and stopped. He turned around and walked back to the door through which they had just passed, which had closed behind them. There was no reason not to expect that another hallway would lie beyond, but Goran turned the knob anyway. The door emptied into the library they had started in, but it was different this time, more familiar. The room smelled of the must and leather of his father's study in Belgrade, and the overhead light shone more softly. When he looked at the books again, he found that he could now read them, tome after tome written in beautiful Cyrillic, and he was momentarily overcome with homesickness.

"I knew you would figure it out."
The small man was smiling again, his teeth slightly discolored. On his clothing, the colors were now still. He emanated a slight fragrance of the clove cigarettes Goran used to smoke.

“What did I figure out?” Goran asked.

“The path to understanding. To travel along the circle, and then to realize that sometimes to go forward, you must go backward.”

“Circle?”

The small man nodded. “It is the geometric structure of this place. You felt the right turns as we traveled?” Goran nodded. “If you circumscribe a circle with a polygon of infinite sides, a series of seemingly straight lines can form a curve. The angles between the sides reduce to an infinitesimal number, and in effect can connect in a circular pattern.”

“Is that why we can communicate? Because we circumnavigated this circle?”

“Partially. The circle realigns your perception of language.”

“But this isn’t Serbian we’re speaking. Or English.”

“That’s right. We’re communicating through logos, what some might call the Word of God. All language is representative, an approximation of the world around us. A book in English will be livre in French, boek in Dutch, buch in German, biblio in Greek, libro in Italian and Spanish, et cetera. So many words to describe one object. Logos is the True language, the basis for what all those other languages hope to translate.” The man smiled again, proud of himself. Goran wanted to sit down.

He lowered himself into a plush leather chair that hadn’t existed a moment ago. Had he conjured it by thought?

“Yes,” said the man. “Thought equals action in this place.”

“So since we’re speaking the Word of God, does that make you God?”

“Not exactly.”

And as abruptly as an eyeblink, they were no longer in the library, but on a wharf at the edge of some seaside city, the salt and decay a physical presence in the air. There had been no sense of the time of day in the library, but out here it was nighttime. The moon shone waxy and
jaundiced overhead, remarkably free of craters; the lunar illumination that filtered down through a haze of clouds cast a sickly pall on the piers, the few sloops tied to the dock, even the water itself. Goran’s clothes had changed. He now wore a charcoal-grey suit made from a material finer than silk. It fit him perfectly, a second skin.

Goran’s guide stood next to him on the wharf, still clad in his inscrutable outlandish clothing. Even the colors on his shirt were dulled and dirtied by the diseased lunar illumination.

“Where are we now?” Goran asked.

“Borstalle-Purgatoire. A city of lost souls.” He turned away from the wharf, toward the city. “Please, follow me. I will answer all your questions, but I’m craving a chai.”

“Chai? That is my favorite drink.”

“I know.”

The man led Goran off of the wharf and into a warehouse district. Block after block of grey rectangular brick buildings, overgrown with lichen and shelf mushrooms. The smell of decomposition was stronger here, as if the city were rotting from the inside. Acorn-style lamp posts lit their way, casting off an almost greenish light. The night was humid and permeated by particulates of dust and spores. Goran coughed.

Their destination was the Café of the Asphyxiated Borough, a smallish coffeehouse and bar on the edge of the warehouse district, decorated by a sign in blockish script next to a wood-cut of two disembodied hands strangling a donkey. Inside, the café was filled with customers who spoke in melancholy whispers. The air was thick with defeat and resignation.

The guide ordered two chais at the counter, then he and Goran sat at a table in the corner. On the walls around them were shelves after shelves of old books, dusty and disused.

“So what exactly is this place?” Goran asked.

“A café.”

“No, the city.”

“This is the place we go who are killed or fundamentally changed by the elementals.”

“Blue . . . she was from the elements?”
The man nodded. “Water. She is a trickster, the first Trickster, in fact. She can change her appearance to serve her needs, even change her gender. She sprang forth from this place, where all the world’s magic originates. It encompasses a vast terrain, and Borstalle-Purgatoire is just a bump on its surface.”

“So we are not ghostly balloons connected to our killer’s head in the real world?”

“We are, but we also exist here. The afterlife doesn’t constitute a single place. Look,” he said, “look at those six men over at the bar.” Goran looked. They all seemed haggard and withdrawn, as if they had suffered enormous hardship, six different versions of Job.

“All of these men were blighted by the Trickster, as was everyone in this place. These six were the most recent before you.”

“So how am I supposed to be of help?” Goran asked.

“We, all of us,” the guide said, “are able to pool our energy and send one person back to the real world. The elementals are on their way to a used books store, and it is this place where we will send you. They are far too strong to fight, so instead you will trap them.”

“How?”

“There is a book, one capable of sending them away forever. It has been there, among its brothers and sisters, for some time, enchanted so that no one will ever pick it up. You will know it when you see it, and you will know what to do with it.

“The catch is that you will no longer be able to die. You will banish them, and set all of us free, but will never be able to see Milena again. As guardian of the book, it will never leave your side, not even when all the stars have burned out.”

“Quite a price for being a hero,” Goran said.

“It is,” the guide said. “Which is why no one else has been brave enough yet.”

Goran gazed at the assembled patrons of the café, broken down, miserable, trapped in this limbo against their wishes, in despair, the apotheosis of depression. He thought about that first magical meeting with Milena, the way she fit so perfectly into his life for the short time they were together. He remembered his rage at her death, and how his anger fueled his rebellious
activities against Milosević. That rage, that anger was sparked anew by his recent murder. How could Blue have done that to him?

“I’ll do it,” he said.

“You understand the costs?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? There is no turning back.”

Goran took a breath, held it, let it out.

“I understand. Do it.”

The guide leaned forward, stared into Goran’s face, and began speaking, softly and rhythmically, barely above a whisper, “Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat . . . ” Chanted, a mantra, the words, the nonsense words filled his body, his brain. The sound was coming from all around him now, and he could see every man and woman in the café, all turned in his direction, all speaking in unison, eyes wide, desperate, pushing their words into him, permeating the air with language. Goran’s vision doubled, trebled, multiple images of the mass of humanity overlapping, intersecting, growing bright, intense, so intense, their internal light blinding him, transforming him, transporting him, a cacophony of hope and longing, a dissonant polyphony, a beautiful destruction—

Goran blinked. The café, the voices, the damp atmosphere were gone. He stood before a massive bookshelf in his grey suit, his hand resting, lightly, on the spine of a slim book at his eye level. He pulled the book from the shelf, and it felt powerful in his hand. No author name adorned the cover, but the title proclaimed, in bold white letters, *Lies and Little Deaths*. He felt as if he was always meant to hold this book.

A quick glance around, at the tall bookshelves, the narrow aisleways, and he knew where he was. The Strand. Manhattan’s block-long used books store. He had visited several times, always able to find obscure books as presents to friends, to lovers. He was in the basement,
among the miles of hardcover review and advanced reading copies. The book in his hands, in its pristine untouched condition, felt very out of place down there.

He cradled *Lies and Little Deaths* in the crook of his arm, and made his way upstairs. Every time he had previously visited the Strand he had barely been able to move, pressed in on all sides by the multitudes of book lovers. But when he emerged from the basement of the store, to the main level, it was nearly empty. He slowly tracked his way through the aisles, seeing only a becapped teenager in the Science Fiction section, and an attractive redhead in Art History. Goran made three careful circuits through the store before remembering the Occult section.

Blue and her brother Dane pored over a large dusty-looking tome, their backs to Goran. If Dane was given time to react, Goran knew that the store would go up like kindling, the yellowed paper and old glue of eighteen miles of books the perfect fuel for the blaze.

Goran opened the book.

He wasn’t sure what he expected to happen. At the very least, he imagined a sudden rushing of wind, a micro-tornado right there in the aisle, howling, a disarray, books flying off the shelves, hair blasted back, perhaps some lightning, Blue and Dane looking at Goran simultaneously, eyes unbelieving, mouths open, screaming, “Noooooooo!” a primal shriek, barely heard over the roar of the windstorm, incredulous, in shock at the fact that not more than an hour before they had seen, absolutely seen his body erupt in green flames, aghast that he had found the only way to defeat them, knowing they were trapped, tricked, doomed forever to their own purgatory, their bodies losing cohesion, molecules sucked into his book, their screams amplified to godlike intensity, the sound bursting Goran’s eardrums as they were pulled, drawn into the book, the wind, the wind—

But none of that happened. He opened the book, heard a pop of displaced air, and then Blue and Dane were gone, vanished, disappeared. That was it. He was a little disappointed.

Goran retraced his path to the front counter and paid for the slim book. The cashier, a young guy wearing a Hawai’ian shirt, unusual for this temperature, this time of the year, familiar though Goran couldn’t place where he might have met him, this cashier rang up the book, took
Goran’s money and said, “Thank you.”

As Goran was about to exit the store, to step out into his new immortal life, he felt a hand on his arm. The beautiful redhead from Art History smiled up at him.

“You’re that guy, aren’t you? Goran something? From that reality show?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not that guy. You’re thinking of someone else. I’m sorry.”

He turned from her pretty and disillusioned face, his new book resting comfortably in a jacket pocket, opened the door, and stepped out onto the crowded streets of New York.
A cage, spacious, the size and shape of a fútbol end zone, open to the sky with a roof of thin netting. But at the same time it feels insular, filled with a stifling and oppressive heat. There’s something of the tropics in this place, a location close to the equator, the heat and humidity a way of life. The walls of the cage are crosshatched mesh, the kind you’ve seen at zoos, or animal parks, the mesh providing some illusion of freedom, no bars here, the weave open enough to allow a breeze, like the one that caresses your naked skin, but too small for disease-carrying insects, or anything bigger. The jungle beyond the enclosure is open, limitless, free. And everywhere is the sound of birds.

On the floor of the cage are dozens of empty exoskeletons, the remains of crustaceans larger than the biggest crabs you’ve ever seen, pecked apart by a powerful beak, left shattered on the concrete floor.

There is someone you need to find. It is your purpose in this place, to look for this person. Only, you can’t remember whom you’re meant to locate. You can’t remember much of anything. Your quarry might be female, though there’s no way to be sure. When you plumb the depths of long-term memory, you find experience and identity gone, as if your existence has spontaneously generated itself. The space where those memories should be is now replaced with water, an overwhelming sense of water, flowing around you, within you, through you. It is an unsettling feeling, this profusion of water.

As you continue to lean against a thick and very old banyan tree (so it’s not just a matter of losing all knowledge, since you can recognize the tree by the feel of its bark against your back, and you do know the names of things, so it’s more of a selective removal of identity, which is even more disturbing), as you sit against this tree, the patch of grass surrounding it coarse under
your naked buttocks, you feel not so much like a person as an assemblage of sensations. Faculties of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, all aggregated into . . . what? Not a soul, certainly, nor an identity.

From above, a cringe-inducing shriek: —Son of a bitch!

So lost in reverie you were that you didn’t think to look upward, to the other denizen of this cage. A great fuliginous bird in the banyan tree, its plumage dark as the deepest shadow, tipped on the ends of its wings and the top of its head with a splash of red, the color of dried blood. Its rheumy eyes glare at you. The wings extend twenty feet from tip to tip, and flap twice, sharply, the produced wind cooling the sweat on your dark hairless skin.

—Son of a bitch! it cries again.

You stand on shaky legs, the posture of a newborn colt, or a giraffe. The concrete is cool under your feet, remarkable in such blistering heat. Above, in the tree, the bird seethes with intelligence. Standing before it in your nakedness, you ask:

—Who are you?

—I? it squawks. —I? It asks of I? There is no I, only us. We are the Great Tocsin, and it is an interloper!

It flaps its wings again, a gust that nearly blows you off your feet.

—I apologize, you say. —I didn’t realize I was trespassing.

—Trespassing-trespassing-trespassing! it tics, Tourette-like. —It must pay the penalty!

The bird swoops down faster than human discerning, one swift movement that brings it right to you, a tackle, you now on your back, the bird above you, talons extended, its great long beak stabbing down at you. You struggle, but the bird outweighs you by at least fifty pounds, and it opens a gash on your shoulder, stabs deep into your thigh with its beak, scratches furrows into your chest and your face. You roar in pain and anger, and to your complete astonishment, a low green fire sprouts from your skin, licking from fingertips to feathers, igniting the bird like a bonfire. It pushes itself off of you, flaps wildly, trying to extinguish the preternatural flame, hobbling, hopping, lifting into the air several feet before crashing down again. A high unnatural
screech fills the air, a cry of knowledge and impotence, against the unfairness of the world, and before you can question any of what is happening, you reach down to grab one of the many giant crab claws on the concrete floor, and plunge it into the heart of the bird. Purple blood spurts over your hands, a final death call from the beak stained with your blood, a rattle, a shudder, and the bird is still.

From behind you, a voice, authoritative and female, says, —You didn’t have to do that, you know.

Stepping into view is a short Chinese teenager, her blue and black hair short-spiked in seventeen different directions. Dark makeup around her eyes and mouth. Clothed in silk brocade: a red jacket, embroidered with the dragon and the phoenix, and black form-fitting silk pants, embellished with the lotus and the crane. In her hands is a hand-carved walking stick, two different types of bamboo, combined, intertwined, one dark, almost obsidian, the other light, greenish. You did not see her enter the cage, and cannot think of how she has gotten inside.

—Can you understand me? she says.
—Yes.
—Why did you kill the Tocsin? It was the last of its kind in the Park.
—It attacked me.
—So? You can’t die.
—What?

The girl steps over you. She cradles the body of the charred and bloody bird, and sings a low song in a language you’ve never before heard, full of melodious words and tones. The grayish smoke from the bird’s singed feathers thickens, opaques, becoming a solid thing which detaches itself, pulsing in time to the girl’s song, and it lifts into the sky, past the netting at the top of the cage, rising higher and higher, sprouting wings, it’s only a speck now, rising, and then it disappears from sight. The bird’s physical body exhales loudly, then crumbles to ash.

She stands up, dusts herself off, looks you over.
—You’re a mess, she says.
THE SUBTERRANEAN CAVE you now inhabit is built into a large hill, not far from the cage in which you awakened. Cooler than outside, but cozy, decorated with generic landscape paintings and overstuffed furniture decades old. You lie on a dusty leather couch, but no leather you’re familiar with, and your wounds throb. The girl dressed the one in your leg, the most serious one, because, according to her, even if you can’t die, you can still lose the ability to walk if the damage is too severe. A tourniquet, a dressing, a pungent salve applied to your other scratches and gashes, stinging and numbing, the ointment made from distilled tiger saliva. At least you are no longer bleeding, and the girl even found some clothes and hiking boots for you, helping you into them without comment. You get the impression that a naked man is no big deal for her.

—My name is Ming Liu, she says. —I am the guardian of this place.
—And what exactly is this place?
—Jurong. It used to be a Singaporean bird park. Now it’s more.
—More?
—Listen, I know you have a lot of questions, but I’m not the right one to answer them.

Even if I knew the answers, I would not be allowed to tell you.

—Allowed by whom?
—That’s one of the answers I’m not allowed to give. There’s only one person who can help you: the Undine. I can take you as soon as you’re up for the trip.

Every six hours or so, she brings a jellied fruit paste for you to eat, and a tureen of cool, clear water. In between those times, she’s out, patrolling the Park, doing her rounds. You sleep fitfully, jerking awake after only a few minutes, the irrational and unconscious fear gnawing at your tired brain, the fear that when you wake again, you’ll have lost your memory once more. But eventually, you sink into slumber, dreamless in oblivion.

Ming Liu carried you here on her shoulders, fireman-style, her slight frame surprisingly strong. You passed through the mesh of the cage as if it were vapor, non-existent. A compound
illusion. When you asked her why the birds did not just fly away, she exhaled, as if this were a question a five-year-old might ask, and said:

—There’s no reason for them to test their reality, is there? The mesh was actually there at one point, but they can’t tell the difference. As long as they’re fed and kept healthy, they don’t try to escape. Now, be quiet. You’re heavy enough without all this talking.

AFTER THREE DAYS, your scrapes and gashes have healed, and your leg is sturdy enough for you to walk on it. You still experience a dull pain, and occasional twinges of something sharper, but Ming Liu assures you that it’ll go away in time. You are surprised at the rapidity of your recovery, unsure whether you naturally heal this quickly, or whether it is being in this place, in Jurong.

Ming Liu offers her walking stick, and you lean heavily on it as you both exit the cave, from the shadows into the reality of sunshine and humidity. What was once a zoological park, with clear pathways, maintained carefully by gardeners and horticulturalists, is now an overgrown jungle, crowded with hundreds of species of bamboo and palm and banyan and heliconia, a profusion of greens and pinks and yellows, a twenty-foot high canopy saving you from direct sunlight. The intensity of the light is no less diminished, though its harshness is muted from its passage through the leaves. Walking paths have been taken over by indigo mosses and Bird of Paradise and Voodoo Lily, a natural floral labyrinth, impossible to navigate without Ming Liu’s help, an invitation to losing yourself forever.

The going is slow, your reliance on the walking stick a hindrance in the heavy undergrowth. Every so often you pass another cage, more and more colorful birds, mutated, five times bigger than what you think they should be, their size ominous, and they stare at you as you hobble by, the intelligence clear in their eyes, no longer stupid animals, more dangerous for their cognizance. Any noise they normally make is silenced with your passing. Under their intense scrutiny, your skin crawls.

Spaced out along the path are several swampy pools, dark brown water infested with algae
and clumps of starfish and rotted logs. The smell of decay is strong. You see the outlines of several things swimming in the murky water, creatures with an impossible number of eyes and fins. A bevy of dragonflies hovers above one such pool, a silent communion, as if in prayer, and the serenity is destroyed by an amphibious monster, a water-born weasel which hisses as it leaps into the air and snatches three of the dragonflies in its mouth, then drops back beneath the surface with hardly a splash.

Knots of gnats pervade the air, buzzing in your eyes, your ears, your nose. You get the impression they are trying to find a way into your skull. Mosquitos nip at your skin, and you soon wear patterns of red bumps over your arms and neck. Beside the giant birds in the cages, other smaller free-ranging birds populate the countless number of trees and plants. However, you are surprised at the absence of other animals, tigers, monkeys, rodents, and you tell this to Ming Liu.

—I’ve wondered about that myself, she says. —There don’t seem to be any non-avian mammals in the Park, beside the two-legged kind. Just the insects, fish and birds.

An explosion from the greenery in front of you, a burst of feathers and small bodies, of green and red and yellow and black and blue, and you scream and fall to the ground, hands over your face, the sound and fury of countless beating wings streaking by you, a hundred thousand winged projectiles, and then they’re gone, a massive flock lifted up into the sky, an amorphous colorful blot headed where it will. Ming Liu helps you up, a smile wriggling its way onto her lips.

—Australian lorries, she says. —Come on, we’ve still a ways to go.

Limping slowly, slowly, trying not to trip over roots or the occasional mallard. Farther down the footpath, late afternoon now, is the biggest tree you’re ever likely to see, as if Yggdrasil, the Norse world-tree, has taken root in Jurong. The apotheosis of banyan trees, its massive trunk the size of a city block, sprouting hundreds of roots as thick as your body, and an infinite number of massive branches stretching up into the clouds, and beyond. Hanging from almost every available surface of the tree is a reddish moss that pulses in the breeze, as if it is breathing.
Clinging to the areas of bark not occupied by moss are gnarled shelf mushrooms the size of your
head, occupied by dozens of different kinds of insects, all crawling over the surface of the fun-
gus, teeming with life.

Suspended from one of the lower branches, thirty feet from the ground, is a spindly
middle-aged man with a blunt rifle, being attacked by dozens of small, laughing, white-bodied
birds. Their high-pitched taunts fill the air.

—Groundling!
—Carnivore!
—Piss off, meatbag!
—Slow human!
—Your mother was a cuckoo!

Surrounding the man seems to be a buffer of wind that the swarm of birds is unable to
penetrate. At your approach, the man lowers himself to the ground on his harness, and the
cyclone of air dissipates. His features are South Asian, possibly Indian, and he wears a tired
smile. The birds rise as a group, disappearing into the branches.

—Hey, Kadek, Ming Liu says. —Bali mynahs again?

—Yes, they have infested the lower levels of the tree. I have been battling with them all
morning. Silly creatures. If I could just get a clear shot, I could take care of nearly all of them.
Can you help?

—I can try, she says.

She turns to you.

—Hang on to something.

You grab the trunk of a nearby bamboo tree as Kadek ascends via the harness again. The
mynahs flock down from the branches for another assault, buffeted by the protective cyclone
that has again sprung up. Ming Liu takes the walking stick from your hand, drives it deep into
the ground, closes her eyes. She opens her mouth and emits a deep

thruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuummmmmmmm, barely perceived by the human ear, a vibration felt in the marrow
of your bones, in the air itself. The ground shakes and rumbles, leaves fall from a dozen trees, the mynahs freeze in place, equilibriums unbalanced. Kadek aims his weapon at the cluster of birds, swinging and shaking in his harness, unable to squeeze off a shot, and he's yelling to Ming Liu, but her eyes are closed and she can't hear anything for the deep bass rumble, the earthquake of her voice, and the branch Kadek is suspended from cracks, sending him straight down, a collision course with the ground, but before he hits, the weapon misfires, right in your direction, and the next thing you know is abominable pain, the low bass replaced with high-frequency shriek, the sound blinding you, an obliteration of pain, a white noise of pain, and you feel the heat rising within you, activated by the sound, by the pain, a rapid buildup of green fire, and the pressure is abruptly too much to bear, so you release the heat, the fire, and you hear screams, a multitude of screams, and slowly, slowly, the feeling dissipates and the high-frequency shriek fades and your sight returns.

Crumpled up on the ground, Ming Liu shivers, her clothes charred, her skin pink and burned underneath. Littering the ground under the tree are the smoking corpses of mynah birds, motionless. Kadek rushes over, unharmed, and gently turns Ming Liu onto her back. Her breathing is ragged, shallow. Most of her hair is gone.

Kadek's eyes accusatory, —Must you destroy every living being you meet?

—I . . . I didn't mean . . . it was . . .

—Help me. We need to bury her.

—But she's still alive. She's breathing.

—Do what I say! It is the only thing that can help her.

Scattered on the ground near the trunk of the banyan tree are groundskeeping tools, including a pair of shovels. The two of you dig into the ground, far enough away from the roots that the going is rough but consistent, and after the hole is deep enough, about three feet, you and Kadek lift Ming Liu and place her into it. You are still unsure about this, but the look on Kadek's face is stern, such a difference from before. You throw the dirt over her, creating a small mound to cover Ming Liu's still living form. Kadek tamps the dirt tight with his shovel.
He then tends to the dead mynah birds, planting each one in the ground surrounding Ming Liu, digging with his fingers, an oval perimeter of dead guards, dead sentries.

—What are you doing?
—You deserve no explanation, Kadek says. —Sit over there and do not talk to me.

You hobble to the base of the great tree, sit on a massive root. From your position, you hear Kadek sing in a low voice, in the same strange language you heard earlier from Ming Liu. But this song sounds different, not a goodbye, not a release, but more of a plea. The song, soothing, seeps into your brain, and you lean against the tree, the exhaustion of hiking and the most recent events taking over your body, and you are asleep in minutes.

The next morning, you awaken to fog, and voices. Kadek and Ming Liu stand just out of earshot, arguing intensely in hushed tones. It crosses your mind that they are discussing what to do with you.

Ming Liu catches your eye and cuts off a sentence mid-word. She gingerly makes her way over, aided by the bamboo walking stick, her steps delicate. Her hair has already started growing back, blue already streaking through the black, as if it is her natural. Her skin is smooth and unburned. To your surprise, her expression is not fury, nor reproach, but concern.

—Are you all right? she says.
—I think so. Are you all right?
—It appears I am. The rebirth was successful.
—Are you immortal too?
She laughs, a boisterous sound that doesn’t fit with her small frame.
—No, I’m not immortal. You are, and the Undine is, but not me.
—So how?
—I told you. Rebirth.

And as you look closer, there are subtle differences, the eyes tilted just a bit more, the cheekbones higher, the lips fuller, the face less round. She radiates a glow, possibly the glow of
rebirth, but it seems more than that, a happiness that wasn’t there before. A definite improvement.

—But it was so fast, you say.
—I had help.

She pads over to the freshly disturbed grave, and digs with her toes in the surrounding dirt. A miniscule bird skeleton pushes to the surface, its hollow bones stripped completely. Dozens of its brothers and sisters poke out of the ground, the group of annoying Bali mynahs silenced forever. Even the ones in the tree are mute today.

—What is it with you and endangered species? she says with a bit of a smirk.
—It was an accident, that gun Kadek had . . .
—I know, I know. You probably would have gotten a similar response from me. But listen, you’ve got to learn to control your abilities better. I’ve seen you do it, so I know it’s possible.
—You’ve seen me?
—Yes. From before.
—Please, Ming Liu, tell me what’s going on. If you knew me before I lost my memory, you’ve got to help me out.

She opens her mouth, her eyes showing an eagerness to reveal the truth. But then she shakes her head. —I’m sorry. It’s not my place.

The fury wells up within you, the helplessness, the frustration. Why won’t anyone just level with you? Why all the secrecy and mystery?

—Why not? Why isn’t your place?
—It just isn’t. The Undine . . .

She closes her mouth again, as if this is a bit of information she wasn’t supposed to reveal. The Undine seems to be pulling all the strings in this place.

—Fine, you say. —I’ll have to find out from her directly. I get it.

Kadek steps into view, a look of shame and embarrassment in his eyes.

—I must apologize for my behavior yesterday, he says to you. —It wasn’t completely your
fault, what happened, and I was angry with myself as well.

He gathers all his tools together in a bag, shoulders everything, and shakes your hand.

—Good luck.

—You're not coming?

—No. I have duties within the Park, but I will see you when you return.

He turns and disappears into the jungle, humming a tune loudly to himself. After several moments, the humming fades away, and Ming Liu turns to you.

—Ready?

She leads you halfway around the base of the giant banyan tree, carefully navigating the network of roots and frequently putting out a hand to balance herself, coming after several minutes to a split in the trunk on the other side, a dark gash. A cold breeze drifts out of the opening, bringing with it dampness, leafmold and decay, the smells of a forest in much cooler climes.

She taps the gash with the head of her walking stick, and it widens, opens, the wind from inside rippling your clothes and chilling your bald head. A motion from Ming Liu, an indication to enter the tree. The thought of so much coldness makes you nervous, but you squeeze through the gash, pushing through into total darkness, instantly chilled to the bone. She follows, and the gash closes again with a wet sucking sound.

—What happens now? you yell to be heard over the gale.

She takes your hand and squeezes tight. The wind changes direction and increases, pulling you upward, and your feet gently leave the ground. You float for a moment, then you are jerked upward, pushed from below and pulled from above, and you're unable to tell how fast because of the darkness but your stomach lurches, and your internal organs feel as though they want to escape through your feet. You fall upward, twisting now, and turning, and the nausea pushes bile into your throat but you clamp your teeth. Ming Liu's hand grips yours, so tight that you'll have bruises later. Falling forever and always, as if this will never stop, as if you will fall upwards into the blackness of space, and beyond, falling past the limits of the solar system, the galaxy, the
universe itself, never to return.

But then, your movement slows, and a dim light creeps into your vision, getting brighter, expanding from a point into a fuzzy halo. A hole, a passage to daylight, and you’re through it, once again emerging into daylight, brighter than supernova. You hover above a wooden platform, you’re held up by the wind within the tree, you float there amid the upper branches. Ming Liu performs a series of deft maneuvers, twisting and contorting her body, wriggling out of the column of air and landing easily on the platform. You clumsily follow her example and manage to tumble out, landing on your injured leg, and the pain from your thigh shoots up your spine and into the base of your skull.

—You okay?
—Fine, you grunt.

The sunlight is so bright here, unfiltered by the branches and leaves closer to the ground. It is almost too much, being surrounded, pushed down by the illumination, by the fiery ball close enough for you to reach up a hand and caress it. But gradually, your eyes begin to adjust.

She helps you up and hands you the walking stick.
—Here. You still need this more than me.

A walkway, wooden, cherry or mahogany, stretches out before you from the platform, disappearing into the upper branches, a latticework of struts and trusses. Once again, she takes you by the hand, and over the side of the walkway you see an infinity of branches. You stay to the center of the boards. From far below you can hear the sounds of birdcall, but it is muted. This high up, you expect the air to be cold and thin, a constant assault of wind currents, but it feels almost exactly the same as when you were on the ground, hot and sticky, the barest hint of a breeze.

From nowhere, a giant thing passes overhead, like a pterodactyl with a two-hundred-foot wingspan, a leviathan of the air, and it screeches, filling the sky with its cry, and Ming Liu pushes you to hug the branches, to stay out of sight.

You whisper, —Does it attack?
—Not me. It won’t hurt me. But it’s still angry about what you did to its babies.
—What?
—Quiet.
—What did I do?
—Quiet.

The mammoth bird screeches again, then veers off, away. You press against the branches until she tells you it’s okay. A few moments later, from far away, the bird cries again, a mother raging over her lost children.
—Come on.

Around and over and through, a dizzying number of turns and doubling-backs, and then you are there. A clearing in the branches, a wide circular landing, above which hovers a small zeppelin, no more than thirty feet long, tethered to the landing with steel cables. Hanging from the sides of the balloon are a pair of flesh-colored flaps, lobes, like the ears of an elephant, thin material but sturdy-looking, blending into the fabric of the balloon, seamless. The deck underneath is enclosed, but surrounded by open windscreens. Through the windows at the bow of the airship, a middle-aged thin man is visible, working several controls in a brisk manner. As you and Ming Liu board the airship via the flexible gangplank that stretches from the landing up to the deck, the man looks familiar, and when he turns around, you see why. It is Kadek.
—I thought he wasn’t coming with us, you say, confused at how he could have beaten you two up here.

Ming Liu smiles. Kadek approaches, but . . . he appears different, filled out, not so spindly, an easy smile that reaches up into his eyes, and his clothes are different, a sleeveless shirt and cargo pants, and he is clearly not the man you met before.
—I am Wayan, he says slowly, as if talking to an infant, or someone hard of hearing, or a foreigner. —I am the pilot of this ship.
—Amazing, you say. —You and Kadek, you’re twins?
—Septuplets, actually. Seven of us to keep the grounds. You think the Park’s a jungle now,
you should see it when we're not working on it.

Wayan laughs, a joyous boisterous sound that seems to come all the way up from his toes, as if he has just told the funniest joke in the world. It is infectious, and you grin involuntarily. He wipes a tear away.

—My job is reconnaissance, the eyes in the skies. I report anything unusual back to my brothers. And I’ve been known to take passengers where they need to go.

—We’re headed for the Undine’s Waterfall, Ming Liu says.

Wayan nods. —I figured as much. She would definitely want to see him.

It is unnerving, everyone you meet knowing who you are, but unwilling, or unable, to tell you anything, who you are, why you have no memory, what exactly you are doing in Jurong, how you came to be here. You take a deep breath, trying not to burst into an exasperated diatribe, or something worse, go with the flow, breathe, breathe, breathe.

Wayan smacks you on the arm. —Shall we make way?

Ming Liu sinks into a bean bag chair on the deck, made from the same leathery material as the couch in her cave, closes her eyes, and promptly falls asleep. Wayan chuckles.

—It amazes me the way she can do that. But I know how uncomfortable she is traveling by air, being so far up from the ground, from her earth. No worries, we will wake her when we reach the waterfall. Come, stand up at the front with me.

Wayan gives you a leather strap, shows you how to hook it around your waist, hook it to a support loop on the control panel. He dons a similar strap, and does the same. On the panel are dozens of buttons, gauges, levers, a complicated array of controls, illustrated by simple pictograms. One button and the gangplank retracts, another and the cables unmoor themselves from the landing, slither up and disappear underneath the deck. The zeppelin rises slowly, clearing the last of the Mother Tree’s upper branches, your view now unhindered, the vast swath of Jurong extending in all directions, stopped only by the two oceans on either side.

—Here we go, Wayan says and pulls a lever. The elephant ears on either side of the airship raise, then lower, up down up down up down, faster and faster, building speed, producing an
amazing amount of wind, faster, now up to the speed of a hummingbird, or a dragonfly, the sound a roar at tornado-strength, and Wayan grins and pulls another lever and the dirigible launches forward.

Windscreens slide up on all sides of the deck. Your ears pop. You can’t tell how fast you are traveling, but the clouds streak overhead. After a moment, Wayan tells you that it is safe to walk around. You unhook yourself from the control panel and step to a starboard windscreen. Below, far below, the ground passes quickly beneath the ship, out of the Park proper and into miles and miles of city buildings, all overgrown by lichen, ivy, fungi, luminescent violet kudzu. Streets are barely discernible as thoroughfares, so choked they are by hundreds of species of greenery. And above the dimmed roar of the passing wind is the combined sound thousands upon thousands of cries and squawks and trills, the noise of the bird park writ large.

—Where are all the people? you ask.

—I do not know. In all the time I have been here, I cannot remember encountering anyone other than my brothers, the Undine and Ming Liu. And you.

—Was it always like this?

—It does not appear so, Wayan says. —At one point this whole area must have been a great metropolis, a thriving area of commerce. You see how tall the buildings are. Now, Jurong encompasses everything, all of Singapore, stretching up into Malaysia and Thailand, and down into Indonesia, where I am from.

—So how did you come to work in this place?

—I . . . you know, I no longer remember. I have been here a very long time, but I cannot actually recall when or how I first came here. Isn’t that strange?

—Do you think the Undine knows?

—It is possible. She knows many things. I suppose I never really considered the question before now, content to do my work. Perhaps I shall ask her.

You pass the next minutes in silence, staring out at the verdant landscape, Wayan stolidly operating the controls. The flight brings you parallel to a wide river that runs the entire length of
what used to be Singapore, a vast blue bifurcation in an otherwise field of green. In the distance, at the river’s source, rises a gigantic waterfall at least a thousand feet tall. The spray is visible even at this distance, powerful in its magnitude. And the *déjà vu* hits you, and you know you’ve been here before.

Something about this place, it gnaws at your guts, at your cullions, an importance. Ming Liu says the Undine has all the answers, but it’s more than that, more than just the promise of knowledge. It is the feeling of inevitability, as if you were meant to come here, that this is somehow *right*.

Wayan maneuvers the zeppelin to a landing platform at the waterfall’s cliff, discharges the mooring cables, extends the flexible gangplank. The hummingbird flaps slow and slow and slow and stop. He presses more buttons and the airship sighs, as if the trip has exhausted it. You look back to Ming Liu, yawning and stretching in the bean bag.

The three of you disembark, the warm mist making the air heavy, hard to breathe. Underneath the cross-hatched metal platform: a spiral stairway, stretching down, all the way down, the bottom obscured, disappearing into mist and distance. Ming Liu takes the lead, and the three of you start down, the steps slippery from condensed vapor, every inch of handrail and stair and support covered with rust. You briefly wonder about the stability of the structure, whether it will hold your combined weight, but as you progress you hear no groans, no straining metal, and it’s entirely possible the rust is the only thing holding the stairway together.

You walk for nearly an hour before stopping to rest. Your clothes are saturated, soaked to your skivvies, as they say, and Ming Liu’s short spiky hair is plastered to her skull. From several hip pockets, Wayan produces bean paste balls, seven-treasure dumplings wrapped in banana leaves, and bars of tamarind candy, sweet, salty and chewy. Munching without words, the roar of the falls preventing conversation, and after finishing, the descent begins again, down and down and down. You lose all sense of time, as if you have been walking these stairs your entire life, the step-step-step a hypnosis, a trance, down the spiral forever, the aching in your calves and quadriceps always there. Haven’t you reached the center of the earth already?
A few close calls, wetness on the steps or handrail, a brief vertigo, a momentary slip but a quick recovery. No one loses his or her balance, grabbing for the handrail, the bolts coming free, eaten away by rust and time, as he or she plummets end over end, a wordless shriek, disappearing into the mist, swallowed up by the natural world. You almost prefer something like that to this endless walking.

And then, abruptly, you stop. You’ve reached a wide landing, cross-hatched with moss and clover and bird droppings, though you’ve seen no birds in the vicinity, with a plank that leads behind the waterfall, perhaps to a cave in the rock. Ming Liu smiles at you, squeezes your hand, says something you can’t hear.

You don’t want to go inside. This place curls up in your stomach and scrabbles like a bag of rats. Happily, you’ll stay on the landing, getting wetter and wetter from mist and spray, skin wrinkling and puckering, a meat statue for all time, ossifying, calcifying, an everlasting reminder of cowardice, but then Ming Liu and Wayan nudge you gently from behind, propelling you onto the plank and beyond the waterfall and into the cave.

Only, it’s not a cave. The roar of the waterfall is gone, and your ears ring in the sudden silence. You stand in a vast ornate chamber, lit by candles in sconces along the walls and in holders on tables, decorated with paintings and complex tapestries. Upon turning around you see no evidence of the entrance through which you passed, no waterfall, no walkway, just solid wall, wooden, or something like it. It is a chamber of royalty, intimidating. The floor is constructed of black and white tiles, constantly moving, forming new patterns, shifting, moving, fluid art. At the far end of the room is an intricate fountain, three layers of marble animals spouting water from mouths and cisterns and other orifices, and on the top sits the most beautiful woman you have ever seen, made entirely of water.

—Welcome back, Dane, she says. —It’s good to see you again.

She hurts your heart, her beauty a palpable thing in the chamber, a gravitational well, drawing your attention and fixing it. The dim light from the candles bends to flatter her every curve, while simultaneously reflecting off of her liquid form, throwing wavery patterns onto the
walls and the floor. You feel an intense urge to kneel before her, to pledge your undying loyalty, but you remain standing.

—You know who I am, she says.
—You are the Undine.
—That’s correct. Partially. I am the water goddess and the ruler of this place. I was there when the world cooled and the elements formed, springing to life from the natural magic of this new existence. As were you.
—I was?
—Yes, Dane. You are my brother, and I am your sister.

The Undine stands, and an arc of water trickles from her position down to the floor at your feet. She steps into the arc as if it is an escalator, and travels the short distance to directly in front of you, her water conveyance disappearing into her form, reassimilating into her body. The barest touch of her fingers on your cheek and you are sobbing, though you can't think of why. Her smile is beatific. You cannot imagine being a sibling to this goddess.

—I know, she whispers, a susurratus that reverberates throughout your body, and all at once you feel exhausted, and the only thing you want to do is sleep in the presence of this beautiful woman, this creature who fills you with longing and shame. You sink to your knees and close your eyes, feeling her hand on your bald head as the world slips away and you sink into the darkness of dream.

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You awaken in a large bed of silk sheets, surrounded by pillows, in a room decorated with Chinese characters and delicate watercolor artwork. It feels as if you have slept for days, your mouth gummy, your eyes crusted at the corners. Yawn and stretch, and there is a tureen of water on a table next to the bed which you drink from, greedily. You stop for a moment, suddenly struck with the notion that you are drinking the Undine, that this is her sleeping place, and you find that you don’t care, that you would drink her down completely if you could, in order to feel
closer to her.

You roll out of bed, the tiled floor cool on your bare feet. The clothes you were wearing are stacked neatly next to the bed. You dress quickly, not bothering with the hiking boots, happy to feel the cool floor with your toes, and then step out of the bedroom and back into the main chamber. The Undine is nowhere to be seen, not at the fountain or anywhere else in the room.

Next to the fountain is a dining table for one, adorned with a shiny red tablecloth and laid out with an unusual meal of cooked fish, a lychee bunch stuffed in its mouth, and next to it a glass of pale wine. As you get closer, you identify the fish as one of the amphibious weasels swimming around in the swamps of Jurong. A slice has been cut and displayed on a bone china plate, the food still steaming, and the smell makes your stomach clench with hunger. Saliva springs into your mouth as you sit down to the table.

You alternate between pieces of the weasel and the golf ball-sized lychee, a mixture of fishy and sweet tastes that dissolve on your tongue. The wine is in actuality a type of mead, a powerful concoction with all the flavors of springtime, honeysuckle and jasmine and flowers in bloom, and you stop at half a glass, wary of becoming drunk on the ambrosia. After finishing the weasel and the fruit, leaving nothing but the head and bones, you sit back in the chair, pleasantly full, content. Happy.

Movement from behind you, delicate footsteps, and the Undine appears at the side of your table.

—Feeling better?
—Yes. Thank you.
—I suppose you have many questions. Let me start by saying that I wish your amnesia hadn’t been necessary. Hurting you is the last thing I wanted to do.

—You did this to me?
—Yes.
—Why?
—You had become obsessed with the nature of this place.
—Jurong?

She nods. —You couldn’t handle the reality of the situation, that Jurong is a prison, a fictive imagining. After an eternity of folly and trickery, it is my punishment, and yours as well. We were sent here by a man you and I both wronged, one I had seen die with my own eyes. But he was just the agent of retribution for a hundred thousand acts of pain and ruin.

—This is a prison? Is there any way out?

—No, and this is what drove your rage. I still see this rage within you, still burning, ready to leap out and consume us all.

You breathe slowly, but she is right, you can feel the frustration and humiliation rising again, like a living thing.

—And I take most of the blame for our being here. You always followed my lead, obeyed my commands, like a trusted lieutenant. But I was the one behind all our schemes, our reign of amoral terror, done for my amusement. If I hadn’t ordered you to kill the one who sent us here, we never would have been enslaved in the first place.

You smell smoke, burning cloth, and realize you are scorching your own clothing. It is her fault that you are here, trapped in this jungle setting. Who is she to take your memory, to rob you of your identity?

Between gritted teeth, you say, —How long have we been here?

— It is impossible to tell. Time moves strangely in this place. Many years, if not centuries. You explode.

The Undine throws up a protective shield of water, but it evaporates in seconds. She screams, a multi-harmonic shriek that would shatter glass, the sound ringing in your ears as her form is completely transformed into steam. The walls of the Undine’s chamber burst outward, and you see the waterfall in front of you, and it boils and evaporates with the power of your rage. Your feet lift from the ground and you pass through the hole in the chamber back into the outside air, your heat melting the spiral stairway on which you traveled, turning the rust and metal into slag, the anger unending now, expanding outward in all directions. You are a super-
nova, a hundred nuclear bombs, the Big Bang. The energy of your wrath sears the landscape, turns to ash any living thing in the Park, the trees, the plants, the birds, the insects, the fish.

Before you, the scenery becomes a wasteland, a charred and scorched destruction. You drift down and down, to the bottom of what used to be the waterfall, now nothing but blackened rocks and ash. You scream yourself hoarse, you sob uncontrollably, the tears misting as soon as they leave your eyes. Your muscles contract to the point of pain. It isn’t fair. The screams of protest carry to the skies, but there is no answer.

You sit, alone in your misery, emptied out, the ash of a million million trees drifting around you. You are immortal, and the only thing you want right now is to die.

Out of the smoke, nine figures emerge. The Undine, Ming Liu, Wayan, Kadek, and the five other Indonesian brothers.

—Well, says Ming Liu, —that was certainly unproductive.

You shiver, suddenly, uncontrollably.

The Undine puts a hand to your shoulder. —It is fortunate that I have some command over this place. Jurong will regenerate, and I can bring back all the plant and animal life, though it may take some doing.

—What will you do to me? you ask. —Will you erase my memory again?

—No. This clearly did not work last time. And punishment seems to be out of the question. Instead, we will help you.

—How?

—We will teach you to accept, to see beyond the reasoning of events, beyond the fairness of the universe. To understand that things happen, such as our imprisonment, and that it is not for us to obsess over why, or to dwell on it, but to move on. We will teach you to live.

—Like this, Kadek says. —In through the nose, filling up your lungs, and out through the mouth. Good. Better.

You sit on the ground at the base of the newly grown Mother Tree, learning to breathe, to
meditate. More and more mynahs populate the Mother Tree every day, mocking Kadek with their taunts. But he shows a vast amount of patience, not accepting their provocation, treating them with respect even as he stuns them with his sonic weapon, stores them in a canvas sack, and relocates them to other sections of the Park.

You have noticed a change in yourself as well, a feeling of increasing peace. Your mind relaxes and the memories slowly return, not stolen but buried, hidden away until you were prepared to deal with them. The actions of your past shame you, the lies, the pain you caused, the countless lives affected by the actions of you and your sister. With this gradual recollection, you can appreciate more fully the person you were, and the person you wish to become.

The meditation over, Wayan slaps you on the back and smiles. He hands you the bag of groundskeeping tools, and you follow him through a path to a northeastern area of the Park, the home of tens of thousands of flamingos. The Park becomes more familiar every day as you reacquaint yourself, the paths no longer quite so labyrinthine, the heat no longer so intolerable.

At Flamingo Lake, you trim away dead foliage, you plant new strains of lily, you dig a new pool for the specialized nursery, where the flamingos can raise their young away from the other birds in the park. You dig, the shovel solid in your hands, each thunk a verification of existence, the moistened soil and plants filling your nostrils with life, you dig and your thoughts of how to escape such a place vanish, and your worries about the nature of your imprisonment evaporate, you dig for the feel of the tool in your hands, for the productivity of it, you dig, you dig, you dig, and you are alive.
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“Songstress,” *Electric Velocipede*, Fall 2003


“One Less,” *Americana*, February 2005

“Solipsister,” *Electric Velocipede*, Fall 2005

“Ghost Dancing,” *Four Seasons in One Day*, October 2003; reprinted in *Znak Sagite*, October 2004


“Watersnake, Firesnake,” *Claw & Quill*, March 2005

“Skin Flute,” *Fishnet Magazine*, July 2004