

JOHN LOVES A HOOKER

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First Edition

Dedicated to:
Dr. Megan Otton, who told me this was a thing sort of
worth pursuing.

A monkey and a cat walk into a bar. The monkey buys the cat a beer and rambles on about how hard life has been lately. He suspects that his monkey wife is cheating on him and that his monkey children secretly hate him and that sometimes it feels like the entire world is conspiring against him.

The cat watches the monkey from across the table, sipping a beer. Not a peep leaves its mouth.

After a few more drinks the monkey finally breaks down. Tears roll down his hairy cheeks. He pulls his lips back, revealing a set of bright red gums. A sign of distress.

The cat doesn't understand what this means and just sits there quietly, watching the monkey's sad eyes, unsure of what to make of it. It can't look away.

"I really needed a friend. Thank you. I think this is helping, I'm feeling better already." But the feeling of relief is quickly fleeting. The monkey needs more than a set of fluffy ears. "Won't you say something?" The monkey begs.

But the cat doesn't say a word.

The cat does not speak Monkey.

THURSDAY

PROLOGUE: A RUSSIAN MISINTERPRETATION

Can you buy doorknobs in bulk? The door and the frame I can always salvage. The doorknobs though...

This is not the time. This is really not the time to be thinking about this but I'm trying to keep my mind off of something right now. I really wish I'd made a habit of it to actually think things through during the many important events that have occurred during my lonely time on this planet. I thought I could make myself feel like a more confident human being if I were to simply just quit second-guessing myself at every turn. I wish I were the type to *just go with it*.

But I've got just this one door knob left. Brand new. The brass so shiny and scuff-free that one could easily eat salo off of it. So lonely, sitting up there all by itself in that kitchen cabinet reserved for just this one sort of item. The doorknob is waiting for me to free it of that miserable prison they call packaging—that unbreakable plastic shell, created by masochists, I would guess. God, I hate that stuff, more so, I hate the fact that every single time I need to open one of those packages I seem to never have any sharp objects nearby. Somewhere, some time ago, I read that a can opener works fantastically for cleanly and safely opening such

packages—I'll have to try that out if I ever get a chance.

Unless I go through with *this*, that is.

I should go and buy another can opener.

Like that will solve all of my problems.

But then again, sometimes all it takes is a little distraction. Anything for a moment to reconsider what I'm about to do.

A can opener. Yes. God, it must be hard to choose just the right one—so many features, so many styles and shapes and sizes. I bet there's even a can opener that can tell you the time.

Make a note.

It may be on me—my mistake about this entire door knob situation. I'm slowly becoming more aware of it with each passing moment. But I know that if I go out right now and buy a bunch more doorknobs, then I would feel a million times better. More doorknobs. More can openers and maybe even some cleaning supplies because I'm desperately lacking in... I need to make a list. Lists always help, I hear.

Hell. I might even consider changing my mind about doing what I'm about to do. It could help to calm my nerves.

I read somewhere that if you could talk to somebody when they want to be doing what I'm about to do, even if for just a few minutes—if they help to get your mind off of making this decision for just a moment and think about something else—then you might never go through with it.

Supposedly, what I'm about to do is *always* done on impulse. Do they *all* go through this sort of nonsense in *their* heads before it happens?

Who do I talk to?

Who do I tell that this is beginning to feel like a pretty long fucking impulse?

A healthy-minded human always needs to have a set of rules or ideals they must live by, which cannot be broken under any circumstance. I'm not exactly sure what people mean when they say *ideals*, but I can tell you for sure that I do have some rules. My main rule is to always, *ALWAYS* keep

at least two freshly packaged replacement doorknobs ready to be installed at any moments notice. I'm slipping—I really am losing it now. Maybe I should go out and buy a thousand of these fucking things and finally live in peace for a little while longer. However much time or money it may take, I'll do it. It's for a better, safer future. Mother and father always taught me to think about the future. I could never get mad, or feel upset about their parenting methods because I was told that everything would make sense to me as I got older. If only they taught me exactly when *that* may be.

I want to do whatever it may take to make myself a happy, satisfied man right now. Free of all bad thoughts.

Relax.

Deep breath.

Remember that article you read: *The Five Benefits of Meditation*? You can have those benefits—they are yours to take!

Fuck, what were they again...

Maybe if the world would just stop for one goddamn second and listen to me, I would be able to share this amazing idea I've been cooking up in my head for the last five minutes. They, the world that is, can make my life easier, and help mankind as well, if this idea were to be applied to the real world. So *they*, whoever that may be, can produce these door knobs that would come with some sort of frequency wave sending...technology thing. I'm no scientist. And, *and*, these henchmen, these assholes that love to kick doors down, well, they can mass-produce *them* with a manner chip installed in their brains that would interact with these specialty door knobs. It could also work as a remote shocking device if necessary—which it totally is.

Brilliant, just goddamn brilliant.

Just goddamn perfect.

Can you imagine for a moment the real-world applications? Upon approaching a door that these assholes are about to kick down, this frequency-sending-door-knob-thing would send a signal to this henchman's head. This

signal would then travel from the brain chip through their spine, down to the nerve endings in that savagely powerful door-kicking-leg, stopping it right in its tracks. And...and then, this signal would travel to the arm, and send the appropriate frequency to their hand, forcing them to mimic the motion a decent human being would normally make when politely knocking on somebody's door. The henchman doesn't even need to be fully aware of what's happening to his body—at least not for a time period long enough for me to get to the door, open it myself, and greet him like a regular fucking human being.

Damn it.

I keep doing this shit—once again I've gotten myself way too excited about an idea, only to let myself down shortly afterwards when I give it a pathetic little moment of rational thought. Either always be rational or always irrational. These fleeting bursts of either one are degrading. They remind me that I'm always living on some extreme end of a spectrum. Jumping from one end to the next, always hopping over the ordinary middle. The more I think about it now, the worse I feel about this whole thing, and about myself in general. This idea would never fly. Door knob manufacturers don't want to go bankrupt by making a product that would last a lifetime. No, they need to continue making these cheap, breakable door knobs. Henchmen, who lack manners, need to be unsuspectingly gunned down once in a while before they get bored and some sense of power gets to their heads. Before they decide that they need to move onto bigger and better things in life.

But, everyone needs to continue on making their money—it's all just politics or economy or any of those important-sounding things they don't teach you in high school. Not that I ever really understood them; but I feel like they never gave me a chance, either. Sometimes, I really do feel like this country is conspiring against me. Maybe it's in my roots. Maybe, it's in this pure blood flowing through my veins.

Maybe my parents were right about everything.

Maybe I just like to continue telling myself these things—I like to think that everyone does, and I think it makes sense to try to fit myself into the bigger picture. The grand scheme of things, which I doubt that I will ever understand.

I think I know what it is: it's this stereotype that I've been forced into, which I believe hardly fits me. It really stuck for some reason and I've had absolutely no control over any of it. None of it is my fault.

Ever.

I promise.

I was only a five-year-old when my family migrated to this country to start a new life. Instead of allowing me to have a new, easily pronounceable, strong American name like Clint, Magnus, or even Rambo, they insisted that I keep the *stronger* name that Old Country gifted me with. They told me I would be proud of it later on. That it would all make sense once I got older. I remember it being something to do with reasons of not forgetting the Old Country and everything that it stood for, and that I must always display a strong sense of pride of where I come from. Let not my new memories of this land of corrupt politicians and baggy pants substitute the ones I've attained throughout all my years of living in the Old Country.

You are more good than American pig.

I am?

Yes, because you are of Old Country and everything of Old Country are more good. Every colour of person touch fresh fruit in store here. If we had fresh fruit in Old Country, only ones of Old Country blood would be touching fresh fruit with hand. Here clean water is bullshit because chemicals to control head and make more fat.

I don't know how strong of an accent I had at five years old, but it seemed to stick with me—people heard it whenever I spoke, even to this day. Maybe it was the way I insisted on my name being pronounced—I had great pride in my name, they *had* to get it right. But they just kept mistaking the A's for O's no matter how persistent I was in getting them so say it right, no matter how annoying this

whole thing got to them. Shortly afterwards, people simply gave up and resorted to simply calling me Yuri, Mikhail, or better known as *Migghhaaaell*, and of course: Boris. Fucking Boris, *I've* never even met a Boris in my entire life.

They called me these names, and soon I gave up and I let them. Laughing it off with them as if it wasn't slowly killing me on the inside.

If only I had a strong American name like Duncan, Morgan, or Tiger, none of *this* would've happened. None of it was *ever* my fault.

How did I get the name I have now? As of not too long ago, the only live human interactions I've experienced have been with a group of very hostile men with very strong legs. There's nothing I can do about it—they *have to* come see me once in a while—I have no say in the matter. I could never build up the courage to stand up to these men and get them to even *try* to get my name right. So, these impatient, humour-lacking, unimaginative, soulless bastards, who couldn't even think of *Boris*, came up with a quick fix to this name dilemma thing for me.

I would from then on be known simply as *Skinny Russian*. I don't even get a *The Skinny Russian*. But now that I think back on it—I don't remember ever asking for it.

Bad people. Radishes—every single one of them.

Rediski!

Names, names, names—I guess you are what they call you.

Blenders.

Goddamn blenders.

Who knew that a broken old blender would get me into this much trouble with these sorts of people? None of this is my fault. Not a single goddamn bit. All I ever wanted was a new blender. A *fancy* new blender that would blend just about anything you can think of and make it absolutely delicious. I couldn't just go to any store and buy any thirty-dollar blender again. Hell no, not since my old one turned out to be such a piece of garbage. I still cringe thinking

about the sound it made when those rusty old rotors malfunctioned and propelled the glass into the air, landing on my kitchen floor. Glass everywhere.

I saw in a movie once that someone had blended a barbecued chicken. I had to. Now, I can't really remember what I had been blending before the incident. But, I am sure that I put it to good use. I'm sure that the blender was an essential part of my daily life.

Shit yeah, I needed a real blender—a man's blender—I wanted to have the power to blend bricks, if I wanted to. I wanted a blender so solid that I could make all the margaritas in the world and not be judged under the assumption that such a beast of a blender would only be capable of making *manly* margaritas. I just wanted *the* blender. Something I could use to blend other blenders if I wanted to. And who wouldn't, if they could?

I blame my general social anxiety issues on the fact that ever since I moved to this country, I've had to constantly deal with this crippling language barrier. I never really went out to meet people in the real world. It was because of my name I think, the reason for not personally knowing any blender experts out there. I needed a guru, a master—someone to teach me everything there ever was to know about the delicate art of blending.

If only I'd known where all of this would lead to, I would have gone and kicked my own ass out into the real world and learned everything there was to know from my own blending experiences. My own ups and downs. Blenders may have gotten broken over and over again. It may have cost me a bit more. But goddamn it, if an infinite amount of monkeys would eventually write Shakespeare, I would've eventually stumbled upon the perfect blender on my very own.

My own efforts.

My own hard work.

How proud would I have been of myself then?

But no, I turned to the mighty, all-knowing internet for help. My eyes and mind were suddenly open as everyone I

stumbled across seemed to know everything and anything about the subject. Everyone was such an expert. Everyone also had an opinion, which I thought helped to filter out the phonies. I learned that the person providing a seemingly *expert* opinion could be proven wrong if they could somehow be compared to Hitler or had a shitty internet service provider.

Eight-hundred-dollar phones, complete turkey dinners, video game controllers—they all blended. Computer disks, toy guns, and even plungers. Video cameras, unwanted Christmas gifts, oh and of course, smoothies. The recipes were endless.

A *why do that?* could easily and instantly be countered with a simple *why not?* It was freedom and I loved it. I was hooked. Over a brief period, my simple fascination became a full-blown obsession. Possibilities were endless; time was not. I had to pick just one. I *still* needed a functional blender, despite all these possibilities. I made sure to remind myself that I hadn't yet lost sight of my main goal.

With whatever spirit of Old Country I had left in me I decided to follow in the footsteps of a comrade I met through a forum and try to live out the same blending adventures he'd gotten himself into. I don't know what he looked like, or exactly what country he lived in. But goddamn it we got along. I once told him about a movie I watched with my parents when I was little, it was about a bunch of rascals getting up to no good while in prison—a film that took quite a dark turn, now that I actually give it some thought. He'd seen that movie too! He was even able to summarize the entire plot in a tight, almost professionally written paragraph that looked like it could've been ripped straight out of a movie database of sorts. Damn, he always sounded so smart.

We became friends because we shared similar thoughts on America. He agreed with me when I gave him my opinion about how stupid the current haircuts all Americans have now are, and how the similar-looking haircut, that was a trend back in the Old Country, was much better because the

people there have style and class. The same style and class that's always getting ripped off by the west.

We got along so well. Funny to think now that we never actually spoke to each other in our native language. But I'm sure that he was fluent, because I was sure that I was as well, and we didn't need to prove anything to one another. I thought that made for a stronger friendship. Either way, we could really relate to each other, him being from the Old Country basically rendered us brothers—fighting the good fight against capitalism...or socialism...or whatever it was that our people were supposed to be fighting for or against.

Biodiesel.

My faceless comrade used his fancy blender to brew homemade biodiesel. Shortly after becoming best friends with him, I decided that I also wanted to make biodiesel. The industrial-sized blender, although far more than I had budgeted for, I could scrape up enough money for. The gallons of olive oil, the bags of lye, the methanol, especially—those I could not afford on my salary as an ex-burger flipper, at least, not in the quantities required to really make this thing pay off in the long run. Oh, and the car—why make all this fuel if you don't even have a car to fill it up with? A fairly new Volkswagen sufficed. The used diesel models may have been thousands of dollars more expensive compared to their gasoline counterparts, but it was all worth it. Yeah, I needed some real capital if I were to go into this all they way like my comrade did.

Long story short, I met some well-dressed, but poorly behaved people and made some big promises. Having learned so much about the subject by the time I approached them gave me enough confidence to talk the talk. I was really able to sell them on the idea of lending me a few bucks. Everything was working out in my favour. Passion goes a long way, I learned. The direction in which it can take you, well...

Now? For the past few weeks I've done nothing but sit around in my kitchen, sulking. Every now and again I'll try

experimenting with a new batch, hoping that it won't cost me another fuel filter replacement for the Volkswagen. I often contemplate whether this was the right move for me. But in hindsight, I feel that without this, I would've been even more lost than I am right now. No money has come of this business venture; absolutely nothing has been paid back so far. At the time, it seemed like the perfect business opportunity, despite the options seeming endless. Looking online for new ideas hasn't worked out, it's so distracting with all this information around you.

I know Old Country wouldn't throw all this information around to confuse their citizens. Old Country would tell my parents when they were satisfied—and I always believed that they were. They didn't need billboards and neon signs to promise such things, even if Old Country could afford billboards and neon signs in the first place.

The Russian biodiesel mixologist simply stopped talking to me one day. I don't know why. At first, I was hurt. Then, I thought, maybe he made it big with his work. He was probably just so caught up with the dealings and intricacies of running a successful biodiesel business that he'd forgotten all about me. Over time I learned to let go and simply feel happy for him. It assured me that I was probably on the right track with my own work.

But there was no goodbye. He just vanished.

I *know* in my heart that I'm happy for him, so why does it still hurt so much?

Despite all this reminiscing the impulse feels just as potent. Maybe this was meant to be. Or maybe it's not as easy to talk *yourself* out of it as one might think.

Now I'm standing over this little plastic tub full of hot water, watching this bar of soap aimlessly float around in it, slowly dissolving. I can almost make out my own reflection in the murky puddle. *Don't look*. A small part of me hopes that this shower curtain won't hold up the weight.

Don't look!

Yeah, wait for that soap to get nice and soggy, you're

almost there.

Can you see it?

Here I go now.

Can you buy fuel filters in bulk?

This is beginning to feel like a pretty long fucking impulse.

WHEN JOHN IS NOT AROUND

The early morning sun outlined the backs of four ceramic monkeys placed along the length of an eggshell-coloured windowsill. Vinyl paint chips that had flaked and fallen off of the frame had collected into a fair-sized pile near the damp, moldy patch on the carpet meeting with the bubbled-up wallpaper. A line of bookshelves, ranging in styles from the 80s, all the way up to IKEA, concealed most of the mess. The shelves were littered with softcover romance novels unsatisfied housewives would find in the bargain bins of their local grocery stores. The rest of the space kept revisions upon revisions of manuscripts for many of the same types of novels. Whatever space remained on these shelves, be it in the scattered cracks and crevices, the top or underneath, be it behind, was filled with various research documents pulled out of blogs or similar sources that collectively talked about the greatest minds of the past couple of centuries, in an abridged format.

The scuffed-up silver band on the scuffed-up silver watch scraped across the heavy oak desk, dragging with it an old manicured hand that set itself upon a fresh 300 page manuscript. There was a brief dramatic pause, then wrinkled fingers finally came alive with a dull, contemplative tap

dance atop the cover page. The other hand stroked a grey patch of stubble on the crinkly chin, squeezing and tugging away at the cheeks with the thumb and index finger, releasing the tension, and continuing down toward the breast pocket of the brown tweed jacket with beige elbow patches. The colour of the jacket complemented The Editor's eyes, only it was much less judgemental.

Like watching clouds form, the man sitting across the desk could never seem to figure out what to make of the shape of the liver spot on The Editor's head. The spot which The Editor had to convince himself into believing to be concealed by his ever thinning white hair.

"Is this it? Is this your best? It's the same thing as last time," the dull, contemplative dance of the fingertips came to a boring halt.

The Writer feverishly scratched at the itchy part on the inside of his inner thigh, just above the knees. His other hand, as if habitually, reached behind his head to fiddle with the collar of a grey cardigan suffering from an incurable case of pilling. His confounded grey eyes said, "*what!*"; his thin, cracked lips unlatched to make a, "completely different this time!" sound. "It takes place in Africa—people love African shit these days! You have to stay topical if this thing is to make any money." He ceased scratching and reached forward and give the manuscript titled *Burning Waterfalls* a persuasive hammer-down with his bony fist. followed by a lame wink.

"You've got to have more ideas than this. It's too much like your last novel. It won't fly with the people who actually have any say around here."

"What, don't you like Africa?"

Ignoring his comment, The Editor shooed away the bony hand and carelessly flipped through a few random pages of the manuscript, "*I'm already getting bored with the stories you write.*"

"It's only my second novel!"

"I know, I know—but I'm already seeing a pattern. But don't mistake repetition for style. I have to tell you this now

before you get even more carried away with what you're doing. You've got the same sense of loneliness—I mean, damn. I don't know how to explain it. But there must be *other* feelings of loneliness people can identify with. I get that it's a universal feeling, perhaps you may need a different approach. You know? Anyway, it's alleviated by some romance that materializes out of thin air—totally unbelievable. Whatever. Some buy into it, sure. Then some tragedy that isn't nearly as inevitable as you lead your readers to believe." He paused to massage his face, "you've even got the same scar on the guy's hand. The same scar that you have right there on *yours*! I mean, *I* don't care enough to make the connection here. You think your readers, who don't even know you or have ever seen you, will?"

"Maybe when I get famous they will...when they look back at it?" The writer finally acknowledged the criticism and let it sink in for a moment. "Or...whatever, man—I think you're a racist—everyone should like Africa."

"Quit being a smart ass—don't you realize people can see right through that? Even if they can't put it into words, there's going to be a feeling in the backs of their heads telling them something's off. Something not entirely genuine. I'm being serious here."

"You're being pretty damn harsh is what you're being. I told you, it's a totally different setting, that's what really matters. You can't change *everything*. The waterfalls in—"

"Also," The Editor interrupted, "I'm very certain that there are no waterfalls in Africa. And I'm a pretty smart man you know. I've been places. I know things."

"Are you sure about that?" The Writer scratched the itch on the old scar in the palm of his right hand against the top of his knee, simultaneously avoiding the convicting gaze picking away at his self-esteem.

"Whatever. Doesn't matter." The Editor reached for a wooden pipe tucked away at the far corner of his desk. His face was overcome with disappointment when he suddenly remembered that he hadn't stocked up tobacco for it. Reaching into the breast pocket of his blazer for a pack of

cigarettes, he continued, “shit...I’ll make it work, I guess.” He placed a cigarette in the crack between his lips, through the small opening in the side of his mouth he said, “I’m going to start with—” he spotted The Writer itching, pulled the cigarette from his mouth, and presented it to the fidgeting writer.

“No thanks.”

“Really? This whole time I took you for a smoker. Don’t know why I’ve never asked. What the hell kind of writer *are* you? Hah!”

“Not a cliché one, if you’re asking,” The Writer replied, “never had one in my life, I don’t think.”

“Funny...” The Editor took the cigarette back and lit it, taking a few personal moments to enjoy that feel of the initial burn in the roof of his mouth, the sound of the gentle crackle of its embers, and the sight of that first puffy cloud on the exhale. While watching a thin trail of blue smoke emerge from the tip of his cigarette, The Editor caught sight of an impatient writer and snapped back to reality “...first thing that I’m going to do,” he pulled in a deep, long drag. Exhale, “I’m going to change the name of the protagonist.”

“What! Why!?” He ceased the scratching and lunged for his manuscript with open arms as if it were a baby carriage plummeting down a flight of stairs.

“Because, you can’t use the same name for the guy in every one of your novels.”

“*They* do that all the time though!”

“Yeah, in a series...without that, it’s just lame. It’s past unimaginative. I get it though—you’re a writer. You want to have a thing.” Another smooth exhale, “pick a different thing. Besides, are you really going to keep writing about a sad sap named John who goes out of his way to get hurt and then find a reason to kill his love interest all the time? That’s going to get old, fast. That’s not a way to develop a fan base,” The Editor shook his head disapprovingly, “that’s a surefire way to lose all of your female readers.”

“You didn’t give me this much shit last time, you know that?” The Writer threw the manuscript back down on the

desk, leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Fine.”

“And the title. The title has got to go.” The liver spot shook side to side. The head followed.

“I—”

“It’s a stupid title! Remember your last one: *Instant Depth?*”

“Yeah, and I thought it was a great idea. It’s clever... because the drowning...death...” the truth slowly dawned on him, as if for the first time “...and everything.”

“Every idea sounds like a great idea until you put it down on paper. Unfortunately, even that isn’t enough for some to see it for what it is—horseshit. Some people are simply oblivious. It’s a bad title and I hope you feel bad about it. So, the name goes, the title goes, and I am going to spend some serious time changing a bunch of nouns and verbs to make this thing here sound *somewhat* fresh.”

“How long?”

“The usual—a few months, at least. Have to roll over it again just to see how bad the situation *really* is. Got anything to keep yourself busy in the meantime?”

The chair was suddenly too uncomfortable for The Writer to sit in any longer. He got to his feet and commenced a monotonous pace around the room. The worn out heels of his boots *clicked* and *clacked* with every child-like stomp against the hardwood floor. With nothing more to lose, he finally turned to The Editor and said, “I could get started on another one of my books. Got some ideas here and there.”

“Uhm...” The Editor looked down at the manuscript in front of him in the same way a parent would look at their house when their five-year-old offered to paint the rest of the rooms with crayons. “You should try something different.”

“What? You don’t think I should write any more?” he looked back at The Editor with the same look a five-year-old would give his parents while offering free haircuts for the entire family, after having shaved the dog.

“I’m not saying that you should quit writing. I’m saying perhaps...change things up a bit? Live a life? Get a

girlfriend...A little boy meets world sort of thing? You really come off as a type of guy who's in need of...something."

"But I *prefer* being alone...it helps me write."

"Maybe if you were to change," he twirled the cigarette around and watched the circles of smoke form in the air, hoping to distract The Writer and make the stalling feel a little less awkward, "...you can write something different. You know?"

"What do you mean? Like some sort of social commentary or something?"

"A commentary on what?"

"What does it matter? Technology, gluten-free diets, something current. Throw in a few obscure analogies here and there and people will buy into it thinking it might mean something."

"How about a little effort?" The exasperated liver spot hid inside the palm of The Editor's hand.

"Or, I can do an allegory for 9/11—I hear that's still popular. At least for another decade or so, with the way things are going."

"No. Well. Shit...I don't know, it's just the way you write I guess. Maybe it's because you're fairly new—the reason why I see something...better. Perhaps it's something you've yet to dial in. I hate to use the word, but: *potential*. You can do better. Even this whole Africa thing. It sounds romantic and all, and it will sell, I guess...in the way that everything can be sold."

"But what's the problem?"

"Ugh shit...I just don't feel the love."

"I *know* love. OK?"

"I know you love your words. That doesn't count."

"I don't..." the five-year-old who discovered he wasn't on his way to Disneyland after all looked down at his sweat-stained plain white t-shirt that he bought in bulk, five for \$20.

"Yeah," The Editor pointed his cigarette at the t-shirt, "and change *that*. Look, just do this—for yourself."

"I can't just all of a sudden..." The Writer flailed his arms around and stomped his feet. Looking down, his voice was brittle when he blurted out, "fall in love..."

"No, no you can't. But start by meeting some people. Make some friends for once."

"Aren't you my friend though?"

"Goddamn it. Can you go outside and write in a journal or something? Write what you feel or see or do, not the same derivative rubbish you think up while locked up inside of your apartment. Go sit at a park bench. Go hang out at a pier—any of that introspective nonsense that other writers do."

"There aren't any piers around here...how do you expect me to do something original while telling me to do the most cliché shit imaginable?"

"You have to start somewhere. Clichés are there for a reason, they're always a safe bet when starting off with anything new. Clichés are comfortable." The Editor's voice grew more irritated, "go look at some mountains. Have you even been outside this city?"

"There aren't even lakes!" The Writer answered. "No, I haven't."

"Damn it," the cigarette burned rapidly between his lips, "go look out of a window or something. I'm sure there are guides for how this goes. I can only give you so much advice before I start to feel responsible for the outcome of this experiment. Look, I'm trying to help you."

"But why can't I just keep doing what I'm doing. You said it's gonna sell."

"Because for some sick reason I want to see you be happy."

"I think you just want to see me different. Happiness is horseshit, any smart person would know that," The Writer said, confidently.

"Oh yeah? And what makes you so smart? Who, aside from yourself, thinks that you're such a smart person?"

"Well, I don't really know many people. But I do think about all sorts of things a lot."

"Here's what I think: the problem with so-called *smart*

people is that they think they're too smart to be happy. Too smart to take risks, to just let things go, in case there's something left to figure out in their own thoughts. Then comes the problem with dumb people who get the idea into their heads that just because they're miserable, they must be smart. The problem which both groups share is they think they're exempt from any such generalizations. So which group do you think *you* fall into?"

"Neither."

"What do you mean? Are you happy?"

"I'm content." The Writer's voice became more assertive, almost as if he'd been preparing for this type of question his entire life.

"But are you happy with being content?"

"I'm content with it. Happiness is fleeting--anybody who tries to convince themselves that perpetual happiness exists is delusional."

"See!" The Editor cheered "there's your first cliché! Good, roll with it. So what then? You're going to remain as is?"

"I'm a writer, I need to stay neutral."

Hoping he wouldn't have to resort to such accusations, The Editor finally gave in, "I would argue that you're simply comfortable remaining a wimp is what you are."

"For fucks sake," The Writer dug a nail into the scar on his hand, twisting and turning it, feeling the sting escape him the deeper he went, "why the hell are you being so difficult all of a sudden?"

"Because," The Editor slammed his hand down on the manuscript. He looked up at The Writer in the same way a father would when his five-year-old perpetually asked him why he can't grow up to be an astronaut firefighter, despite providing a valid set of reasons. "Next time, I won't take something like this from you."

"Then I'll go to somebody else!"

The Writer heard the words, *no, you won't*, even before they left The Editor's mouth.

"Fine then!" The Writer flipped through some random

collections of notes stashed on the shelf beside him, “at least give me something to start with.”

“Just a notepad,” he discarded the burnt cigarette filter into the cup of the wooden pipe, “and a list of your major character flaws.”

HIPPOCRATUS REX

“This early in the morning—shouldn’t you kids still be asleep?”

“I...uhh...they couldn’t afford the nightly rate.”

“Whatever you say...”

Sometimes, the only thing she’d have for lunch was the carmine-flavoured lipstick she would lick off of her bottom lip, particularly on the more stressful days, when she would need to interact with a new human being. The taste would keep her mind distracted from jumping to conclusions when it came to first impressions. Sometimes, she thought, maybe it’s worth it to simply sit and listen. But some people make it harder than others.

The plastic rose on the tip of her red heel, having been glued back on more times than she can remember, gradually separated from the top with each unaware wobble of her foot. Looking around the hotel room brought back memories of her high-school graduation night, where both the living room and the bedroom provided enough real estate and privacy that the two couples wouldn’t have to avoid eye contact the next day.

A young pair of intimidated eyes, about a decade younger

than Christina's, watched cautiously. His unaware hands tugged away at a boy band era-sized dress shirt haphazardly tucked into his jeans.

"Every minute, Jeremy. Every minute is costing your friends money." She fixed the uncomfortably tight blue tiger-striped leather skirt that Jeremy's friends requested she'd wear, "how about we make the best of it, huh?" Most of his friends' experience and knowledge had come from secretly watching *Pretty Woman* alone in their basements.

Christina sat facing him. The back of the chair pressed against her chest, her arms rested atop the rail. With her legs spread, she aimed herself toward the timid, early twenties Jeremy, who was trying to be respectful by not staring into the void.

"Yeah, don't look it in the eyes," she said sarcastically, "it might eat *you*."

She snuck in a brief inspection of her breasts to make sure that they were still aesthetically pleasing in the way she had them pushed up along her crossed forearms. The white tank top connected to the skirt with a large torso ring and showed just enough cleavage to still be considered classy.

Jeremy was sure that his friends were but a block away, laughing to themselves.

"Well?" She asked and licked some more fish scales off of her lips.

"I just..." he muttered. Jeremy brought his hands up to his face and peeked through the cracks of his fingers, "...is this—?"

"What? Is this what?" Her eyes wandered around the hotel room for a clock to stare at in hopes that it might make the time go by in a more exciting manner.

"You know...normal?"

"Normal for it take so long to get started?" Her head swung back around toward Jeremy. "Shit." With a raise of an eyebrow, she said, "actually. Honestly—it really is."

"No," Jeremy struggled to make sense of the feelings that the blue tiger stripe skirt invoked in him, "I mean, for guys my age," Jeremy looked away to hide the shame on his face.

“Jeremy!” Christina snapped her fingers to grab his attention. Spellbound by her commanding authority, Jeremy’s eyes followed her fingertips all the way down toward her crotch, “do not stop looking until I tell you to. Got it?”

“Ok”

“Now. What the hell do you mean for your age? Is it normal to *fuck* at your age? Yes. People can fuck at whatever age they want...to a certain extent. Hey! Keep looking! How old are you, anyways?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Good,” she said, “that’s a good age.”

“I guess I just wanted to know: do you get many people... *this* young?”

“Who cares, Jeremy!” She hiked her skirt up in a slow, seductive manner, revealing to Jeremy more of her smooth thighs, but really just to open up the circulation to her legs as they were falling asleep. “Seriously, who cares!” She slid herself and the chair toward Jeremy, who at this point, had almost completely been swallowed up by the gaping cracks in the cushions of the leather couch. “Am I your girlfriend?”

“What!”

“No. I am not. And you’re not going to see me again after this.”

“I’m not?”

“Shit. Probably not. I don’t know, man.”

“Look, sorry. I’m not exactly sure how to act right now. It’s my first time with a...” because in Jeremy’s head, it was totally plausible that behind the hotel room door stood a seven-foot tall, monosyllabic behemoth by the name of *Sven*, who would not only break Jeremy’s legs if he were to offend the Christina, but would also tell his mother about his whereabouts, and shortly afterward, the entire neighbourhood. This would be absolutely tragic for Jeremy as his broken legs would prohibit him from running away from the shame. When he looked up at Christina all he saw was a frightening image of his mother shouting at him, and behind her, somewhere back in the corner, stood Freud, nodding his head approvingly.

"You can say it," in the gentlest manner possible, Christina swatted away the blonde bangs of the wig obstructing her vision.

"...With a prostitute."

"A hooker, Jeremy," she said in a commanding tone.

"But that makes it sound so much worse."

"Worse, huh?"

"Uhhh...bad."

"Hah! Hey, pal, I don't need your sympathy. The word *prostitute* constitutes a talent—fucking, is not a talent. Dressing up as Pretty Woman is *definitely not* a talent. Got that?"

"Well, what's *your* talent then? What did you do before all this?"

"Damn it, you know that I'm still on the clock for this?"

"Yeah, yes I know." Jeremy's voice grew calmer, the tension in his body began to dissipate. "Not my money, right?" He smiled awkwardly.

"A shrink. I was a shrink."

"Really!" His face was overcome with delight, "were you good at...it?" He leaned in closer.

Christina rested her chin on her forearms and looked off to the door, "you know...I never got to find out. What I *can* tell you is that I had a lot of clients, very specific sorts of clients," referring to the fact that her breasts, although not too large, are just the right size for any man walking down the street to not feel *too* intimidated by them and think that she was out of his league. Referring to her legs, although long, slim, toned and lead up to an aesthetically pleasing set of butt cheeks, are slightly bowed when observed from a certain angle under the right kind of light.

"I can believe *that!*" Jeremy exclaimed, feeling foolish immediately afterward.

"Exactly, Jeremy, it's *this*..." her arms exploded out from the sides. She sucked them back in to air-cup her average-sized breasts, "...that got me a lot of clients..." her hands hovered along the contours of her body and grabbed a firm hold of her thighs, "...it's *this* that attracted the sorts of

clients that turned out to be whining, bitching, middle-aged men who convinced themselves that every tiny little hurdle they encountered in life was an impenetrable wall. All to do, in one way or another, with a woman that they have, had, or could never get in their life. Shit, it's not something I could comprehend at the time. I was just a good little girl, I was so eager to learn and help out every miserable chump out there. Wanted to do good in life and all that crap they teach you in kindergarten." She paused to catch her breath, then let loose an exasperated sigh, "and you know what?"

His nodding indicated for her to keep going, while his eyes, for the first time, found themselves admiring how nice her breasts looked resting atop her forearms.

"Yeah...I really believed that I could help everyone. What sort of entitled...with an over-inflated sense of importance...something...twat was I? Who was *I* to help everyone? And you know what—when I wasn't sure of what to do next—I sympathized. I sympathized so hard with these fools that their problems became mine...ughhh...that's what happens, Jeremy. That is what happens when you let yourself care for someone..." she paused to get the *please go on* look from Jeremy. "...but who the fuck is *anyone* to do anything good? To really change something? Someone. I mean, we're all just a bunch of helpless little shits fucking around, waiting for our turn to die. Some just feel more entitled to be heard than others I guess. Some more delusional to think they have the capacity to help anybody.

"A word of advice, Jeremy," she paused.

"Uhhh..."

"Be careful who you feel sorry for."

"Uhuh..."

"Over time, it seemed that the more I talked with these clients, the more exacerbated their problems became. It was almost as if they'd dig up anything, and I mean *anything*, out of their heads just to keep these sessions going. I didn't know if I was bad at my job or if every guy who spent enough time with me became convinced that eventually I'd fall in love with them. Imagine how easy it is to fall into the

trap and think you're the *exception* when I'm so willing to listen to every word you need to say, and with an attitude so inviting. Anyways, I needed an escape."

"Drugs?"

"No, no. Well, not in the sense that you're implying," she stuck her forearms out to display a complete lack of needle-induced bruises. "Come on, it wasn't *that* bad. I did start going out quite a lot. I lost my shit a little bit, spending many nights after work getting hammered and spewing my mouth off to anyone who would stop for a moment to listen," pausing to remind Jeremy of the breasts that aren't too large and the legs which are only slightly bowed, "the audience didn't seem grand enough, so at some point in all of this I started a damn blog where I wrote down everything I talked about with my clients just so that I could get other peoples' opinions on the subjects. I was sure I wasn't crazy. But a second or third or thousandth opinion couldn't hurt. Some responses I got were quite helpful, the rest were misunderstood morons going off about how this would never happen in their perfect homes with their perfect fucking lives. Funny looking back at it all: very rarely was my professional integrity put into question. But, you can guess where this is all going, right? I got caught, I lost everything I've ever worked for and now I'm here dressed up as Julia fucking Roberts.

"How was that?" She sneered at Jeremy. "That get you going or what?" Looking Jeremy directly in the eyes, she mimicked a stroking motion with her hand.

"Do you like doing *this*?" Because nobody wants to sleep with a hooker who doesn't take pleasure in her profession. It just so happened now that Jeremy recalled that the red heels with roses at the tips were not the long black leather boots he so distinctly remembered from the classic film. He couldn't bring himself to point out the mistake to Christina.

"Come on, Jeremy. Are we gonna do this or what?" She snapped her fingers and pointed to her crotch, "look, Jeremy...vagina! Besides, what the hell—you're a fairly good-looking guy. I mean, just don't attempt to grow your

facial hair out for a few more decades and you're good to go. You shouldn't have problems getting any. What's the deal here?"

"Well..." Jeremy casually rotated his body to position himself on the couch more comfortably, laying down on his back. His face pointed toward the ceiling. Fingers locked together. Hands rested on his relaxed stomach. A deep, relaxing breath—

"Jeremy..." Caution spiked in her eyes, Christina stood up and backed away from the chair.

Another deep rela—

"Come on, Jeremy, did you not hear anything I was saying? Get your pants off. Please don't take that deep, relaxing breath," she pleaded, "I know where this is going!"

"I just haven't had much confidence lately...ever since my girlfriend broke up with me. You know? My friends don't get it. This is what I get for opening up to them. I think *this here* is what I need. Is that alright?"

"...Jeremy."

"I listened to you, didn't I?" He turned his sullen mug toward her.

"But..." *The customer always gets what he wants*, she was told when she signed on for this. *It will be over before you know it. Just close your eyes and let it happen.*

"Please?"

THE SPLIT

...John's head hurts—or at least he's trying to make it seem as if it's hurting. He paces back and forth in his apartment while rubbing at his temples. Occasionally he will pinch the bridge of his nose and squint his eyes tight, hoping to squeeze out a drop of emotion...

...John can't seem to take a proper shit. No matter how hard he squeezes, it almost never happens. Not completely, at least. Eventually he will have to add hemorrhoid cream to that extensive collection of medication in his bathroom cabinet full of goodies. His worst fear, aside from somebody 'actually understanding him' one day, would have to be receiving an enema. ~~He rolls his eyes as if that part will not make it into his new book and crosses out the last line.~~ After several safety wipes, he pulls his pants up and reaches inside the cabinet full of painkillers and antidepressants that help him with his 'headache' and various other afflictions. Among all the other medication, these antidepressants are the primary cause of his chronic constipation...

...John believes that by waking up every day in the late

afternoon with a hangover, or in a moderate amount of pain of some sort, might help to provide him with that burst of inspiration he's been looking for to help in jump-starting his latest masterpiece. He likes to walk over to look out that window, with that one loose little drape flailing around in the wind so dramatically, obstructing his vision of the outside world, and just think about life.

~~Is this how he actually thinks? Consciously?~~

~~Just keep it flowing for now.~~

~~John also thinks that by making his inner voice come off as some sort of a caricature will make his deep seated fears and insecurities easier to deal with.~~

Like it will stop you from thinking about it in the first place.

Resting dangerously close to the edge of the windowsill sits a cheap glass with two fingers worth of ~~vodka scotch~~ bourbon, ~~watered down with an ice cube or four too many.~~ His mouth expels a series of comically dry coughs when he tries to down the entire glass in one swift gulp. Drinking ~~scotch~~ bourbon alone in his home during the afternoon would presumably make John more sophisticated, or damaged, or whatever think up more of these later on.

Maybe make a list? Lists help.

“Whatever...” The Writer placed the empty glass back on the windowsill. He pulled out a notebook from the back pocket of his jeans and briefly ran through his last few entries, crossing out the things he was sure he wouldn't use. With another round of cautious optimism, he took hold of the teal, square-edged pen, that he snatched up from the DMV the last time he had to get his license replaced, and resumed scribbling down the next series of his internal ramblings.

The Writer took a contemplative pause when tip of the pen touched down upon the faint blue line. He walked over to the wooden chair by his desk where he kept a checkered cashmere scarf hanging over the frame, wrapped it around

his neck a few times, and backtracked to the window. His pen began to work; his mind followed.

John, I've got a really bad feeling about you just... jumping into this whole thing here like this. Forget what your so-called 'friend' said earlier. It's too soon to start changing. Besides, who the hell is he to tell you to change—do you see HIM doing anything worthwhile? All he does is criticize. He's wrong and you're perfect and you know it. Just take a seat for a while, think about where you want your story to go. Turn around, look! What's that? Is that your laptop and your comfy chair? You love to sit on that thing—it's where all the magic happens, ever. That's how you and I work best.

The Writer released the tension in his hand. He took a moment to examine the life happening right in front of him only three stories below. Immediately, he spotted a wide array of colourful characters and allowed his imagination to wander and figure out their stories. The Writer watched a pair of homeless people fighting over whose turn it was to use the stolen shopping cart. A sweaty fat man, doing something resembling jogging, came to a halt because the feud in front of him blocked off the entire sidewalk, and not because he was at all tired. With every passing moment the tip of the pen tapped nervously along the edge of The Writer's leg. The feeling of unease spread down to his fingers, forcing them to shove the pen back into the spine of the imitation leather notebook.

The cork of the worn-out boots tapped along the crudely nailed down hardwood floor of the studio apartment. Unopened bottles of all varieties of liquor, in all shapes and sizes, decorated random spaces. The tapping continued along, past the dusty couch, stopping in front of the kid-sized, Swedish-style desk, where a brand new laptop, one that would load his word processor three seconds quicker than his old one, resided. The Writer unravelled the cashmere scarf from his neck, threw it over top the spine of the chair, and sat himself down. He methodically placed his hands along the sides of his computer and took a deep

breath. He swung open the lid with the type of confidence and determination only a writer could possess. The screen came to life; an endless world of possibilities reflected in his eyes.

Good, John. Damn that scarf, damn that scarf to hell, you don't want to go outside, you've seen what happens. Powerless to the smile that envelops his regularly sad-looking face, he opens up the computer and blocks the outside world from his head, continuing on with what he usually does best. He thinks about that summer he spent in Africa with his beloved family and recalls what it was that had first inspired him to write about it.

"No, I shouldn't...he *could* be right after all." Sliding back in the chair, he whipped his head toward the window. The Writer longingly watched the beauty and elegance of the sheer white drape fluttering about. He listened to the sound of the crows fighting over a piece of bread mid-flight and the mellow tune of the men outside on the street, arguing over who it really was that stole the shopping cart in the first place. He wondered if the jogger was still standing there, watching, or if he'd regained his breath enough to continue on.

Yes, you definitely should. Stop looking, stop dreaming. Face reality—it's always been like this; it always will be. Who cares what your editor told you? Do you think he really knows you? Who is he to tell you how to live your life? What has he done? Do you think that he even likes you? You think he's your friend?

"Perhaps...yeah."

No, he definitely is not. A real friend wouldn't put a pal in such a tight situation as he did you. He wouldn't manipulate you as he did. He's supposed to be helping you. I'm your friend and you need to keep on listening to me and do as I say. I can keep you safe. I've kept you safe your entire life—I'm here for you now, and always. I would never betray you. Not like everybody else had. It's better this way. Trust me, I know what's best. Now, just think up a fun story and start writing! Forget this notebook nonsense.

The yelling coming from the outside, although scary and uninviting, was just intriguing enough to cause The Writer to recall where it was that he had left his house keys. He scratched at that inner part of the upper thigh, causing the flimsy wooden chair to rock back and forth. That squeaky, old chair that should've fallen apart many years ago, but hadn't yet.

No, John!

"Fuck!" The cork of the boots dug into the uneven hardwood floor as he stood himself up. His body became stiff. The Writer's hands channelled the childlike fury pumping through his veins and grabbed a firm hold of the laptop by the sides, bringing it up over his head. His bloodshot eyes stared into the void of the daffodil yellow prison wall built out of two-by-fours, drywall, and mismatched screws. The tips of his fingers grew whiter from the increasing pressure.

OK. OK John...take it easy. Please.

"You need to let me do something!" The childlike fury channelled out through his mouth, "just one, fucking, thing!"

Fine! Fine, John. You wanna go outside? You want to meet some nice people? Huh? Like the ones on the street down below us? Where you can get stabbed, or get run over by a car, or be collateral damage in some terrorist plot? Is that what you want? Fine, I'm not going to stop you.

~~Not for now at least...~~

"I heard that..." The Writer released the mighty grip from the laptop and rested it on top of the Swedish desk. His old boots shimmied toward the house keys. With a swift lean and grab the keys were in his hands, the boots continued on toward the front door.

Hey, John.

John, stop walking.

Aren't you scared?

The boots came to a halt, the grip on the keys loosened; his eyes remained fixated on the doorknob. "Scared of what?"

Oh, I don't know...rejection. Maybe?

"I don't..." The Writer swallowed the lump in his throat, "I don't expect to find a girlfriend *right away*." He took a hesitant step toward the exit, "I could just...walk around...maybe talk to a stranger?"

Talk to a stranger? Are you sure you can just walk up to, and talk to anyone—you think it's that easy? Tell me then, what will you talk about? What do you have in common with them? It's not just women that can reject you, John—it's the entire world that can. And will. You think you'll care about having a girlfriend when you learn that the entire world despises you, simply for being you? What would you have to say to that? How do you get yourself out of that one? Some risks are not worth taking. Yes, please think about it. You don't have to move a single step now.

Think about what you have here. Think about what's good for you. Everything there is—are you willing to risk it all, John? Why don't you take it slow for a couple of hours or years...come on, come back to your desk. Sit back down.

"Something has to change."

They'll always tell you that.

"People can change."

Oh yeah, give me an example.

...

"I think...I might be lonely," The writer whimpered. "I can't tell," his mouth fought a frown.

That's what people do, John! They make you feel lonely because they will always leave. If there's nobody to leave you, then...~~John, are you sure you took all of your medication today?~~

The boots proceeded back toward the couch and parked themselves in front of the coffee table. His loose body fell down and adapted itself to the contours of the tough cushions. His eyes wandered. The lazy gaze came to a stop at the sight of a stack of free local newspapers.

What? You never read those anyway—it's useless information that will pervert your creativity. It's not about them, it's about you. Remember?

“What if I were to have someone come to see *me*?” His eyes watched his fingertips carelessly flip through the pages of the latest newspaper, “...someone that’s guaranteed to talk to me...” the fingers came to a rest. His hand hovered over the surface of the remaining two pages.

Ranging from definitely attractive to possibly a transvestite. Some sets of oiled muscles, which couldn’t possess the grammatical skills necessary for writing such colourful, meaty descriptions. Groups and intimate massage sessions. Trashy and classy. Boys, girls, and everything in-between. Possibilities—endless.

“It’s a compromise I’m willing to make. You can have this one, for now.”

TAG TEAM

Following a series of unsuccessful attempts—not one, not two, but three, three entire escorts sat shoulder to shoulder on the dusty couch. Unsure whether John called them in for a group session or if they were in competition with each other, the one closest to the window, with the largest breasts of the three, felt confident she was winning. Best described with the help of their emotional dwarf doppelgangers, starting with closest to the exit, sat Dopey. She wore gold boots that ran up her thigh where a thin black mesh continued upward to a pair of tight, teal shorts. A black tank top concealed the push-up bra. Wrapping it all up for a complete package was an overabundance of mulberry mascara and bright red nostrils.

Squeezed in the middle sat Grumpy in a pair of sapphire heels a size too small, one leg crossed over the other. Her hair was short and brown, complementing the short brown skirt that didn't leave much to one's imagination. The buttons on her red blouse had been continually sewn back on, each time more carelessly than the last, following several repeated nights of them being torn off.

Closest to the window was Sleepy, whose large breasts, although disproportionate to her waist size, benefited her

her, as she never had to perform that subtle forward lean and scrunch of the shoulders when she needed to grab somebody's attention. The white extensions with silver speckles concealed the contrasting black hair underneath, but helped to divert attention away from the fact she'd forgotten to apply that rosy blush to her left cheek to match the right.

The Writer analyzed the three girls while he sat across from them in his squeaky old chair. Following the events of the last few hours, The Writer had developed a defeated look he was no longer capable of hiding. He was exhausted, drifting off somewhere, thinking of himself as a child who had just used his only magical wish to bring his toys to life, only to later find out that once they became self-aware and capable of speech, they only spoke Mandarin.

The Writer's previous attempts at befriending a prostitute had proven hopeless. He learned that he too, like a regular human being, had a taste in women. And just like a regular human being, he had no idea what he looked for in a mate. He only knew what he *didn't* like. The list was long, and he didn't hesitate to cross the next one out at the slightest hint of frustration.

During one heated argument with a girl, The Writer was persistent in understanding the real story behind the bruise on the her thigh. She tried explaining to him that earlier in the week she threw herself in front of a moving car so that she could try to extort the driver. The Writer insisted that she was lying to him, assuming that some pimp with a stretched-out coat hanger gave her the said bruise. This made The Writer very nervous. He was not willing to spend another minute antagonizing a hooker who had such an ill-tempered pimp, or any sort of pimp for that matter—he didn't want to risk getting beat up with a metal coat hanger.

Not more than a half hour later, the next girl sat on the same couch. The Writer almost immediately sent her home when he saw that her hands were almost the same size, if not bigger, than his own. He was quite sure that there was

something underneath her skirt that he was absolutely not interested in, even if his goal was simply to talk. Nevertheless, he had to spend a few moments afterward reassuring himself that he completely understood and respected peoples' life choices and everything. Even after the girl had lifted up her skirt to reveal that there was in fact, no penis, he still couldn't get the thought out of his head. He didn't bother to ask her, but he was intensely curious as to how a prostitute could afford sexual reassignment surgery on her salary. She was let go because The Writer suddenly got a bad headache.

Grumpy attentively watched the four-inch blade in his hand dice up lemons into progressively smaller pieces while the strange man was struck in a trance, rethinking his life choices, his work, and the correct shape a lemon wedge should be in order fit onto the edge of the glass for the long-awaited gin and tonics. The Writer, completely inattentive to the motions of his knife-wielding hand, pointed it at Grumpy. Nervously, she finally spoke, "you haven't said a single thing in like..." she stopped and nudged Sleepy on her left, requesting an alliance.

"...yeah, like at least ten minutes," Sleepy regained her composure, "what's up?"

"It said *here* you were taller," The Writer said to Dopey, pointing the knife at the newspaper on the table in front of them. She watched the knife shift in Grumpy's direction when he spoke out again, "*you* were supposed to be Asian."

"I'm an eighth. I like to think that counts." Grumpy answered, defensively. She felt it was important to show a great sense of pride in one's roots. And not because some people would be willing to pay more for a certain fetish.

"I gotta use the bathroom," without waiting for The Writer's acknowledgment, Dopey got up from the couch and walked past him into the kitchen.

"Are you gonna cut us?" Grumpy jumped in.

"What?!" The Writer was suddenly aware of the knife he'd been holding in his hand the entire time, menacingly

scraping the bumpy skin of the third butchered lemon, “no. God no,” he dropped the knife and lemon onto the coffee table. Looking down, he realized that the three glasses in front of him had neither gin, nor tonic in them. “Shit. I have to—” he turned to look for the bottle of gin he had stashed somewhere in the house only to see instead a large glass bowl from his blender flying at his head.

Grumpy stood over the unconscious writer. She waited and watched for any signs of the man waking up. The blender was back in her hands, primed and ready to go for another swing at a moment’s notice. Her breathing was excited; her eyes filled with adrenaline. The blender became heavier with each moment. She decided one swing was sufficient when she spotted a stream of blood creep from underneath his head.

“What in the fuck was that about!” Sleepy jumped up. She knelt down beside the man and grabbed his wrist to feel for a pulse. It was satisfactory.

“That dude was crazy!” Grumpy shouted.

“Sure, he was weird, but...” Dopey interjected, still glued to the couch.

“That was American Psycho if I’d ever seen one! That Patrick Bateman motherfucker was gonna cut you up and shove a rat in your snatch! I just saved all of your lives!”

“When the hell does he *ever* shove a rat up somebody’s snatch? Are we talking about the same movie here?” Sleepy asked.

“Bitch, read a book!”

“Bitch, do I look like I read books?” Sleepy held a gaze at Grumpy before bursting into a fit of laughter. The other girls joined in.

“Well,” Grumpy shoved Sleepy out of her way and snatched up the man’s wallet, “you should read it — really adds a lot to the watching experience.” She stood up and made haste for the exit.

The other two jumped up and followed Grumpy into the hallway. They joyfully kicked progressively smaller shards

of the blender around on their way down the stairwell.

For however long it took them to get all the way down they continued to play and laugh, bonding over the fact that the guy was totally a creep. Reassuring each other that he wasn't really dead, and if he was, then he like, totally deserved it.

They've all seen worse, they decided.

Don't be so sad, John.

Leaning over the kitchen sink, The Writer whimpered and moaned while his left hand held up the weight of his tipsy body. His right hand trembled as it searched and pinched around for dry blood clots in his hair. The muscles in his face spasmed when his fingertips felt the depth of the gash on the upper right side of his head. His lower teeth bit into his upper lip. His eyes became more bloodshot with each painful squint.

"Blenders fucking hurt," a clump of hair, held together with a sizeable chunk of dry blood, fell into the sink, "blenders hurt a lot," more clumps followed. He watched the cold water dilute the blood and pick up torn-out hairs on its circular path toward the drain. He wondered if he would need to call a plumber to get all the hair out later; he stopped caring the moment he submerged his head in the ice-cold stream.

Don't be sad, John. Some people simply cannot make friends. There's nothing abnormal about you. Not in the bad way, at least.

"I'm not sad, you idiot!"

You're crying, I can see it. Just look at all this water running down your face. What are you hiding? You're not making any sense at all right now!

"I'm crying because there's a fucking hole in my head!" He brought his head out from underneath the faucet and rubbed cold water into his eyes. The Writer fingered the gash for a little while longer before making his way back to the living room toward his writing desk.

Poor old John decided to finally give up. Living his life one half-measure at a time, as he always had, he sat down at his—

He walked right past the desk and toward the windowsill where he grabbed hold of his imitation leather notebook.

I was joking! I was only Joking, John. Put it down. Take a seat. I didn't mean it.

"I meant it." He shoved the notebook into his back pocket, taking strides toward the door. Each step more determined than the last.

No. This is a mistake.

The Writer glanced over at the laptop across the room, longing for his company. He understood that the rush he was currently experiencing was only temporary, and that if he were to sit back down, even for a moment, that his wild burst of motivation would fade and he would remain where he always had been. The longer he thought about it, the more difficult each step toward the exit felt. He only had a few more to go before finally making it out the front door.

IN THIS CITY WITHOUT LAKES

Christina munched on her curly blonde extensions as brisk gusts of wind, blowing through the back window of the black luxury sedan, tossed them into her mouth. One by one, she yanked them out from between her teeth, only to find them making their way back almost immediately. She longed for the day when she would regain her window-control privileges. The black silk stockings running up her thighs, accompanied by a set of matching three-inch heels, glided along the warm leather seats with every swift maneuver. The driver, as usual, took the turns a little sharper than how she'd prefer. Her sangria-masked lips held a perpetual pout; her blue eyes counted the passing lamp posts. The \$329 French maid outfit, which her client had mailed in the day before, remained concealed underneath a black fur coat that stretched down to her shins. At the edge of the silk-lined sleeve peeked out a white band wrapped around her thin wrist. At the stop in front of every red light a new chunk of fake hair left her mouth; passing every other lamp post, it flew back in.

Ahead in the driver's seat, the man behind the wheel worried about the seatbelt putting wrinkles into his pressed black suit. If it weren't for the strategically trimmed facial

hair, some might suspect that this man had no jaw line, as the skin running down from his cheeks to his neck seemed to form a flat plane. His pointy nose flared when he when he thought of whether seat belts *actually* save lives, and if so, if they save *enough* lives to justify such strict laws about it. His introspection was cut short by another meaningless thought, and so, he resumed making sounds and mouth movements that the person in the backseat had made clear, on numerous occasions, she does not want to hear or see. He made good use of the car's stereo by keeping it off, and with a swift push of a button, the rear window rolled up, allowing the wheelman to hear himself a bit clearer. Christina, as she did every time, emotionally prepared herself for the inevitable.

"...remember that time with that fridge door?" Without waiting for any acknowledgment from the woman in the backseat, he blabbered on. The enthusiasm in this voice grew wilder with each sentence spoken, "...could've sworn to god he was so fucked up by the end of it all that his spine had disconnected from his...his—" he jammed a finger into the back of his head where the spine met the skull, poking at it several more times to make sure she saw it well and clear "—the thing..." he turned to her, "you know this sort of shit...?"

"The atlas, Gerald," Christina threw him her finely honed look of exaggerated, annoyed disinterest, holding it there for a few moments hoping he would notice, "...the fucking atlas. I've told you this, how many times do I have to keep telling you this? If you ask me one more time about the atlas, I'm gonna grab my switchblade and carve a diagram of the human anatomy right there on your shiny dashboard so you can stare at it all day long."

"Have I?" Gerald scratched at his atlas, "...*have you?*" He threw a safety glance at the road before turning his head back toward her. "It must be these goddamn pills, I don't remember being this forgetful."

"Hey!" She threw a finger up at the windshield, "...road. Right there, do you see it? I think you should keep looking

at it. Pretty please?" She held her finger until the car moved again. Christina groaned, then recited the words in her head before saying them out loud, "they're just ibuprofen, Gerald. Your memory is fine."

"WHAT!"

"Some people would take that as good news, you know?"

"This whole time—"

"Yes. Jesus, Gerald. I feel like the longer I keep it from you the more intolerable you get. You're not psychotic. *He* was wrong. You're just a bored asshole who gets migraines from time to time. It's normal to feel a little loopy after an episode. Your brain goes through a lot when it comes on—and then that's it. There's nothing wrong with you. A few ounces of misappropriated hate, perhaps."

"Well shit, to think, all this time—"

"What—that you were special? Get over yourself." Christina scoffed and shook her head at him.

"What did you tell *him*?"

"I...tell him what he wants to hear, as usual. It's not like he'd believe me otherwise. We're both in the shit now, *you and I*. Can't say I'm not to blame, partially, at least. He hasn't told *you* yet, has he?"

"No...but watch me not give a shit anymore."

"Oh you're so *very* convincing. It's adorable." She snickered.

"Hey, *fuck off!*"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll see when the day comes..." Christina said, then sunk back into her seat.

Gerald assured himself that his sense of pride was unshakeable before turning back around and actually doing his job. With a swift, frustrated jerk he pulled down the sun visor to block his eyes from the late-afternoon sun. His hairy, manicured hand hovered over the steering wheel, applying the absolute minimal amount of grip to keep them from crashing. His eyes fought the burn while he fiddled with the visor. He noticed that the flap concealing the mirror was open, as usual, and caught sight of a frustrated Christina in the back seat. Arms crossed. Eyes looking in every

direction but his. He couldn't restrain himself. He really wanted to talk about the time—

“...when that asshole didn't want to...only paid you for —”

“YES!” Christina interrupted. She grabbed a firm hold of the front seats' headrests and pulled her body forward, bringing her face up to the back of Gerald's shoulder. Amidst heavy breaths, she blurted out, “yes, Gerald! I do remember. *I was there!*” Her heavy breathing subsided. A heavy groan left her mouth before she allowed her body to slide back into the usual spot. “Just drive. Please, for the love of god just keep driving and doing absolutely nothing else while you do.”

“No, but I meant after—” Gerald, unable to stand a moment of silence not established on his terms, turned his head back toward her when the road appeared clear enough, which coincidentally, happened to be whenever he had something important to say, “after...once you got down from the guy's place...”

Her blood boiled.

“Remember?”

The allegorical whistled out of her ears.

“Do you?” Upon arriving at their destination, he shifted the gear into the *PARK* position and awaited her response.

Her scarlet red nails dug into the soft, cushioned leather by her thighs. She squeezed once. Then ten more times, before releasing the tight grasp and collecting her purse. “I've fucking heard it. I've heard *this* story, I've heard *all* of your damn stories. Every goddamn day I'm with you I listen to these stories! Gerald...goddamn it, I hate being like this to you, but, hun, please, for the love of god, find something else to talk about aside from yourself. Read a book. Watch a movie. Don't look in the mirror for at least an hour. Do it for yourself. Do it for me. Do it for America, Gerald. Go for a walk. Take a breath of fresh air—something besides this stench of Armor-All and leather conditioner. See what you come up with. Because, Gerald, honey. Look at me. Gerald, if I have to hear you tell the same stories over and over

again I will, and I promise you this, I will just murder you. Plain and simple. I will slice open your goddamn throat... ok?" The rear door flew open, she straightened out her leg to stop it from swinging back and slamming into her body. She jumped out and looked at Gerald through the passenger side window, gritting her teeth. A faint growl emerged from the bottom of her throat. She shook her head.

"Hey! You can't talk to me like that!" Gerald shouted. While staring through the glass into her disappointed eyes, he longed for the days when Christina was just a little nicer to him.

While the late 40s mother was busy admiring the firmness of the pair of joggers in suspiciously fashionable running gear, her ten-year-old cursed the gust of wind ruining his attempts at focusing the late-afternoon sun into a pile of dead leaves through a magnifying glass. The leaves expelled a whiff of black smoke that got picked up by the gentle current of the wind and joined forces with a plastic shopping bag flying circles through the brisk park air. The plastic bag danced through the park before becoming snagged in the rear wheel of an electric scooter piloted by an old fat lady. A frantic teenager speeding through the park cradled the pouch of his hoodie when he saw the lady in the scooter up ahead. He helped to clear up her jammed wheel, emptied the stolen cans of soda and cigarettes into the bag, and carried on through the park. A homicidal Chihuahua spotted the frantic teenager and let out a series of high-pitched yaps. She gave chase, following him out of the park and down toward the sidewalk. The owner of the homicidal dog, a soft-spoken, six-foot-five body builder, caught on and chased after the thief.

While avoiding several collisions with other oncoming pedestrians and placed trashcans, the teenage thief couldn't keep his thoughts straight about how he would defend himself against the massive man. He anticipated the moment he could take a rest and rummage through his loot. He figured he would be quite thirsty by the end of it all. The

body builder made sure that his biceps were pressed up against his ribs when he passed by the more attractive women in the park, just in case they might look. Meanwhile, the old lady in the electric scooter was having the day of her life when she discovered that the thief who helped her clear the jam had dropped a pack of cigarettes. She tried to gain the little pyromaniac's attention so that she could ask him to retrieve the pack, as she could not reach it. A few cigarettes would be fair compensation for such a task, she figured.

The homicidal Chihuahua's attention diverted away from the thief when, from the corner of her eye, she spotted a shiny red fire hydrant. She stopped the chase and trotted toward the fire hydrant, tongue hanging out of her mouth, breathing frantically. A well deserved pee was in order. Her idiotic face stared at her owner as he ran past. The thief took a hard right onto the sidewalk and across the road; the man chasing him didn't see the city bus coming in from the left.

The first set of wheels crushed his internal organs; the second pushed them out of every orifice in his lifeless body. His solid and liquid remains painted a picture on the asphalt that garnered the attention of nearly every passer-by in the vicinity.

Amid all this unremarkable exposition The Writer sat with a bored look on his face on an unremarkable bench, still in wait of inspiration. Unable to get his thoughts in order, he wondered what the bronze dividers separating the bench into three individual seats said about us as people. A bronze plaque screwed into the top of the backrest stated that this bench had been dedicated to some man who contributed a great deal to the community; his close friends knew him for his hate of the obese and the homeless. The red fire hydrant provided another opportunity for an introspective quest toward finding the meaning life. He took it. It didn't last long as the chihuahua picked him, out of all the other people in this park, to hold intense eye contact with while expelling her urine.

See. This is what I was trying to tell you, John, it's hopeless. Fire hydrants mean nothing, they just look nice in

pictures. What's next? You're going to seek out a lonely swing in the middle of a field somewhere? Get real.

"But clichés?" The Writer broke eye contact with the dog and spotted the crowd of people gathering around in the middle of the road. The bus driver paced in circles around the scene, phone in one hand; pulling his hair out with the other, contemplating whether he should call 911 or drive the empty bus into the closest body of water. But in this city without lakes, he thought, the opportunities were limited.

The little pyromaniac discovered a large tree behind which he could shield his pile of dead leaves from the wind. In short time he was successful. The pile burned more intensely. With nobody to notice his accomplishment, the boy soon walked away from the situation he created. The whiff of black smoke he inhaled sent him into a coughing frenzy as he ran off. That moment he decided that he will never become a smoker.

Unable to get anybody's attention, the woman in the wheelchair struggling to retrieve the pack of cigarettes lost hope. She reached further and further down with each stretch, nearly falling off a few times. It was of no use. She had no choice but to give up and roll along.

The homeless man sitting on the opposite end of the bench cursed under his breath about what an asshole whoever designed that bench must have been. Tired of his ranting not being acknowledged by the self-absorbed writer sitting two slots down, he found himself entranced in a special moment with the Chihuahua when their eyes met. When nobody was watching, he walked over and yanked her up from the ground, performing another quick scan of the area before walking off into the opposite direction of the accident. "Circle of life," the homeless man muttered to himself.

An obese jogger, on his second stroll of the day, gazed upon the bronze dividers on the bench. "One day," he longingly thought to himself. "...One day." There was a spark of optimism in his voice as he picked up speed and continued on down the path, taking in a gulp of the mid-

afternoon autumn air and burnt leaves.

The crowd around the bus grew larger with each minute. The Writer's social anxiety overpowered his sense of curiosity to get up and inspect the scene. Despite it all happening a mere hundred feet in front of him, the distance felt larger with every excuse he came up with to stay put. His attention diverted to the patch of sidewalk straight across the street where a black luxury sedan pulled up to a cobblestone walkway. He watched the scene up ahead, trying to make out what the set of golden blonde curls were so enraged about. Aside from some muffled shouting there was hardly anything to work with. When she finally jumped out, The Writer admired how effortlessly her golden curls flailed in whichever direction the late-afternoon wind decided to take them.

There was something there, he thought. The tip of his pen touched down upon a fresh page in the notebook.

...

"I can talk to you however the hell I want!" She shouted at the passenger-side window, "*I had a shitty morning. I had to dress up in clown make-up again only to end up having to endure another sob story. When do I get to talk about me? I flash my snatch at this little motherfucker and all I get is tears in return—how do you think I feel today? I couldn't even rub one out afterwards because of how ashamed I felt of my body. I couldn't even bring myself to take a shower. And now I have to get up there and do it all over again. Chin up, soldier. Best foot forward, right? Well I ain't got single a good foot because I feel like a fucking cripple right now... Aww. Come on, Gerald, what's wrong?—chin up, soldier! Ha!*"

"...well..." he stalled.

"Thought so. I'll see you in an hour or something!" She took off, stomping her black heels down the cobblestone leading into an elegant front lobby. As she passed between the two gold-plated pillars her reflection grew, then wrapped

around the smooth edges, distorting her image until she shrunk to a pin-point, before disappearing completely. The magnetic locks on the glass doors disengaged and granted her entrance. She was greeted by a polite concierge who'd been trained to not ask too many questions and treat everyone equally.

Back in the sedan, Gerald uttered a series of sounds that mimicked something resembling indifference slowly turning to reluctant comprehension. He checked himself out in the mirror to make sure that the recent confrontation hadn't caused any new wrinkles to develop on his suit or face. His eyes shifted around to make sure no one was watching as he fixed the cuffs on the sleeves of his shirt and inspected the knot on his tie.

Gerald noticed the group of people on the road ahead of him gathering around a bus. Perhaps the new story he was looking for. But on the other hand, a story that had nothing to do with him seemed hardly interesting. He doubted that Christina would want to hear a story about how some bus ran over a homeless man. Although new to him, the magnitude of this drama seemed far too normal. Too uninspired. How was he to get someone excited about a story which even he didn't feel enthusiastic about? He needed something else. Some fresh air, perhaps, and nothing looked fresher to him than the park across the road.

Gerald was surprised by his own reluctance to walk out into the real world. He blamed a sudden soreness in his ankle he swore didn't materialize out of nowhere. When he stepped out onto the road, he dug the heel of his shoe into the pavement to assure himself the pain actually was there. After a few stomps he finally felt a sting shoot up his calf. That would have to do.

While crossing the road, Gerald spotted a man on the bench making eye contact with him. It was quickly broken off...

...The Writer's facial expressions cycled through a sequence of confused, to puzzled, to scared, and finally, to in-denial as

he watched the man get out of the sedan and walk toward him with an awkwardly inviting facial expression. He rolled up the notebook and stuffed it into his back pants pocket.

The man was forty feet away when he raised a hand in the air pointing to the bus on the road. “What an ordeal, huh!” He yelled at The Writer. An inviting laugh followed.

“Uh...what?” The Writer lifted his ass off of the bench. His legs tensed up, ready to burst at any moment.

“I said,” he closed in “what an ordeal. The bus thing! You saw that, right?”

“Yes—uhhh.” The Writer scanned the perimeter, mapping out his escape route. “Hey, I’m sorry, OK!”

“What are you talking about?”

The Writer stepped away from the bench.

“Hey, what are you talking about? I was saying what an ordeal that was over there—just trying to have a conversation, buddy. Where are you going?”

“Hey, I didn’t mean to...” The Writer moved out of the way of the man’s trajectory, “I was just writ—” then sprinted off mid-sentence.

Gerald, not yet knowing why, followed.

JOHN: REDUX

“Why in the hell did you run?”

The Writer had a hard time answering with his face pushed up against a brick wall; he came closer to tasting it each time he opened his mouth to speak. Gerald’s elbow pressed into The Writer’s atlas, making sure that his face stayed there for a little while longer while he figured out what to make of the situation. A few feet behind them, in the alleyway, lay a pair of old shoes The Writer had tripped on. He looked at them disapprovingly.

“I didn’t!” The Writer whimpered.

“Boy, you are not off to a good start!” He kicked The Writer in the back of the ankles, persuading them to cease the shuffling. “Who the fuck are *you*?”

“I’m—” The Writer peeled his lips from the bricks.

“Stop. Moving.” Gerald kicked him several more times.

“Ok, OK!” The Writer’s nose and forehead felt a rough texture. “I’m a writer!” he grunted.

“What...” Gerald patted down The Writer’s cardigan but found nothing of interest. In the man’s jeans, Gerald found an imitation-leather-bound notebook. He read a few lines from the last few pages while keeping pressure on the back of The Writer’s head, “...*she storms out of the car, obviously*

upset about something that's happened...a man sits in the—
what the fuck is this!"

"It's not what you think," he whimpered.

"Are you spying on me?" Gerald put away the notebook and reached behind his jacket. The Writer felt the muzzle of a pistol dig into his side.

"NO! No-no-no-no-no!" The Writer's arm broke free and flailed in whichever direction it's joints permitted, "look sorry—just let me—" his arm contorted further toward the back of his head. Gerald swatted it away with the butt of the pistol.

"Stop. Moving." The muzzle dug deeper.

"Just. Please, read the other pages! I'm a writer, I'm writing a fucking novel!"

Gerald complied. He tucked his pistol away, "don't move an inch. I'll read your fucking diary." While keeping his elbow in the same place, he pulled out the notebook and read more, "...*John can't take a shit...what?...squeeze one out...force...the hell...standing by the window,*" Gerald shut the notebook, closed his eyes, and thought of an appropriate insult, "John?"

"Uhhh..." his eyes shifted, "...yes?"

"You're a fucking joke," he slapped the notebook against the back of John's head and released his grip.

"So, can I go then?" John asked, dusting off his cardigan. While massaging the back of his neck, he looked down at his feet to conceal the shame he felt from somebody seeing the first notes of something he planned on writing. The first draft is painful enough for others to witness, but the notes, the random ideas, the physical manifestation of his internal ramblings—for somebody to see it would be a fate worse than death to The Writer. "Please don't think anything of *that*," he pointed at the notebook. "It gets better, eventually."

"Yeah...sure," Gerald nodded. Before turning away, he added, "wait!"

"Huh?"

"Show me your ID," Gerald stuck the palm of his hand out.

“Why?” John patted his pants down. “Shit,” he cursed Grumpy or Sleepy or Dopey under his breath.

“Just in case,” Gerald closed in, “if, for some reason my business gets interrupted, I’ll know approximately whose legs to break.” Still short of any form of documentation, the palm of his hand made another inviting gesture, “hand it over.”

“I don’t have any,” John exaggerated the back-and-forth motions of patting himself down to make sure that Gerald understood.

“You kidding me? What the hell kind of adult are you? Jesus, look at you—you’re at least forty—”

“Forty-something...yeah.” John interrupted.

“Forty...?”

“I mean...does it matter?”

“No, John. It doesn’t matter, but don’t mind me while I assume you to be a fucking moron who doesn’t know his own age,” Gerald scoffed.

“Shit,” John said, then slapped his own head, “*they* must’ve taken it.”

“Who?”

“The hookers.”

“Pathetic,” Gerald burst into laughter. A sense of suspicion came over him, “wait. You were writing something about hookers earlier in your diary. You got some sort of a vendetta against hookers or something? Or some weird obsession? What were you were doing on that park bench—waiting for *her*? Or me? What the hell are you writing—does it involve me? I’m not a pimp or anything—if that’s a part of your research. If you’re gonna write about me, don’t say that I’m a pimp. I should be a gentleman sort of character, but like, in a cool way. If you’re gonna write about anybody—it should be me. But I can’t tell you anything, otherwise...well, you know.” He waved the gun in front of John’s face.

“So that’s settled then, I guess. Am I free to go?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Hang on a minute—I need to think about this.”

“Look,” John’s voice shook, he was unsure if it was out to fear or frustration, “we can drive over to my house—that way you can find out where I live in case something happens, which it won’t.”

“Fine.” Gerald said.

“Really?” John didn’t actually expect to talk any sense into the man with the gun.

“Wait.” A smile crept onto Gerald’s face, “so...a writer, huh?”

“Yes. Am I free to—“

“I’ve got some great stories you know...” he interrupted. Gerald couldn’t resist.

“Uh, great? I think it’s better that I—”

“I’ll tell you some. Come on,” Gerald threw the notebook at John’s stomach, pausing appreciate that John had actually caught it and didn’t fumble it like an idiot. “A quick drive—it won’t take too long.” As he waved for John to follow while walking away, he stopped and turned to face him, “just one thing, John, you need to man the fuck up if you’re gonna be hanging around with me. Can you be a man?”

Perplexed, John eventually answered, “...I caught the notebook?”

EXPECTATIONS, EXPECTATIONS

The French maid outfit swaggered through the confines of a modern-styled high-rise apartment decorated with every uninspired item from a six-year-old Sears catalogue. If the burnt-out light bulbs were ever swapped out they would paint the melon-orange walls with beautiful, random scatters of light through the chandelier in the centre of the living room. The chamois leather couch and recliner would feel so soft if only they weren't subjected to years of neglect and evaporated alcohol stains. A built-in microwave with a broken handle seemed to be the only appliance used lately, the oven underneath it, along with the fridge and dishwasher, were a few quick wipes away from being restored to their original brushed steel finish. An old water filter, from which the water could no longer flow in a smooth stream due to years of mildew build-up, hung over a cast iron sink, underneath which, a powerful two-horsepower food processor sits in wait for someone to press that little red button to reset its breaker and live to chop another day. The food stuck to the dishes in the sink had solidified to an orange-grey crust; anything that could decompose or create a stench had dried out a long time ago. Granite counter tops held together the mess of it all;

porcelain tiles paved the way down the middle. Shards of broken bottles, along with month-old pizza boxes, tied it all together in a trail that led to a pair of scuffed-up designer dress shoes resting at the base of the chamois recliner.

Whatever bit of sunlight remained of the day beamed through the dusty east-facing windows adjacent to the kitchen, bouncing off of the granite countertop and scattering across the old body of her client, who sat in a personal shadow on the chamois leather recliner. An overpriced bottle of cognac tucked between his legs. Thin white hairs scattered the top of his head and, in a faint trail that ran through his temple, eventually met up with a raggedy goatee. A cigarette-burnt striped silk shirt was tucked into his black, microwave-dinner stained slacks. His dead-green eyes fought the weight of the stacks of wrinkles on his forehead. He watched Christina as she fidgeted, hiding her look of disgust, in wait of the client to break the silence.

Her black heels tapped along the hardwood flooring, she cringed at the sight of the kitchen, yet repeatedly looked back at it hoping to come up with a smart-assed comment about the scene. Finally, she gathered her words, but the client spoke first.

With a slow, deep rumble in his voice, he instructed for Christina to get herself settled in.

“Uhh this...” forgetting whatever clever quip she came up with only moments ago, “...this is all very gross.” While scouting around the apartment, she spotted the room to where she assumed the bed would be, “can we just...” She struck a commanding pose and pointed a finger at the bedroom door.

He stopped her. It wasn't time for that *just yet*.

“Why not? We're not gonna do it in here...like, anywhere in here,” her finger danced around the room and pointed to everything but the bedroom door.

The man assured Christina that all of that would change.

“Uhuh?” She said with caution in her voice. A sarcastic nod followed.

“You can start in the kitchen.”

THE CURIOUS CAT

Classic grind-house era movie posters, scribbled over top with incomprehensible graffiti and autographs from washed-out celebrities, decorated the walls of the old-fashioned greasy spoon diner, located in a moderately poor neighbourhood, where the panhandlers had given up any hope of scoring a nickel or two or finding a bench to sleep on that hadn't already been claimed. The night hadn't yet taken over, so neither have the owners of overpriced laptops looking to inject a bit of grunge into their lives. The restaurant was swamped with truckers with misunderstood accents who exchanged various trade secrets, like their personal methods of sleeping on the job, what drugs to take when they couldn't, and how they syphon the fuel out of their trucks and sell it off for cheap on the side to their friends. Most the customers came for the novelty of the \$2.99 all-day breakfast. The musky smell, they convinced themselves, only made the experience that much more authentic, it's how they would imagine a run-down diner would smell like in those classic movie diners. A movie-like diner, where there is always potential for a spontaneous shootout waiting to happen. These customers came here because they want to live dangerously, and they can get just

that for an affordable \$2.99 in a neighbourhood where no one could afford the thousands of bullets, let alone the guns required, for the massive scale shoot-out they so often daydream about.

Gerald would eat dinner there almost every night, secretly hoping that one quiet evening someone would be brave enough to initiate a shoot-out with him, so long as he had the upper hand on the quantity of bullets. Deciding that this was a special occasion, since he was now convinced that John would write his biography, Gerald ordered a sub-style sandwich instead of the usual, which cost him an entire \$3.79. He even paid for John's meal.

"Just the driver?" Gerald repeated John's question back to himself. "...You're never *just* the driver," with a full belly, he thought, and the other attempts at a conversation they had on the ride over ending so awkwardly, he could finally conjure something up.

"How's that?" John asked, playing up the enthusiasm. Trying to ignore that he was not entirely convinced he would walk out of this situation alive. He considered telling Gerald about the strand of tomato skin hanging from the corner of his mouth, but decided not to as it might get him killed.

"When working at a supermarket..." with the mix of white bread, processed ham, lettuce, tomatoes and mayo swirling around in his mouth, Gerald continued, "...are you ever *just* a bag boy?"

"No?" John answered. After a moment of giving it some thought, he added, "I guess not? Depends on how you—"

"No. Most definitely not. Bagging groceries is your main duty, sure. But occasionally something will come up. Something much, much bigger. Much more important. Something will happen that will force you to break away from your momentous bagging duties and—"

"Clean-up on aisle five?" John heard a standing ovation play out in his head.

"HA! Precisely, John. Imagine: an old lady is dashing..." his hands danced around dramatically, preparing to slam

down on the table with the upcoming punch line. He finished chewing, "...she's dashing down this aisle five towards a pile of fucking...I don't know...salsa on the ground, broken glass and shit...tomatoes, other red shit...you know?"

"Oh yeah. Shit, she's old, she wouldn't see it."

"No, no-no-no. She sees it, she sees that salsa on the ground, John. That's exactly why she's dashing." The excitement was harder to contain with each sentence spoken, "her, and the bagboy, are in a race to whoever can get to that pile of shit the quickest. This grandma, you see, she *wants* to trip on that pile of salsa. She'll trip on it, she'll sue the store...she'll waste all that goddamn money on lottery tickets and die alone." He stopped himself before getting too emotional, "...but that part's not important."

"Why wouldn't she just buy her grandchildren some shit with the money? Isn't that what they do?"

"Because, John, *this* grandma doesn't do that. This one here, this is the cunt of all grandmas. No suicidal grandma is thinking about her children. She's not sharing shit. Anyways—back to *my* story."

"Why is she suicidal?"

"Because the world is a tough place!" Gerald said, "who the fuck knows—it doesn't matter. She killed herself and that's that."

"Hold on..." John jotted a few scribbles down in his notebook.

"What?" Gerald, frustrated that his momentum was being fucked with, took a fierce bite of his sandwich and watched John work.

"So this isn't a hypothetical grandma then, right?"

"What!" Gerald snapped.

"I mean..." John hid behind his notebook.

"It doesn't fucking matter, John. The grandma's just a grandma! Let's assume she lives happily ever after—you happy now?!"

"So...in comes the bagboy with his mop. Saves the day. Go bagboy?"

“Yes.” Gerald calmed himself down, “you should never underestimate the power of the bagboy. Sometimes a bagboy is the best possible option. You see, he doesn’t do the sort of job where anyone could care or have any sort of respect for his work, nobody would think twice about peeling him away to go do something else. So, they go and call him. He comes flying in with that big, yellow...” Gerald drew up a big yellow triangle with his hands in the air, “the...*CAUTION, wet floor...*...thing. He gets that shit on the ground in time and the store becomes just a little less liable for the glass that’s about to get up in the...” making sure that nobody in the diner saw him first, Gerald thrust two fingers up in the air. A series of deep grunts followed.

John understood the gesture and nodded agreeably.

“The buttocks, John,” he finished with a sarcastic British accent.

“Hey, are you sure that you’re writing all of this down?” Gerald distrustfully looked over at the scribbles in the imitation leather notebook on John’s end of the table.

“Yeah, I mean...sure, it’s a little abridged. The rest is in...” John poked at his temple with his pen.

“Good...good.” In the few moments of silence that followed, a wild idea brewed inside Gerald’s head. “Oh, shit,” his hand jumped for the phone in his pants pocket.

“What is it?” John asked.

“Someone’s calling. Hold up. ” Gerald pulled his phone out, making sure that John couldn’t get a glance at the screen and notice that nobody was actually on the other end of the line. With a wild grin on his face he talked into the phone, “Yeah?...Now?...*Him?*” Pausing every few moments to sell it, “...yeah, I’ll do it.”

John, confused and intrigued, leaned in. “...What?” The restlessness inside him was unbearable. “What is it?” He lunged over the diner table to sneak a peek at the phone screen. Gerald pulled it away.

“Clean-up on aisle five.” John didn’t even get a chance to have a sip of his coffee before Gerald dragged him out of the restaurant and back into his car.

* * *

Despite considering himself to be a seasoned writer, The Writer never took the time to master the art of pen and paper, let alone have the finesse to scribble something down that would later be legible, even to himself. He regretted his ignorance of the old art as he fumbled around in the passenger seat of the luxury sedan, shuffling his scrawny body back and forth in the smooth leather seat, trying to make his mind up about the most comfortable limb to rest his notebook on. Meanwhile, the driver of the car dictated his stories while paying minimal attention to the road. John propped the heel of his right boot up against the edge of the leather seat, rested the notebook on top of his upper leg to keep it steady, and began to write. The comfort was short lived. Before the tip of the pen even touched the paper John felt Gerald's fist dig into the side of his leg, sending the propped shoe flying back down onto the floor. He gave John a dirty look and informed him of all the effort he'd put into detailing the car earlier in the morning. Gerald went into great detail about how he had conditioned the leather seats with that *premium shit*, the specific type of cloth he used to apply the fresh layer of Armor-All to the dashboard and the trim pieces, and how regretful he was about not thinking ahead and flipping the passenger floor carpet over to the prickly rubber side before an inconsiderate, dirty writer got his shitty old boots all over it. He never figured he'd see anyone in that seat of his car, ever.

"And don't think you can put that shit up against my dashboard either, you asshole." Gerald added when he saw John's notebook reach for the front.

"Why? It's a thick notebook—look," John waved the notebook in front of Gerald's face to show its thickness. He rested the imitation leather cover against the fresh layer of Armor-All and jabbed the tip of his pen into a fresh page, "it's not gonna leave marks or anything—"

"I have a gun, John." Gerald opened his jacket to reveal the pistol, in case John had forgotten about it.

John yanked the notebook away and decided that the most

comfortable position for it would be on the tops of his legs while hunched over. He pressed his thighs together, tucking the three most important components underneath him. He repeated Gerald's ramblings under his breath while jotting them down. "*Cock...suck...errrrrrrr*," the *r* rolled off the side of the page and onto his jeans when the sedan flew through a tight right turn. "Shit."

"Great word, isn't it?" Gerald exclaimed, then waited for John to get his act together and resume writing.

"I guess," John spat on the tip of his index finger and rubbed it at the pen mark on his pants, making a bigger mess with every stroke. "Yeah..."

"This one...cocksucker. Let me tell you. He just refused to understand the concept of paying for things at an hourly rate. Tried to go pay-per-minute with Christina one night, as if she were a calling card of some sorts."

"Christina?" John's interest peaked. The image of her golden curls flashed through his head.

"Yeah, the one you were spying on earlier. Anyways, I don't know if you know this, but some people have some weird fetishes. Some weird shit. Admittedly, some hilarious shit, sometimes—that's *mostly* why I'm telling you the story. Ehhh, Ok—it's mostly weird shit. Things they would never get away with in real life with real women without some serious repercussions. Something you would just *have* to pay for. So anyways, this one guy I'm about to tell you about—the cocksucker—he's got absolutely no interest in standard intercourse of any manner.

"This one guy...man. Ok. So, she gets up to his place. Everything's standard procedure so far. He lets her in all politely, has her sit down on his comfortable sofa, hands her an Old Fashioned he whipped up in preparation for the whole thing. She does her thing too: the dick check—everything's just swell—he's being a real goddamn gentleman. Complying. Tells her to hang on a moment and sip on her drink while he gets himself ready in the bathroom. I'm sure she didn't suspect a thing, she knows some guys need a minute to work themselves up or take a

vitamin or something beforehand—you know? So then, some minutes later, this guy blasts right out of the bathroom, dick in hand, runs right up to Christina, and BAM!” Gerald slammed the palm of his hand flat up against the fresh layer of Armor-All on the dashboard. He followed with a swift jerk-off motion with the same hand and shot a load of imaginary semen into John’s direction. “Festival!” he exclaimed!

“Uhhh—” John dodged the imaginary projectile.

“Right into her face, John! Right into it...got me thinking you know: from what I understand about this world we live in—a little semen on a hooker’s face, out of all people, shouldn’t be too big a deal—wouldn’t you think?”

“What...” John had almost given up on trying to scribble everything down. “Guess so?” He thought he should at least attempt to keep up with the conversation, “this had the element of surprise though?” he added.

“So what,” Gerald said. “No matter how used you are to something happening, however often it may happen, there always needs to be an act that precedes it. That’s what *you’re* really used to, John—a *series* of events. A pattern.”

“Like a cliché?”

“Goddamn it, John. Do all writers have to make everything about themselves? Are you even listening?” Gerald looked infuriated.

“I am!” He knew he would not write it down, so he contributed in any way he could. “When I was little,” he began, “I saw a documentary about planets, or life—something like that. I think it was a series. Anyway, the host mentioned something about the reason humans evolved was because we learned to recognize—”

“John. I don’t need to hear your life story. Look, I’m just gonna call it the natural order of things. So, what’s a hooker used to? She comes over, you both get naked. Various holes. Various objects. I’m not one to judge. It all ends with the big festival. Shit, I’m sure that guys bust onto her face *all* the time. I’m sure she’s always ready to take it from some asshole who can’t differentiate between porn and real life.

But this asshole. This cocksucker, he skipped a few steps and threw all of her shit out of alignment...or orbit... whichever."

Unsure of where all of this was going, John focused on maintaining strong eye contact, accompanying it with the occasional slow nod and a, "uhuh."

"Yes, you're right. It wouldn't have been much different even if he *were* to tell her his plans. The point is: you take the element of surprise out of it and it still doesn't change a thing."

"Is it time?"

"What do you mean?"

"Give her more time to prepare for it. That would make the surprise much easier to handle. You tell her a day, or a week ahead. She could be prepared for it—emotionally at least."

"I don't think that's how life works, John. People know of their eventual demise, and what do we do about it? Try to escape it. Sure, some freak out about it or think that if they prolong it for some time, they'd figure out a way to immortalize themselves. The majority can remain calm. Fuck me..." An idea popped up in Gerald's head. He took a moment to gather his thoughts and make sure it made any sort of sense first before vocalizing it.

"What?"

"I've got an idea for a novel, but you gotta credit me on it, otherwise I'd have to kill you. Imagine everybody lived in a world where nobody knows that they're gonna die, it's like a...government secret of sorts..."

"Yes...?"

"That's it. You're the writer—make the rest up. Anyway —"

"The big surprise?" John said sarcastically.

"Right. Death—you know of it, but you're still just as surprised when it actually happens, or is about to happen. You're not gonna think or emotionally prepare your way out of the inevitable. What's the fucking point? You're surprised when you're first told. You're surprised all the way until the

surprise comes to a climax and fucks you right up the ass!” Gerald’s foot slammed on the brakes. The sedan narrowly avoided a rear-end collision with a shiny ~~blue~~ red truck up ahead.

John took it all in while recovering from what he believed to have been a near-death experience, simultaneously admiring the timing of the event. He gave himself a moment to regain his composure, then asked, “don’t you mean...” he imitated the same jerk-off motion with his hands he witnessed earlier, “...in your face?”

“Yeah, sure...whichever, John.” Gerald’s tone changed, he talked slower, “John, do you believe that for you, me, for whoever, that there’s a specific event in life which will or had already defined the person they will be from that moment on? Do you believe that people can change from it?”

“...”

“I don’t know, man. Sometimes I think too much into things. Maybe *I* could’ve been a writer. Forget it. You’re not gonna find the meaning of life spread across a hooker’s face.”

“But maybe it’s a start?”

“So then,” After several minutes of both passengers staring straight ahead, John broke the silence, “he doesn’t pay her? Is that it?” He looked off, disappointed.

“Hang on a minute.”

They came to a sudden stop by the curb. The wake of the sedan picked up a handful of dead leaves from the ground, sending them spiralling around in random circles before landing on the sidewalk amongst the sprouts of fresh grass popping up through the cracks in the sidewalk. The dry leaves crumpled underneath a pair of polished leather dress shoes. The shitty old boots followed. The crusty trail faded at the doorstep leading toward the lobby of an old derelict building where they stopped. A coat of deteriorated and sunburnt beige bricks composed the facade; the concrete

structure underneath was revealed in random sections where the bricks had broken off. Staked deep into the concrete on the side of the building hung the remains of a fire exit stairwell, from which the steps and handrails had become rusty and broke away decades ago, leaving just the decaying platforms floating in the air.

Before stepping inside the lobby, the man in the black suit looked up and studied a specific set of windows on the third floor. The aged paint around the frames had chipped off, leaving just the exposed, soggy wood underneath. The windows themselves were either nailed shut or replaced with particleboard or mismatched two-by-fours. He noted the distance from the windows to the centre of where he assumed the stairwell to be and continued on. They made their way through the front entrance where there was once a door that used to keep the building's residents safe from thieves, murderers, and worst of all, racoons.

The pale-teal stairwells were dimly lit with the occasional flicker of fluorescent bulbs and beams of apricot-orange light shining through the small sections of glass bricks facing to the outside. Upon reaching each ascending platform the men would watch their steps more carefully than the last. The piles of dog faeces became increasingly abundant the higher they climbed; the murky stench of urine and ammonia were consistent throughout. John couldn't decide if it would be safer to wrap his hand around the rusty railing, or risk slipping on whatever liquids coated each and every new step on his way up. He alternated.

"Oh, he pays her alright. Not the \$1500 he owes, but he pays her."

"\$1500 an hour?" John stopped looked up in awe.

"Oh yeah, she's big time...I guess...if that's even a thing. I'm not sure how that part of the business works or who sets the prices."

"Oh," John looked down, disappointed.

"Ha! You really thought I *was* the pimp, didn't you?"

"Well, I wasn't really sure how it all worked, either."

"Hah! Let's move on. So this asshole did his math, he

hands her a hundred and twenty-five dollars for the five romantic minutes and throws her right out. Well, drags her out, if she was telling me the truth about the whole thing. Meanwhile, I'm waiting around downstairs in the car, she comes running, tells me what happened...now," Gerald stopped climbing, "don't get me wrong, John." He looked down at John standing four steps below him and shook his index finger side to side to display his seriousness. "I had to go in and do *my* thing, but don't think that I did this for *her*," he continued up.

"So, I'm making my way down this fancy lobby of this fancy hotel with this doe-faced concierge in his fancy fucking vest. I don't even acknowledge the 'hey...hey, sir!' Hell no, I just keep making my way towards that elevator and hit that button with the muzzle of my gun. Once that door closes, I look at myself in the mirror and think of all the cool, badass shit I'm gonna say to this pervert. I play with the safety on my gun. On and off. On and off—it helps me get into it. Finally, I make my way to his door, stopping for a few moments to think about how I'm about to make that stupid electronic door lock my bitch. I compose myself, crack my neck. Once to the left; twice to the right.

"I bang on the door with the butt of my gun.

"'Who is it?' I hear the pervert's footsteps come closer. I can feel him. I can hear his heavy pervert breaths on the other side of that peephole.

"I tell him that it's the collection agency. Hah, I remember how cool I felt in that moment, saying that shit. Came up with that one in the elevator.

"I actually said that," pausing his trek up the stairs, Gerald spun around and poked his finger at John's notebook, "write that part down.

"'Fuck yourself! She got the money!' I can pinpoint exactly where the noise is coming from. I can picture an outline of him on the other side of that door so clearly.

"I calmly and concisely explain to him the concept of an hourly rate.

“Get fucked! I didn’t need an hour!’ I’m sure he knew the concept—there really was no need to tell him all that. It just felt really satisfying to explain it. I felt like a cop reciting the Miranda rights to some crook I just tackled face down into the dirt.

“I put my ear up to the door just to be absolutely certain that he’s still standing right where I need him to be standing.

“I take a big step back and think about how cool all this would look from various camera angles. I raise my foot up and drive it straight into that electronic door lock. All of my weight. Right into it. BOOM! The fucking thing flies right open and knocks the pervert down onto the ground. I strut my way inside with this big grin on my way face...but it quickly disappears when I see the little .357 raised in his right hand. Before I get a chance to process all of this he pulls the trigger.”

Gerald ran up ahead to the next platform, whipped out his pistol, pointed it at John’s head and immediately pulled the trigger. John didn’t even get a chance to process what had happened before realizing that he was still alive and breathing. His face froze; his eyes spread wide open. He gazed directly into the big cocky grin on Gerald’s face.

“I don’t like to keep one in the chamber,” he tucked the pistol back into his belt, “I get a little forgetful sometimes. It’s better this way.”

“Good...” John’s internal screaming subsided, “...to know.”

“Plus. It gives me a chance to slide that action back right before I’m about to ruin someone’s day. I love that sort of movie shit. Anyways...

“Click. The snap of the hammer on his .38” Special proves worthless. Click, click...click. Still nothing—I’ve never felt such exhilaration. I snap back into reality and take slow, steady steps towards him. The last two clicks prove ineffective. That makes for a total of six now, bringing the chances of anything flying out of that barrel at me down to zero. I keep on walking while he drags his ass back

towards the open suitcase lying on the ground behind him.

“‘Wait!’ He throws his hand up in front to stop me.”

“Really?” John interrupted.

“Hah! Yeah!”

“‘Wait?’ I repeat it back to him. I stop to scratch my head and think about whether this shit is really happening or not. He starts rummaging through that suitcase, tossing out some clothes, underwear, magazines...whatever. He scrapes the bottom of his suitcase and finds a handful of bullets, fumbling them, of course, spilling the fucking things all over the floor. I watch his shaky hands struggle to get one of them in, just one round into the drum of that revolver.

“‘Fuck!’ He whimpers, again and again and again.

“At this point I’m so embarrassed to be in the same room as this guy that I have to cover my face. Then I hear the sound of the drum snap back into place. I get myself back into it and kick the revolver right out of his hand, pick it up and point it at his stupid fucking face.”

With an idiotic grin on his face, Gerald turned to John, and in a cool, matter-of-fact manner said to him, “John, do you know what the greatest feeling a guy like me can experience?” Not waiting for John’s nod of acknowledgement, he continued “to shoot, a motherfucker, with his own damn gun.

“I put mine away and empty the .38” right into him. The one round goes off but I squeeze it five more times.

“It just felt so good to keep going.”

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

Upon reaching the top of the stairwell, the two men were closer than ever to the origin of the stench that had been fouling up their nostrils. They came upon a hallway lined with Baker-Miller pink wallpaper. A strip of moss-green carpet stretched toward a single broken window looking out to the fire exit. The trail of dog faeces led to an unwelcome-sounding growl coming from the door to their left as they passed it. Stopping in front of the growling door, Gerald grabbed John by the shoulder, spun him around, and pointed across the hall. John did his best not to acknowledge the revolver being shoved into his limp, unwelcoming hand.

“Who’s in there?” John asked, casually slipping his hands into his pockets.

“Uh. He...” So caught up in his story, Gerald had forgotten to think of a legitimate reason for dragging them out here. He did the best he could when he said, “some guy—owes money or something.”

“Ok. Are you going to kill anybody?”

“I’m sure *I could*. But I *probably* won’t.” The thought hadn’t crossed his mind yet. “But, hey! It would be a hell of a thing to write about if I did. Am I right?”

“Oh,” John felt the barrel of the revolver graze the top of

his leg. He pulled away, "I'm good. Thanks." While avoiding eye contact, John took a moment to think the situation through, "don't you think this is too much? You don't even know me."

"I thought you were a man, John. Look—it's nothing. I just don't want to be seen walking around with a wimp. How do you think that would make *me* look? Take the thing!" Gerald pushed the revolver further.

"Well, look. I can just leave—"

"What! After everything I just told you? It's not that easy, John. Take it!"

"No!" John took a step back.

"And why the hell not?" Gerald grabbed John by the arm and pulled him closer to the door.

"Because I'm not a bad guy!" John immediately felt embarrassed by how stupid that sounded.

"What..." Gerald stared at him, confused. "Nobody in there gives a shit what you are. Look, just put the thing in your hand and put on the meanest look those lifeless face muscles of yours can formulate. I'll do the actual work. Trust me—I know what I'm doing."

A mess of splinters from the door frame and bronze-plated bits and pieces of the busted door knob littered the entrance to the apartment. Gerald burst in, barging his way into the living room with his gun stretched out in front. Aside from an old beige couch, the living room held little of interest to Gerald. He spotted a light coming from the bathroom, crept toward it, and lent an ear to the door, listening for any movement. John followed behind, avoiding stepping on the mess they made to not make more noise, in case nobody heard the door breaking down. Unable to get his own ear to the door beside Gerald, John got fed up with watching him and took to the right. He came upon something resembling a bedroom. John went inside to find nothing more than a stained mattress on the ground with minimal sheeting, and outdated laptop sitting on an old child-sized desk illuminated by an ugly yellow lamp, and a pile of ragged

clothing.

The fading beam of the late-afternoon sun pushed through the cracks in the boarded-up windows, paving the way into the kitchen. John followed the trail. While snooping around, he spotted a state-of-the-art blender, and felt a confounded sense jealousy in admiring its many features. It was an industrial-sized blender with a massive three-quarter gallon glass jar etched with very precise volume markings, sitting in a sturdy base. Twelve mechanically activated speed buttons ranged from *CHOP*, to *GRIND*, and everything in between, to *ICE CRUSH*. The clean, crisp LCD display read *18:46*. John reminisced about the earlier incident in his home while his fingertips grazed the durable, metal-grey, anodized finish. He felt the sting of the gash on his forehead when he dug the tip of his nail into the laser-etched markings on the various knobs and buttons.

John's curiosity led him further where he spotted a yellow-stained microwave that looked as if it was manufactured a century ago. In front, on top, and even behind the microwave lay a collection of glass flasks and scientific beakers of mixed shapes and sizes. The sort of equipment one would find in abundance in high-school chemistry classrooms, where the students would gladly commit minor crimes in exchange for a cheap bottle of Polish vodka. Underneath the discoloured, creaky kitchen cabinets sat gallon-sized jars, labeled with a permanent marker, *METHIL ALCAHOL*; beside them sat a few buckets labeled *UESD OIL*, with inch-wide nozzles at the tops for easy pouring. From the far end of the countertop, a puddle of corn oil dripped down from the edge into a half-empty, which only last week was half-full, bag of lye laying on the tile floor below it.

John saw the ingredients for something immensely fascinating in that kitchen. He was trying to make sense of it all when the noises coming from the bathroom became too distracting to ignore. Soon enough, Gerald called for him, there was a meeting in the bathroom, and John's attendance was mandatory.

* * *

The porcelain sink, toilet, and bathtub shared the same shade of pale blue with the eyes of the naked man hanging from a slippery rope tied to a sturdy shower curtain rod. His scrawny feet slipped and slid along the surface of the tile floor coated with a thick puddle of warm, soapy water. Gerald's fingers struggled to get a grip on the slippery knot. He tugged at the rope up and down, then side to side, dragging the flimsy body along with it, trying to get it loose. With a tight enough grasp he could hold up the weight of the man for long enough to release the tension and untie the knot from the rod. Gerald lowered the noose with the naked man attached at the other end onto the toilet seat. He stared at his frightened blue eyes while trying to figure out the appropriate action to take. A few jabs to his stomach were to suffice for now.

Skinny Russian struggled to regain his breath. His bony, chemically burnt hands pulled the noose looser. With the tension on his neck relieved, he took a deep, raspy breath, expanded his stomach, and got a lungful of air. He massaged the rash around his neck and scratched the back of his head. A strong sense of remorse overcame him when he reevaluated his decision to commit suicide, especially while naked. The look of shame and regret in his eyes trailed from his thin, hairy legs to the small plastic tub of warm soapy water beside his feet. His eyes followed the wayward motion of the bar of soap Gerald waved in front of his face. As if in a trance, he watched the soap float around in the air until he caught sight of Gerald's face, then immediately turned his head away and closed his eyes. He shut everything out, went to his happy place; an open-handed slap to the side of his head brought him back to reality.

"You..." Gerald spoke, trying to project a sense of anger which he could not yet justify. He tried to yank at the noose hanging from the man's head. The slimy texture made it difficult, which further angered him, "...you were serious about this. Huh?"

"No!" Skinny Russian cried. His twitching, bloodshot

eyes bounced around the crowded bathroom, “no-no-no!” He hid his face in palms of his hands.

“You smothered the rope with this soapy shit!” Gerald threw the soggy bar of soap at Skinny Russian’s head. He yelped in pain when it hit him in the eyebrow. He yelped a second time when the soap bounced into the bathtub and made a clunking noise. “There’s no way you could’ve undone the noose yourself, you bastard.”

“Well...” he shuffled in his seat. “How the hell was I supposed to pay everything back? Or when, even? Nobody tells me anything! EVER! All you people do is come here and...why would you even...” he got more flustered, “look at me! Did *they* not? It’s not my fault! Nothing ever works!”

“Well, no shit buddy,” Gerald tugged back and forth on the noose, “why else would you...” pulling Skinny Russian’s head in closer, “...want to...” then let the rope go, sending his head slamming back against the tile wall, “...wrap this soapy goodness around your neck?” Gerald shook his head, “I hate to tell you, but I don’t think you get to just walk away from something like this.”

Feeling left out of the drama, John decided he should cut in. “Where did you learn that method?” He pointed at the lathered rope.

Gerald looked over his left shoulder to see a neglected writer standing idly in the corner, “oh, right—your diary thing.” Back to Skinny Russian, he said, “I don’t know what the hell to do about you. Yet. Lemme think for a second. Meanwhile, you can tell John here a story. It’s a thing we’re doing today. You get three sentences.”

The Writer was once again tested on his pen and paper dexterity as he tried to balance the notebook on the sleeve of his cardigan. With the revolver in one hand, he readied his pen in the other.

Hopelessly trying to gather his thoughts, Skinny Russian simply began with: “...uhhh. Back in the Soviet, um, small town...” he massaged his head and pondered what made up a complete sentence.

The notebook slipped back and forth along John’s

forearm, the revolver followed its every random motion. John's eyes shifted rapidly between the notebook and Skinny Russian, looking for something in the man beyond the limit of a mere three sentences to write down.

Skinny Russian continued, "...small prison, very few guards around to keep everyone in check. Every few months they'd send an inmate with a shopping list into the small town nearby..."

The texture of the imitation leather couldn't keep a stable grip on his cardigan for long enough to scribble down anything decipherable. Every other word would slip off of the page, get scribbled out, then get written in again beside it. The scribbles in the notebook looked as panicked as the words coming from Skinny Russian sounded.

"Just in case the inmate decided to run off..." Skinny Russian brought the noose up to his face, then looked into the bathtub for the bar of soap, leaving John to fill in the blanks.

The notebook slipped for the last time. John's forearm muscles contracted in a failed effort to catch it, causing the joint in his index finger to squeeze the trigger. The .38 Special left a six-inch wide crater in the tile wall a foot away from Skinny Russian's head. Specks of tile and cement dust settled onto every surface and body in the bathroom. The three confused faces tried to deal with the shock by exchanging profanities and inaudible complaints about the ringing in their ears. The air in the crowded room cleared up. When the dust settled, John saw two very confused men stare up at him. The revolver remained in his hand, motionless. The notebook beneath his feet sat collecting dust.

"The thing's loaded..." John's eyes remained fixed on the gun in his hand.

"Fuckface! Of course it's loaded!" Gerald tried to raise himself up. The slippery floor prohibited his shoes from getting his footing. He cursed under his breath while repeatedly falling down on his ass. After he had enough, Gerald called for John's support.

Upon discovering that the little red button really exists, the prospect of *why not?* seemed to be much more appealing to John than the *why?* He submitted to his curiosity and closed his eyes. Somewhere in the infinite amount of thoughts that ran through John's head this was the only one that made sense.

"HEY!" Gerald shouted.

John rotated the revolver toward the man in the nice suit.

"JOHN!"

And then he squeezed the trigger.

"John, what the fuck!" Blood seeped through the gaps between his fingers. Gerald pushed down harder with both hands and shouted again, "what the fuck, John!"

John opened his eyes, surprised to see that the outcome was not what he had imagined, crying out, "OH SHIT!" He saw the bloody white shirt, the trembling body, "oh shit—I'm sorry!" The barrel was still fixed on Gerald when John crouched down to retrieve the fallen notebook from the dusty tile floor. His apologetic eyes bounced around between the blood and Gerald's irate stare, "I meant to shoot the leg. I wasn't aiming for your—they always shoot them in the leg!"

"You weren't aiming at fuck-all, you son of a bitch—I saw you!"

"I—I'm sorry!"

"Why the fuck would you even—"

"Oh, come on. Like I was gonna ever get out of this—I'm not an idiot!"

"I trusted you, John!"

"Why would you do that?!" John pleaded.

"I told you things, John!"

"What?"

"Personal things!"

"You call *that* personal? You're nothing I couldn't have thought of on my own! A walking, talking cliché if there ever was one!"

“Jesus, John,” Gerald massaged the hole in his stomach, “you’re a real piece of shit, eh?”

“Ahhhh—quiet! Just...give me your keys!” John watched the room for any sudden movements.

“Get fucked, asshole!”

“Give me your keys!” John stuck out the firm, welcoming palm of his hand, “give me your keys. GIVE ME YOUR FUCKING KEYS!”

“Oh,” Gerald pressed on his stomach harder, “...you know, I would just fucking love to. I don’t know if you noticed, but my hands are pretty busy trying to keep my fucking guts from spilling out onto the floor!”

“FUCK!” John swung the revolver toward Skinny Russian. “You!” John called out, “get his fucking keys!”

“Don’t,” Gerald grunted, “I’ll kill you if you do.”

“Uhhhh,” Skinny Russian’s quivering face looked around for approval.

“I’m warning you,” Gerald shook his head.

“GET ‘EM!” John shouted.

“OK!” The naked man listened to what he deemed to be the real danger to his well-being in the room. He searched around Gerald’s pants pockets, mouthing an awkward apology while avoiding any uncomfortable eye contact. He found them, and without looking up, stretched his hand outward.

John snatched them. “I’m sorry...” he backed out of the bathroom.

“YOU FUCK!”

“I *am* sorry!” He said from the living room.

“John! You’re the bad guy, you cocksucker!”

He disappeared.

Gerald wedged himself between the base of the toilet seat and the wall behind him to stop from slipping around on the soapy floor. His freshly pressed dress pants soaked in a mix of soapy water, fresh blood, and urine. His hands kept pressure on the uncomfortable warmth on his stomach while his eyes struggled to remain open. He remembered that he

wasn't the only person in the bathroom when the ringing in his head subsided enough for him to hear another person's heavy breathing. The sound of a metal object scraping along the tile floor followed. Gerald opened his eyes and looked up to see a naked man standing in front of him with a familiar-looking pistol in his trembling hand.

STRANGERS IN MY HEAD

John, stop, don't you think this may be too much for you to handle right now? All this excitement in one day? Stop and think, please. Have you thought for a moment about the consequences of...anything?! I don't even know what to—WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING DON'T STOP THE CAR HERE! NO! Stop it, quit your grinning. You're not happy, you can't be happy about anything right now! How can you even be thinking about anything other than—John, you just killed a man!

"No, I didn't!"

John, what's gotten into you? What are you talking about—you just shot a man in the head. Point blank. Tell me you saw what I saw!

"I didn't kill anybody!"

What about all the blood you saw?

"There was no blood."

Are you sure about that?

...

That's what I thought. Then how can you be so sure you didn't kill him? How can you be so certain that it wasn't brain matter you saw splattered on the bathroom walls?

...

Is that her? Is that why you're here? Don't look. Don't go through with this. Just keep driving and never stop. This is the last time I'm going to tell you. Make the right choice, John. Look...it's them or me. Choose wisely.

ME! Pick me!

"No! I think this might be what I need. I can't slow down now. I think too much—that's my problem. That's what's always gotten in my way. I need to see where this goes. Go away."

John, did you take your medication today? I think you may have forgotten it. Maybe you should just drive over to your house, take some pills and just think about your next move. You might change for the better! You'll feel clearer!

Oh quit your smiling already—you look like a moron. Really, the hair? That's all she's got going. Enough already. Just look away right—

The black three-inch heels stomped out of the lobby, flying down the cobblestone walkway straight toward a luxury sedan waiting by the curb. Her black fur coat concealed the red, scuffed-up kneecaps that shivered with each brisk gust of wind that passed through the opening in her coat. The pruned fingers on her left hand pressed against her purse; the ones on her right reached for the cold metal of the rear door handle. She ducked to make room for the golden curls to clear the doorway. In one swift move she was inside. Christina shut the door behind her, melted into the warm leather seat, and hugged herself with the massive fur coat.

Unaware of the impostor sitting in the driver's seat, Christina struggled to make any sense of what she'd gone through in the previous few hours. While massaging her sore kneecaps, she contemplated why somebody had just paid her fifteen-hundred dollars to wash their dishes, organize the cabinets, and clean up the kitchen floor. She couldn't get the image out of her head of the lonely old man who just sat there the entire time. She fought the urge to keep on thinking about what was going through his head. Her mind was already set on purging yet another tedious

story about how some wife left some guy and how this one was different from the rest. Yet, couldn't recall his name. She wasn't sure if he'd even bothered to introduce himself in the first place. She wasn't sure if she had even been listening. For now she would refer to the old man as *Thursday* and move on.

Still paying no attention to the figure in the driver's seat, she reminisced about the days when she wasn't being paid as generously as she was tonight, but at least she had more say about whom she got to spend quality time with. Although she didn't recall being able to wrap such warm, comforting fur around her body back then. Sometime between being handed a stack of cash, and waiting in the lobby for an hour while being subjected to the concierge's uncomfortable stares, something inside of her finally snapped, and she'd already picked out a specific set of ears to be on the receiving end of her fury. She inadvertently realized that there really was only one person she could even think of to talk to, which only angered her further. When Christina leaned in to speak, her mind suddenly went blank at the sight of a stranger in the front seat, "who the fuck are you?" she snapped at John.

If not for the earlier internal conflict, John thought, he would surely have come up with a valid answer. His thoughts were a jumbled mess, the only words that were able to leave his mouth were, "I'm...John." He turned his head, only to see the prongs of a two-million volt taser staring back at him. A pruned thumb hovered over the little red button, ready to release the spark at any given moment. "Uhh...a writer," he added.

"I am not in the mood for nonsense." The taser crackled.

"New driver!" he blurted out.

Hey John, you killed him.

"No shit?" Christina said sarcastically. Still feeling defensive, her thumb remained over the little red button. "Why are you here? Where's the other guy? Does nobody tell me anything?"

"He's..." despite being a writer, the only answer that The

Writer could think up was: *he's on vacation*. Upon realizing how ridiculous that answer would've sounded, he stopped himself from saying the words out loud.

You think you'll get away with it? You think you'll be able to forget about it? Not everything goes away. ~~But it's working for the story, keep it going.~~

"He hurt himself."

"Ha! Serves him right. What the hell was it this time? Please tell me it was his pride."

"Sprained his ankle—can't drive," John answered. "Right ankle."

Christina burst into laughter, "good! That'll keep him out of my ears for a while. Come on, let's get out of here." Feeling more relaxed now, Christina leaned back into the comfortable leather seat and reconstructed the thoughts she'd bottled up earlier. "Hey!" it came to her, "why the fuck is everyone such a whiny little bitch these days? Why's everything so hard to let go of?" Thrilled about the chance to finally speak out loud without being interrupted, she kept going, "are you actually a writer? Write about *that*!"

"I am," John said with a defeated look on his face—those were not the first words he'd expected to hear from her. He took a moment to collect himself, and said, defensively, "that's a little harsh. People have feelings, you know." John felt relieved that he could finally talk back to somebody, now that the chances of him getting shot was significantly lower. He was further filled with relief when Christina lowered the taser.

"To hell with your feelings. Couldn't you have just said something like: *no, we're not all like that*, everything's gotta be so fucking personal. Everyone gets so emotional. Every time!"

"I wasn't being—wait...You're sounding pretty emotional yourself right now. Is everything alright?"

"Hey. What the hell makes you think you can talk about how I feel?" She leaned in.

"Uh."

See what I was talking about, John? ~~I am handling myself~~

~~thought, aren't I?~~

"I thought that's how these things went." He said, softly. Despite being a recluse, The Writer learned a great deal about human interaction and emotions through helpful flowcharts and infographics he'd hoarded over the years for his research. His editor may have thought that the interactions between characters in his novels were too cold and calculated, predictable, but it was also the factor that allowed so many readers to buy into the fantasy and relate without having to think too much about it. All of his research into how human beings should function, despite having little practice, had injected enough conviction into his speech to have it be taken at least somewhat seriously.

"What, like, you think you're obligated to acknowledge and give your best sad puppy face to everybody who looks like they're in need? Don't. Look at yours, anybody's track record, in hindsight, trying to help anybody out is almost always a huge waste of energy. I don't need it from you, or anybody. Everyone's so quick to care about every dumbass out there who screws up their own life. Everybody wants to care about the world going to shit, they don't even figure out why they're doing it until the trend has passed and there's a new exciting thing to feel sorry about right around the corner. Everyone's in a fucking rat race to prove to the world that they're decent human beings, trying to be the first to the finish line to brag about how much more *they're* affected by this and that. Everyone's required to participate. Those that don't have to live with the stigma of people thinking them to be unempathetic cunts. Be careful who you feel sorry for, John. *I* keep my empathy on reserve for when it's truly necessary. For when it really hurts—you should too."

"And when is that?"

"Shit, I don't know. Listen to your heart, man. Forget about it, everyone seems so emotional today, maybe it finally got to me. I think this just might be *one of those days* that people always talk about. Full moon or whatever."

"What do *you* care about?"

"I'm don't think I care about anything anymore, John." Her eyes wandered off to watch the lamp posts fly past her window.

"That's a little bleak, don't you think?" John's enthusiasm about meeting new people was heading for an early grave.

What were you expecting, John, rainbows and butterflies?

"No, I don't think it's bleak. After a while it just becomes the norm. Everyone's got a norm. But hey, norms change. I think I just need to get off my ass and do something about it. I used to think that all of this would somehow turn out differently."

"Like rainbows and butterflies?"

"Oh look—a writer *and* a comedian," she scoffed, "find a better hobby, shithead."

"It's not a ho—," upon realizing what an uphill battle it was to prove himself to people, he thought it best to cut himself off. "What do you plan on doing about it?"

"I don't know, John. This—I just need to get out of this," she fell into a trance-like state, "I just want to leave sometimes, you know?"

John finally heard the words he'd been waiting for since she first got into the car. He watched for her reaction through the rear-view mirror when he said, "do you mean it—do you actually want to leave?"

"Yeah...whatever, John." She couldn't wait to tear the blonde curls off of her head and wash the sweat-soaked black hair underneath. "Let's just go," she said while feeling up the smooth texture of her \$2400.00 fur coat and enjoying the uneasy comfort of wearing \$500.00 high heels. She let out a slow, deep exhale and stretched her neck out. "You know...to hell with this place."

"Yeah! I know!"

"... Yeah..." She sunk lower.

"We can—"

"Huh," she sprung to attention when she realized that the bulbs in the lamp posts had suddenly changed to a dirty shade of rust-yellow. She was not in the neighbourhood she lived in, nor seen for ages, "...you're going the wrong way."

She pushed herself up to get a better look at John and the road ahead of them. While trying to get his attention, she noticed the gash on the far side of his head, “what happened to your face?”

“Yeah!” Immediately forgetting her question, John went on, “I can help you get out! Now’s a good a time as ever!”

“What are you talking about?”

“We can leave!”

“John, where are you taking us?”

“I thought you wanted to—”

She knows, John.

“Do you even know where I live?” Christina's hand crept into her purse for the taser. The pruned thumb, primed and ready to go, hovered over the little red button.

“Uhhh—”

“John?” She watched the composure on his face collapse in front of her eyes. Her thumb remained patient until the sedan stopped at the first red light before unleashing two million volts directly into his atlas.

INSPIRED

On the outskirts of the city, to the west, a rusty, abandoned set of railroad tracks, guarded by a torn barbed-wired fence, barricaded a decrepit sugar factory from the rest of the world. Across the road from it stood a five-storey loft, which several decades ago was home to starving, ambitious artists from various walks of life. That was before a group of people who were great at breaking legs moved in.

On the ground level of the structure once lived a reclusive painter who would lay gentle strokes upon his canvases with exclusively white paint. He would only use brushes made of pure African squirrel fur.

On the second floor was a lady who found love from the stray cats whom she would attract to her living space using unwashed tuna cans from her daily lunches. As a profession, she created props and prosthetics for low-budget horror films. She was quirky and fun and weird and was convinced that her attitude was a large part of what got her much of her work. Mercury poisoning, she figured, from all the canned tuna she ate, was what contributed to her cooky, at times unmanageable, behaviour. But she loved her cats and her self-image too much to ever consider changing.

An antiques enthusiast stayed on the third floor. He was

always wearing the same flower-print afghan he found one day in the trashcan. It was his dearest possession, because through a string of convoluted justifications in his head, he also felt that somewhere, somehow, at some point in his life, he had also been tossed into the trash, and this afghan reflected his personality perfectly. His specialty was treasure chests; his dream was to find a secret compartment, perhaps overlooked by their previous owners, that would hold a treasure beyond his wildest dreams.

Further up on the fourth floor sat a lonely desk, behind it, occasionally, a poet. He would walk circles around the large open space until the sun came in through the east-facing window and a ray of light struck his desk just right. He would write for about three hours a day, shuffling his desk from one end of the room to the other as the sun gradually shifted, before disappearing completely around the corner. On the overcast days he mostly masturbated and attempted to play the dobro.

At the very top worked a young Irish immigrant who dreamed of building beautiful, unique wooden furniture. He lived with his wife, who was pregnant with their first child. She hated being alone, especially at nights, when the gas oven would make angry faces at her. She was sure something would have to be done about it one day.

Although for the majority of their time spent there the five residents struggled to make ends meet, they were always willing to help each other out in whatever ways they knew how. The carpenter built a sturdy new desk for the poet in his free time, who in return taught the immigrant the art of grammar and prose. The prop-maker would rent out the antique collector's unique treasures as props for the film production she'd been working on at the time, gaining a reputation as somebody who could bring a distinct style to her work while splitting the cash she earned with the collector. The reclusive painter was different in his generosity: some nights, when everybody had fallen asleep, he would leave new paintings atop the stairs leading up to the other four apartments. He asked for nothing in exchange.

Despite the paintings being of no use to their well-being, the other residents expressed their gratitude by hanging them on their walls in fear that it would've hurt his feelings if they hadn't. The carpenter was the only person permitted to enter the painter's ground-level studio. He was tasked with assuring the other residents that the painter was feeling fine when a new painting didn't appear for more than a month. He was to explain to them, over and over again, why the painter couldn't meet them face-to-face just yet. Week to week. Month to month. Until a new painting appeared, and they would leave him alone for just a little while longer once again.

A dark, wooden stairwell on the inside of the west wall joined the five levels together; murky plastic drapes hung from the tops of each overhang to provide the smallest bit of separation. On the opposite end of the space, an elevator shaft, wrapped in a layer of bricks, split the building down the middle. The elevator doors on the top floor would occasionally open up to a dimly lit amateur woodworking space encompassed in dust. On the far side of the shaft, the remaining light of the day fought through the cracks in the windows to shed light onto a studio space where a writer gained consciousness.

A small pile of concrete dust gathered underneath a loose-fitting iron baseplate hanging a few feet off the ground. From the end of the plate hung a twelve-foot long chain that stretched down the wall, along the floor, toward the windows, ending at an ankle cuff wrapped around the top of a worn-out leather boot. The exposed cork heel tap danced on the concrete surface; the metal chain clanked and scraped the floor in rhythm. The setting sun blasted its last few rays of red and orange through layers of old newspapers crudely taped over the windows. Thin strings of burlap rope kept John's arms tight against the mid-rail of an old, handcrafted chair. His stomach pressed into the wooden spine. Two more pieces of rope cut the circulation off to his ankles down below.

A dry stream of blood held his eyelids shut; with every spastic twitch it flaked; with every shake of his head they broke off. His eyes struggled to adjust to the blinding squares of windows when they finally opened. With a slow, painful stretch of his neck he attempted to swallow the lump in his throat.

At the far end of the open space, near the windows, John spotted an antique wooded chest with a gold-plated lock, trim, and hinges. His curiosity about what could be inside the chest was cut short when he was suddenly aware that he couldn't catch his breath. He attempted to relieve the pressure in his chest by expanding his stomach outward, but the give of the rope was uncompromising. His anxiety intensified. His breathing became shallow and rapid; the tightness in his chest more prevalent. John jerked his elbows side to side, quietly at first, to help loosen the knots, then as hard as he could when he figured he'd rather be heard making loud noises than suffocate. The rope finally gave a little. He arched his back and gasped for a lung-full of air until he felt that feeling in the centre of his chest push back. He held the pose and relished in the feeling of relief for a moment, should he not get another one, and finally exhaled. Between each lung-full of air he thrust his elbows out further. Between each thrust his boots kicked harder into the floor. The trashing came to a halt when he heard wood creak from behind him. Footsteps, they were growing louder by the second. The tension in his chest returned. The creaks turned to dull thuds, and soon John could see a pair of polished leather shoes in his peripherals. He wanted to shout, but the words weren't there. A silhouette of an old man stood tall in front of him, looking down. The tap dancing resumed.

"Good..." the silhouette spoke, "...you're awake," then reached into the pocket of freshly pressed slacks and pulled out a two-million volt taser. He cracked a few arcs of electricity in front of John's face, waited for the reaction, then spoke again, "good. Good, guess I won't have to use *this* one on you." The taser slipped back into the silk-lined

pocket.

“Who the hell...to do what?” John asked, squinting, in an attempt to make out the details of the silhouette. It proved ineffective. The halo of red and orange around the man was still too bright to see past.

“No, I won’t use that,” the silhouette grunted. His wrinkled hand released the grip on the taser in his pocket, slipped out, and advanced to his crotch. While grabbing a firm hold, he said, “...just this.” He squatted down in front of John, rolled up the sleeves of his fresh white dress shirt, and rested his elbows on top of his thighs. He inhaled deeply through his nose. A growling grunt left his mouth on the exhale. With a deep rumble in his voice he said, “cocksucker.” Again, through his teeth, “*you* cocksucker.”

A whining breeze of cold air forced its way through a crack in the window, sending an old piece of newspaper to unstick and flutter inside the room before completely flying off. The ray of sun struck John’s white t-shirt and bounced off onto the silhouette, illuminating the man’s face with with a warm, orange glow. Layers upon layers of crow’s feet were accentuated by a heavy scrunching of a pair of aged grey eyes. The pupils were sharp and focused. His thin, white hair, nearly translucent in the minuscule bit of backlight, was as short as the stubble on his wide chin. The skin on the cheeks, dry and crowded with large black pores, stretched further down with each condemning frown formed on his cracked lips. A sharp, pointy nose looked up and flared its nostrils at John. John thought about the meaning of the set of pale blue dots, arranged in a square with one in the middle, on the back of the man’s hairy hand as it swung toward the side of his face, sending his head into a disorienting spin.

“Good,” the man stood up. He leaned over John to get a closer listen to the sound of his teeth chattering, the heavy breathing, and the scratching of the burlap rope against the golden oak finish, “...good. You’re already scared. That’s exactly what I need. It’s *exactly* how I want you to feel. But I want you to get *extra* scared right now. Do you want to

know why?" The silhouette took in the mellow sound of the creeping wood as it warped at the spine of the chair, "do you want to know why you should stay scared? Why being the most fearful little cocksucker is the absolute best option for you at this moment?"

Between the various head traumas, the electrocution, the immense amount of fear he was feeling, for some profound reason, John felt he had to pick just one of three to justify his current speech impediment, as if an easy answer would make him feel at ease. Having thought about it a little more, he considered the intense pressure from hugging the chair so tightly for so long to be a viable option. In all his deep thinking he failed to notice that the burlap rope keeping his hands in place was burning the skin on his wrists from the incessant tugging and pulling and twisting. Still short on words, his breathing grew more sporadic. An itchy dry flake of blood hanging off the tip of his nose flapped around violently with each breath and eventually broke off. An uneasy sense of calm and clarity came over him when the itch on his nose was finally gone, but even that wasn't enough to help him cease the violent thrashing and internal shouting.

"Yeah, that's it now. Good—get that bleeding flowing through ya!" The man's fat, hairy fingers wrapped around John's throat. "I'll tell you why you should be so scared. You see—your muscles—they will stay tense." He released John's throat. The silhouette walked behind the chair, reached down, and grabbed a firm hold of John's butt, "and the longer *this* stays tense..." he squeezed harder and whispered, "the longer I will get to fuck you for." He stood in front of John again to make sure that his monologue was having the intended effect. "Because after a while, I'll stop." He raised a fist inches away from John's nose, "because after a while, one of *two* things will begin to happen," the index finger sprung out, "one: you're gonna start to enjoy it," the middle finger followed, "two: you're gonna pass out...because after a while, son," the fingers retreated into the fist. The man raised himself up, took a deep, satisfying

breath, and stretched his neck back, “well. After a while, it just won’t be so tight down there.” He relaxed and loosened his jaw. When he looked down, he noticed that John had quit paying attention, “hey, John!”

Nothing.

“John-John-John-John-John!” The man jabbed his finger into John’s head.

“What?” John sprang to attention. “What!” he whimpered.

The old man spotted the gash on John’s forehead and poked away at it, “you think that’s the only place you’ll be bleeding from today?” He spun around and strutted toward the wooden chest. “Now,” he tossed the lid open, “I really want to make sure that you’ll do as you’ve been asked. Otherwise, things are going to become much worse for you very quickly.”

“What the fuck are you...” John muttered, attempting to spin the chair around to get a better look at the man.

John struggled to make out the outline of what appeared to be a thick, deformed pipe in the man’s hand as it bobbed up and down toward him. Upon reaching him closer it began to look more and more like a part of a human body. The man took a wide swing with the object, and in the brief moment before it struck John’s face, he was almost able to make out the complete shape of it. It finally came to him when the big toe went straight into his eye.

“*This* is what will happen—I want you to meet Chief Blackfoot,” he threw the prosthetic leg across the room. “It’s up to you whether or not that leg will end up in *another* hole of yours. Smarten up—it’s time you start paying attention.”

ABSOLUTE BEGINNINGS

It began at the very beginning of everything before anything went wrong and anybody ever got hurt. It didn't take much more than a little shake to get everything started. It was not his doing, but an unavoidable sort of inevitability, as if he never had complete control of absolutely everything around him, let alone himself. His reluctance to participate meant nothing. It was no longer about just him. He put in the minimal effort possible, anything to stop him from falling behind, but nothing really to get him further ahead. He just was: one with everything in the midst of absolute nothingness all around him.

This was not what he had in mind. This is simply what he had to work with. And if there was ever a time to focus—it was now.

Wake up, little squirrel!

A never-ending, repeating pattern of cracks and crevices coated the great, two-way road that divided the equally never-ending desert down an undefined point in the middle. Non-directional source of sunlight blanketed the complete lack of sand dunes over a canvas of total nothingness in the centre of unimportance. No gusts of wind whistled; no dancing spirals of sand materialized and aimlessly twirled

around before disappearing completely. The lack of tumbleweeds rolling by in this loneliness was equally matched by a complete scarcity of close-ups of cobras hissing. The black sky with no atmosphere met the road to nowhere at the horizon where it continued on forever and ever into the void.

Wake the fuck up.

John found himself lying on his back with his arms spread wide open over the cracks and crevices of this desolate road, thinking thoughts of unknowable uncertainty and incomprehensible irrelevancy. A meaningless burlap noose hung down from his neck; an insignificant bar of soap became soggy from soaking up the sweat in his jeans pocket. His disinterested eyes paid no attention to the directionless rays of sun and couldn't even be bothered to be blinded by them.

Get up

The infinite amount of grains in the sand exploded into a fine mist and began to dance around, painting pictures and shapes all around John as the infinite nothingness watched from up above. His fingers began to twitch, slowly building up to a gentle, soundless tap against the concrete road.

Get up, John. You can't stop it. It's just your prologue, it doesn't even matter. Get on with it.

Fed up with the frustration of being unable to comprehend the entirety of the nihility all around him, the palms of his hands pushed down against the road, helping to lift the rest of his body up off the ground. One by one, sprouting cacti began to sweep the gradually forming landscape.

The total lack of incompleteness finally brought him to his feet. The sky above turned blue as it filled up with atmosphere. A group of five shaved squirrels pranced around in a lack of any particular point in space until they finally came to rest in a square formation, with one dancing around in the middle.

No cacti yet. It's too soon—get rid of all the cacti.

The cacti disappeared. With an awkward limp John began

to thrust his hip forward in order to propel his left foot ahead of his right. Again and again further down the cracked road. The exposed cork heels snagged every new crevice that formed underneath each progressing footstep. The bar of soap became soggy from every newly produced ounce of sweat in his pocket. The noose around his neck swung side to side, he was yet to feel the burn on the back of his neck from the friction.

After just a few more thrusts of his hips a bright yellow circle appeared in front of him on the very edge of the horizon.

In the midst of all this unremarkable exposition, a glimmering red truck approached from behind—

SAME OLD SONG

“Wake up, little squirrel!”

...OH FUCK! Oh shit—goddamn it, that really fucking hurts! Oh fucking fuck me motherfucker—how can they laugh about this sort of shit in movies. I guess it depends on what kinds of movies people watch. FUCK.

A bright red truck...come on—a bright red truck approaches. Come back to the bright, the glimmering red truck—I don’t want to be here right now! I want to be in the desert where the bright red truck is! Close your eyes, close them! Go back to your happy place...a bright red truck approaches from...behind—anywhere but from behind...as I make my way down the desolate desert road with the cracks and shit, it’s...it’s taking shape as the bright red truck approaches—but I don’t know that. No, I don’t know about the bright red truck yet, what the hell am I even saying—my back is still turned to it. The desert is taking shape as I walk down the road, there’s a bar of soap that’s melting in my pocket and a burlap noose hanging, swinging around my neck...it’s all relevant...I think. Fuck it, I’ll make it relevant later. As I walk down this lonely, as far as I know, road, a snake hisses as—shit...are there snakes yet? Rattlesnakes, uhhh—cobras? Do cobras and rattlesnakes exist in the same

desert? The same continent? Wait, what continent am I even on? Am I in Australia this time—maybe? Fuck it. A rattlesnake rattles, a cobra hisses, no...what's an animal that lives in the desert that starts with 'his'? ...maybe not a snake, maybe a Mexican? A rattlesnake rattles and a Hispanic...hisses. Fuck. Are there Mexicans...no it's fine, there can be Hispanics in an Australian desert—they don't have to be Mexican.

Damn it, I can't add any more characters to this thing.

Ok, again. A bright red truck approaches...who's driving the truck? What's his name? Fuck his name! Start with who he is—who is he? I have a truck but no guy. Maybe a rattling rattlesnake is driving the bright red truck that has a rattling muffler hanging on by a thread. A group of super intelligent rattlesnakes working in unison to get this bright red truck to move? Do they talk? Do I need to talk to them? Yes. How the hell do I communicate with these rattling rattlesnakes?

Do I rattle?

Do I hiss?

Do they speak Spanish? Because I fucking don't. So, this desert, this desert has life now as the bright red truck is approaching me from behind—

Clench

Stop it, stop trembling, I need to stop it. Just think of the bright red truck...Red? Why the hell did I have to make it red—this doesn't help at all to stop thinking about the—

Clench

*No, I've put too much work into this by now. I'm not changing anything. The truck is red. What is he...STOP! FOCUS...on the truck, the desert, the rattling rattlesnakes...shit, snakes, another shape I should avoid thinking about at the moment...**CRACK**...what, what in the hell was that? Was that a crack I heard?*

I finally open my eyes to see the rope tying my hands to this chair digging deeper into my wrists, every blue vein looks as if it will burst out of my hands. My fists are as tight as they will go; the knuckles white with nothing but thin red

lines scattered across the tops. I feel like...I feel that if I were to just snap my arms to my sides as hard as I can, that maybe these ropes would tear. Shit, maybe I'll even manage to break the spine of this flimsy chair...damn it—am I that strong? I always thought of myself as a fairly strong guy for someone this thin. When was the last time I arm-wrestled someone? Maybe I could give it a try. It could hurt—is it worth it?

Clench

I can barely make out the sound of my own breathing through the grinding of my teeth. For a moment it's all I could think a—Clench... FOR A MOMENT IT'S ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT. When was the last time I saw my dentist—shit, I don't even have a dentist—who did I go see last time? I'll find one, I think the minute that I get out of here I'm gonna find a dentist and have him look at my teeth. First. Thing. I mean, I don't think that teeth are nearly as strong as people think they are—brittle little shits. I remember reading a story about some guy who flossed so hard that he cut right through his tooth, right down to the root. Shit made the headlines. Flossing is dangerous...when was the last time I flossed?

What the...OH FUCK! I can't see shit. I mean, I can see things, it's really blurry on one side. I'll close my left eye, OK, good, I can see well. Close the right eye—OH SHIT! My eye is fucked, I can't...it's all murky. My left eye is FUCKED! He must've gouged my eye out with that fucking leg! What an itch. It's so itchy in that eye now. I need to make sure it's still there. Maybe if I just start to blink a lot—a couple hundred times should do the trick. I hope.

Clench

Ok, that should've been at least a couple hundred. Wait, don't open that eye yet, don't...wait, squeeze it harder. Build it up, leave it—

Clench

FUCK! My eyes broke open on that one, I couldn't help it. After blinking the water out of my eyes I realize that no, nothing's changed. I'm totally fucked in one eye.

EVERYTHING IS FUCKED. Wait, I can still feel it, I can feel the water build up inside of it. I still have the eye! Ughh—if only I could scratch it, just a bit—just a little feel.

He tilts the chair on the front legs and I hear a series of cracks and squeaks. The change of angle makes that built-up water in my eye trickle down to the corner of my mouth.

*Ah, that taste—it makes you forget things. I haven't tasted that for a long time now. I remember, back in Africa when I cried—I would never wipe the tears from my face if I thought someone was watching—I would always let it trickle down my cheek and into my mouth because it looked so dramatic, I loved it. It's like the pain I was feeling at the moment was so overwhelming that nothing else matte—**Clench**—don't forget to clench, you moron!*

*OH MY GOD, MY BRAIN IS RACING! WHAT ARE YOU DOING CHANGE THE—not a time to sing that song! That song! I remember loving that song as a kid! Before the...no, it's not the time to think about THAT! It's funny, how I listened to that song on repeat for days and days before the...I can feel myself...it's calming to think about it now. The rocking back and forth, it's **Crack!** Oh—that crack! That sound of indescribable relief and immeasurable excitement! Break you, goddamn chair! Just BREAK. OK!*

***CLENCH!** Oh god, that one really did it. OH MY GOD, MY BRAIN IS RACING! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? CHANGE THE STATION! I HATE THAT SONG...what the fuck am I doing—am I not realizing what is happening right now?!*

The son of a bitch...hah! No lube. He knew it would be just as bad for him as it is for me. Go on! KEEP SPITTING YOU SON OF A BITCH! Why do I feel like this is a small victory for me? What the fuck is wrong with my head.

*“Jesus, John!” He speaks! The back legs of the chair touch the ground, is that it? “You’ve lasted a while, you’re gonna make Chief Blackfoot jealous, you know.” The back legs lift up again—**Clench.***

This actually isn't as bad as I had expected it to be—WHAT! What the fuck am I thinking! No, I didn't mean it

wasn't as bad as in it's good—it's just not as traumatizing or...or...physically painful as I would have expected it to be. Oh, maybe it'll dawn on me later. Is that how these things go?

Ahh! AHHH! Clench! Clench! CLENCH! This is so goddamn fucking uncomfortable. The more I think about it the more my legs spasm and dance around uncontrollably. I feel like if I squeeze them any harder it will crush this chair to pieces—CRACK. Keep cracking, you motherfucker! Crack, you piece of shit chair! Let me free!...wait, but then what? How will I get out of this? What's my plan? What, is, my, plan? Wait, is it the front legs that are...yeah, have to be, the front legs are cracking because they're supporting the weight of all this, the rocking must help, too. So...so, the front legs will break, simultaneously, I hope...

Clench

So they break—at the same time. I fall down to the ground, that's gonna be my hands first...my hands hit the ground—hopefully they don't break, then my face—oww. Turn your head to the left before you fall. No, turn your head to the left now and keep it there so you won't forget to later, when the moment comes. Ok...there's Chief Blackfoot on the ground—I wonder if that was custom made—forget it! No, no. So I'm going to keep my head facing right. Ahh, the window, that should get my hopes up about freedom or something along those lines. Stupid. Now, just keep your head there and you'll be fine. Shit. I wonder what floor I'm on right now—if I were to jump...no, what the hell type of building is this...there are those stairs behind me...is there an elevator? Can't see one, but this brick wall could definitely be an elevator shaft, it's rectangular and...big...shit.

He's slowed down. Why, did he see something? Did I say something out loud? Oh—

Clench

Come on! Remember to clench—you don't want him getting suspicious now, you idiot! So the elevator...shaft—shit. Damn it...what if it's not an elevator, what if it's just a

bathroom? I should ask him...YES! I'll ask him!

"Bathroom's downstairs," Jesus Christ you are a sweaty son of a bitch, "turn around—don't look me in the eyes."

I did it—I discovered crucial information that will aid my escape plan. It HAS to be an elevator now.

So then, I fall on my hands, then on my face, I break loose and run to the elevator. Wait, do I know where I am? Wait. Why does it matter if I take the elevator or the stairs? More floors equals more bad guys waiting for me? How many could there be? Shit. Wait. Hold the fuck up—what happens after I break free—figure that one out first. There's still the matter of this fucker and my wrists and feet tied to this chair.

Clench

***CRACK! CRACK!** Oh shit! It's happening, think faster now. The moment is soon! VICTORY! So. Jump out of the window? Do I have enough time to tear the newspapers off of the windows to check what floor I'm on and decide that it's safe to jump before he gets to me? Damn it. What if I forget about all this once the moment comes—**CRACK.** Shit-shit-SHIT!*

*OK. Ok, I get up and I have the chair still tied to both of my hands, I turn around to face him, he's angry, he comes at me and I land a perfectly timed uppercut to the jaw with the part of the chair still attached to me...breaking the rest of it off? Knocking him out? Do guys actually get knocked out in real life like this? He a big guy, too. He's going to have blue balls and I'll be standing right there in front of him—shit! My pants are down, too, how am I going to get up? I can't pull my pants up with this shit tied to my wrists! **CRACK.** SHIT! What if I stand there and wait for him to come to me and when I uppercut him in the jaw it breaks the rest of the chair off leaving my hands free to roam around—**CRACK**—no, to pull my pants up and then run down to the elevator—shit, chair—**CRACK.** It's happening! Get your shit together now! Chair breaks, get up, run to windows to see if it's safe to jump. NO! Chair breaks, get up, uppercut the bastard, run to window, jump if safe—if not, call the elevator, if it takes too long to get up here I run down the unknown number of*

stairs while the bullets of bad guys whizz past me and every single one miraculously misses me, I make CRACK CRACK CRACK! I get downstairs and—CRACK. And... and run out through the front—

CRACK

CRACK

CRACK

CRACK!

“Huh?” He stopped. Why did you stop? Why are you so curious about all these funny sounds the chair is making. They mean nothing! Lift the chair back up! Keep going. I mean...

I ask him what the problem is like I don't know—he ignores me. The squeaking is louder now as he alternates the motion of his hands, one going forward and one going backward, skewing its geometry. I'm trying my best to keep the escape plan fresh in my mind when the back legs of the chair are set back down on the ground. He steps away.

“Well, this is no good.”

Where are you going? I politely ask the man as he zips up his pants and backs away, making his way to other side of what I still think is an elevator shaft. HEY! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING?! I yell louder, trying to rotate the chair in his direction to get a better look at what he's doing. The chair doesn't crack nearly as much when I jump around on it on my own. The hollow chatter of my teeth, the dentist. Red fire trucks. What fire trucks? What am I thinking? Something's off here. Fuck! What the hell was I thinking about just a moment ago? What's down those stairs? Is he... done? What about Chief Blackfoot? Did he forget about Chief Blackfoot? No, he couldn't have—as much as I want him to—he made too big a deal about it...then what is he?

I doesn't dawn on me until I hear the clunking of tools coming from behind.

Did he really just...

Shit, here he comes, I can hear him. Is that—a fucking hammer? Is he just going to hammer me to death now? Is he going to do that tooth pulling torture thing with the hammer

—that seems really painful.

Dentist isn't gonna save me from that one.

“We’re gonna fix ya right up.” I don’t need fixing. Who’s he talking to?

I ask him if he was talking to me. No answer, I yell it a few more times but still nothing. What the hell is his name? Is this the right time to ask?

His eyes are fixated on the front legs of the chair. He falls to his knees. A handful of nails roll out the palm of his hand. He fingers at the split in the wooden leg, then brings a nail up to the far side of the crack, it falls out of his hand and he grasps the split leg tightly—his eyes shut now. His head dips down between his arms. His forehead rests against the wooden spine. He hugs the chair tighter.

I can’t help but to ask what the hell he’s doing but I stop myself when I look down at that hammer and imagine it flying toward my face should a single peep leave my mouth. It feels like at this moment I have to focus on being completely still in order to stay alive—I’m not here right now. I listen to his breathing—it’s becoming more sporadic. I feel the tremble in his hands as it emanates through the wood directly into my body.

I want nothing more than to know your name.

The Chairmaker—that will have to do for now.

I can totally write about this.

A THOUSAND DOORS

Small droplets of water fell from the leaky bathtub faucet onto the bruised bar of soap, breaking it down into a murky white stream leading to the drain. Bits of grey dust and chunks of tile in the blue porcelain bathtub clung to the soapy stream and followed along. The sturdy pole barely held up the weight of the mildew-lined shower curtain when Gerald it to pull himself up. He hadn't thought about the condition of his nice suit for some time now. Skinny Russian sat back on the toilet. His bare back took the cold string of the water bowl behind him without so much as a twitch. He cleaned the bottom of his feet from the soapy sludge by rubbing them against the insides of his calves, only after he was done did Skinny Russian realize that not a single square inch of this bathroom floor was clean, and so, he admitted defeat and put his feet back in the sludge. Sometimes, during all of this fidgeting, the two men's feet would meet. Skinny Russian would promptly apologize, under his breath; Gerald would be halfway into a sentence about a death threat before shutting himself up. The silence, to Gerald, felt worse than his stomach. He knew that even the over-inflated image he had of himself wouldn't be capable of wrestling that pistol from Skinny Russian and gaining the upper hand.

The realist in him, in the rare flashes of self-awareness Gerald would experience, was already standing over his own grave, reading the markings on the headstone: *it wasn't fair*. Gerald watched, half-hoping that the gun would go off and blow the Russian's kneecap clean off, when he saw the naked man use the muzzle of the pistol to scratch the inside of his thigh. He imagined feeling the indifference as to what the consequences of the outcome would be. He just wanted somebody to feel as vulnerable as him at that moment. Bleeding would do that to a man, he thought.

"Were you coming to kill me?" Skinny Russian asked. He imagined that being the first to speak would give him the upper hand, instead, saying the words out loud made the idea that someone actually had come to kill him made his anxiety much worse. *He really had no choice*, for once. He almost believed himself. His neck went limp. His head fell back into the crater left by the .38 in the tiles behind him. A loaded question. Anything to buy himself more time. The freedom now, of not having to worry about what the man with the hole in his stomach might be thinking about, allowed Skinny Russian to take a step back and evaluate his current symptoms. Shock—he was sure of it. He remembered the shock described, from a documentary he watched once, by victims of sexual abuse brought onto them by aggressive dolphins. The documentary was three hours long. Whatever regrets he first felt after watching it had escaped him now. "No time is ever wasted," Skinny Russian whispered to himself. A newfound sense of assertiveness came over him. The crater his head rested in felt more accommodating. He clumped up a basketball-sized roll of toilet paper from the dispenser, tossed it on the floor, and used it to wipe his feet and the floor beneath them.

Playing up the pain from the three-eighths inch wide hole in his lower gut as an excuse to buy more time and think of an answer that wouldn't hurt him further, Gerald let out a series of quick, helpless yelps. He loosened the pressure on his stomach just far enough to see a series of short trickles of blood seep through the cracks between his fingers. He

made sure Skinny Russian saw them. It didn't garner the emotional response from the naked man which he'd hoped for. Gerald had to take it further. A raspy grunt shout out from his mouth while he squinted and gritted his teeth. Again, now with his head thrashing side to side. Skinny Russian watched, unenthused by Gerald's performance. In all this thrashing, Gerald lost his footing, then his balance. While falling over, he tried to grab hold of the shower curtain to catch himself, only to feel a sharp pain explode outward from his stomach when he yanked his arm outward. "Fuck!" he cried as he fell to the floor onto his shoulder. "Fuck!" But the shock faded quickly. The pain too, he feared, was on its way out. With his head on the tile floor, Gerald looked sideways at Skinny Russian, having already convinced himself that getting shot wasn't enough to garner sympathy from the stranger, Gerald already began to resent him. The hardest struggle of all at that moment, he hated to admit, was trying to ignore the fact that all of this wasn't hurting nearly as much as he'd imagined it to. Acting like he was on the brink of death might be the only way to stay alive.

"You were coming to kill me? Answer me!"

"What," Gerald stretched his words. "I wasn't," his head shook, pivoting on his forehead. With each gentle sway he felt more relaxed. He was almost content with falling asleep then and there when a thought occurred to him. "HEY!" his neck stiffened. His eyes widened and stared up at Skinny Russian with a convicting gaze, "wait! You were trying to kill *yourself*!" Gerald shouted, "I saved your life, fuckface!" His arm reached for the shower curtain, he pulled at it until the other arm, sandwiched underneath his body, came free. After a short struggle he pulled himself upright and prepared for a fight.

"Oh yeah?" Skinny Russian asked, sarcastically.

"Yeah, man."

"Did you, really?" Unconsciously, Skinny Russian's index finger massaged the side of the trigger. Gerald observed it. "You saved my life...so you could do what, exactly?"

Skinny Russian leaned in to get a better look at his front door and instructed Gerald to do the same. A fit of tears erupted from his eyes. “Who was *he*? One of your people? He didn’t look like one of your people...” he looked down at Gerald, still unaware he was using the sharp edge of the trigger to scratch the joint of his index finger. “Wait—what the hell just happened here?”

“Ok, buddy. Look here—“ Gerald spoke slower when the barrel of the pistol looked him dead in the eyes. His words more calculated. Not used to seeing things from this perspective, Gerald had to think before finally understanding what those squiggly lines inside the barrel had to do with bullets spinning in the manner they do. “You really need to relax. Just stop.” He wasn’t sure what he could say to Skinny Russian to get him to put the gun down, but he was certain that the look of embarrassment on his face may provoke an ounce of sympathy. Never mind that the additional embarrassment he felt was from just then understanding what the .45 in the gun actually stood for.

“How does your ankle feel?”

“What.”

“Your stupid ankle!” Skinny Russian put the pistol in his lap, grabbed the side of the toilet with both hands to keep himself steady, and kicked Gerald in the ankles repeatedly. Gerald’s feet tried to fight back, but the pain in his abdomen restricted his legs from raising off the ground. With a wide swing, Skinny Russian dug a heel into Gerald’s ankle, he yelped as the pain pierced his foot.

“OWW! FUCK! Stop it, you moron!” Gerald had briefly forgotten about the hole in his stomach, “shit—yes, it’s sore. Why?”

“HAH! You son of a bitch—I knew it was you. It *had* to be.” The pistol happily danced around in his bony hand. “You’re the one who kicked my door down! I knew it couldn’t have been the other guy—he looked like a good guy—and his legs looked a little weak. But he’s not like you!”

“The good guy—you mean the guy who shot me?”

Gerald waved his bloody hand in front of Skinny Russian's face, "you remember *this* happened, right?"

"Yeah." Skinny Russian wasn't about to let Gerald's good sense kill his enthusiasm.

"What is your...how do you...what makes you think he's the good guy?" Gerald asked. In a moment of frustration, he reached up to pull at his hair, only to immediately retract it when he realized that the blood might ruin it.

"He didn't kick down my door. It's about perspective, you know?" he finished. A smart-assed grin developed on his face.

"Who in the hell are—"

"Right," Skinny Russian interrupted, "I haven't seen you around here before, have I?"

"No."

The pistol in Skinny Russian's hand took a rest atop his bare thigh. "In that case," he gathered his thoughts, "I guess I never told you the story...about the doorknobs? I mean, how this all happened? I mean—it all started with the blender. But. No, shit, I never told anybody anything, I guess. Hey! Are doorknobs sold in bulk? Is that a thing?" He paused to catch his breath. "How often do *you* buy doorknobs? Like at stores or shops or warehouses or wherever? Does it make more sense to buy a stronger door instead? Maybe reinforce the frame—"

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT!? PLEASE—" Gerald finally got a taste of what real pain felt like, "PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD—JUST STOP TALKING!"

"Don't you ever listen?" Skinny Russian said, "do you people ever just stop and listen? I know *last time* they didn't. Shit—it's not like I ever get a chance to talk, anyway."

"This *last time* you mentioned," Gerald pointed his chin at his stomach, "was there a guy dying?"

"Yes," Skinny Russian closed his eyes and tried to cool himself down, "*I* was dying."

"What."

"I was dying."

"What the fuck do you mean you were dying? What from?"

"From pain."

"No shit. WHAT PAIN?"

"On the inside. Little by little, I was dying."

Gerald looked away, then returned with what he believed to be a look of sympathy, "are you *still* dying?"

"Maybe."

"Well are you cured? Is something being cured? What's the situation there?"

"I don't know."

"Goddamn it, what the fuck was it? What hurt?"

"Oh see! *Now* someone is listening! Do you know how long I've been waiting for a day like this?"

"What the fuck is hurting?"

"...My feelings."

"YOUR WHAT!"

"My feelings—they were always getting hurt. By *you* people. It wouldn't stop. It was never going to stop."

"Are you being fucking serious right now? This is unbelievable—what in the hell kind of Russian are you?"

"Right," Skinny Russian sunk, "it really felt like dying, you know?"

"NO. And I'm having a really hard fucking time understanding all your blabbering. How were...your feelings...getting hurt?"

"How can you be so oblivious!" Skinny Russian realized that the gun in his hand, pointed in Gerald's general direction, wasn't helping to make the discourse genuine. He hid it in his armpit.

"What was it—the nickname they gave you?"

"All you bad guys kept breaking my doorknobs."

"We have names."

"And I'm not just a skinny Russian."

"Yes...I know that."

"So, what's my name then." Skinny Russian leaned in.

"Look, man, I don't know—I've never even met you!"

“Yet, you came here to kill me.”

“I—”

“You can be *Bad Guy Number Two*.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Gerald groaned, “why number two?”

“Because there’s no way you’re their best.” The moronic grin on Skinny Russian’s face told Gerald that he was wasting his energy arguing. His defeated face watched as the naked man’s eyes danced wildly around the bathroom. Skinny Russian suddenly fell into a deep focus, grabbed his chin, and muttered under his breath, “the closest hardware store is at least a fifty-minute bus ride from here. I’ve only got one doorknob left—gotta always at least keep one as a spare. I’ll have no more left once I fix...THAT!” Skinny Russian’s gun advised Gerald to acknowledge the mess by the front door, “shit.” His manic eyes wandered around the room, “SHIT. Stupid. That’s what you get for trying to kill yourself—I mean—shit. What? If I leave now I can probably make it before the store closes. Yes. I can check the operating hours on my—HEY!” He looked down at Gerald, who was equally confused and entranced by Skinny Russian’s ramblings, and threw out his hand, “hand me your phone! I gotta go.”

“Shit.” Gerald finally grasped the severity of the situation when the skinny hand snatched his only way out from his blood-soaked hand. More defeated than he’d ever felt, Gerald looked up and finally asked what he’d been wanting to ask from the first moment he saw Skinny Russian, “did you have to be naked?”

SAME PAGE

“HEY. STOP! Get the hell back here and help me!” Gerald shouted from floor, his words barely reached the bedroom where Skinny Russian prepared himself for a shopping trip. Gerald’s cries became more faint as they increased in frequency. He dragged his flaccid body along the bathroom floor and into the living room, leaving a messy trail of his bits along the way. He stopped in the middle of the doorway and scanned the living room for somebody to yell at. With no one in sight, he shouted anyway, “HEY! If I wanted you dead I would’ve left the fucking noose around your neck!” He gave his mouth a break to pant and catch a few breaths before continuing, “listen!” The dark stains trailed further into the apartment, “at least let me call somebody if you’re going to leave me all alone here!”

“What?” Skinny Russian poked his head out the bedroom doorway while pulling a checkered t-shirt over his head, “no fucking way!” He crouched down to retrieve a green army jacket two shoulder-sizes too large and slipped into it. “I need to think, ok?” he murmured. Skinny Russian walked out of the bedroom, stopped ten feet away from Gerald, and scratched his own forehead. “HEY!” he threw a condescending gaze at Gerald, “did you know: dumb people

tend to scratch the backs of their heads when they're thinking; smart people scratch their foreheads."

"I don't give a shit!"

"I'm just saying—I'm not an idiot."

"If you're trying to prove to me that you're not an idiot by that demonstration..." Gerald rolled over onto his back, "...forget it. "Listen," he said to the ceiling, "I can call them and I can tell them it wasn't you that did this. Let me call them!"

"But I *didn't* do it."

"Exactly! I'm not trying to get you into trouble here. They'll only believe *me*—I can talk to them—I'm good at talking!"

"You can't talk!" Skinny Russian strutted across the living room as he tightened the belt around his baggy, washed-out jeans.

"No I CAN. I *can* talk!"

"You can't. And you can't listen either when I try telling you people about my progress. And now? Now you're gonna show up and kill me just like this?"

"I didn't come to kill you!"

"Look," Skinny Russian's purple sneakers stopped inches away from Gerald's head. "There are only two reasons you people would ever come see me. One: to bullshit me." He leaned over top of Gerald, "second: to kill me."

"Oh, come on," Gerald stalled.

"Why did you even come? It's not Sunday yet."

"Look, it's neither." After a second of actually thinking about his answer, Gerald changed his mind, "...to bullshit you."

"Bullshit!"

"Yes!"

"No. *That's* bullshit!"

"What is?"

"About you coming to bullshit me—that's bullshit!"

"I didn't come here to fucking kill you!"

"Are you sure?" Skinny Russian massaged his atlas. "Shit, I don't know. Either way, I can think of a good reason

you would *now*, after what you saw earlier. And if *I* can think of a reason, then *you people* definitely have.” He continued toward the door, “so quit bullshitting me!”

“You can’t just leave me to die here!”

“I need more doorknobs.”

“Fuck your doorknobs! What in the hell is the matter with you, man!”

“I won’t be gone longer than two hours.”

“That’s too long! Do you have any idea how this goes? Look at my stomach, will you! Something’s gotta be done *now*! Look—whatever trouble you think you’re in—I’ll fix it! I’m the guy that can do that for you! Trust me—I *am* that guy!”

Skinny Russian stopped and turned around to get another look at the expanding stain on Gerald’s shirt, “I’ll...call a doctor?”

“Idiot.” Gerald groaned and grabbed at the back of his head.

“Well, what the hell else?”

“Jesus fuck I don’t know. Just keep me alive. Stabilize all of this somehow?”

“How?”

“FUCKING FIND OUT! Do anything. Just get me out of here so that I can kill the piece of shit that did this!”

“Oh...” Skinny Russian shimmied back toward the exit.

“...Shit...” Gerald said under his breath, then followed with a more audible, “shit.”

“And what about *me*?” Skinny Russian’s chin sunk below his collarbone. His fingers danced around restlessly.

“Yeah, you too!”

“What? Kill me?”

“No, fuckface! Please, think for a goddamn second when I’m talking to you—I’m wasting valuable energy here! Listen! You’ll get your second chance, *if* I get mine.”

“Bullshit?”

“No. No bullshit.”

“How can I trust you?”

Gerald rolled his head to the side for just long enough to

have Skinny Russian take notice of the conviction in his eyes, then turned back to the ceiling. He gathered himself. Calmly, he spoke out, "You don't have to trust me, but one thing's for sure."

"Yes?" Skinny Russian tiptoed closer.

"Yeah, you see. People are going to start looking for me really soon...now, it could be today, it could be tomorrow. But eventually, a bunch of guys with a bunch of guns are going to come to this place...Look—I know that you know this. And so, when that happens—these guys with these guns are going to riddle every goddamn inch of this place, and that includes you, with lots and lots of bullets, should they suspect a single thing being just a little off. *If* I'm here, alive and...well. I could talk to them—I could stop them. If I'm nowhere to be found, and they so much as suspect that I may have been here—now with this fresh pool of blood and all, they will connect the dots. They will kill you. And it's gonna get ugly. I still think the best option is for you to just let me call them right now."

Struggling to recall exactly how long the victims of sexual dolphin abuse remained in shock for, Skinny Russian became fairly sure that the adrenaline had not yet left his system, "If I help you—I can...prove myself? Wouldn't that make it better?"

"Prove what, exactly?"

"Yeah. Like, I can prove to them that I'm a good guy and all that. Get on *his* good side?"

"Goddamn it—are you just *bored*? I don't understand your logic here. What if I don't even survive this?"

"I think this can work."

"You think?!"

"What about my debt?"

"It's gone," he raised the palm of his hand toward Skinny Russian for an air-handshake. With a thick sarcastic Russian accent, he grunted, "I no bullshit you."

The trembling in his bony hands ceased, Skinny Russian grabbed a hold of Gerald's elbow and pivoted it downward, setting the palm of his hand onto the soaked stomach. "Ok,

I'll go do some shopping." He was finally on his way out, "watch the door. Don't try yelling for help—you'll just anger the dogs across the hall. And with that busted door... are dogs like sharks? I mean when it comes to smelling blood? Because I'm sure that those dogs have...never mind. Don't bother trying to go outside—there's no one here that will help. Just save your strength."

"Yeah, sure—I'll watch your fucking door. HA!" His eyelids drooped. The weight of his head became too much and fell to the floor.

"And while you're here, whoever you are, I want you to feel really, really bad about breaking down my door...jerk", he whispered before disappearing around the corner.

THE CRAWL

Gerald's torso reached for the ceiling, lifting him only two inches off the bed, but leaving a pain in his body as if he were being tossed across the apartment for the last hour. He hyperventilated. His wrists and ankles danced around in a frenzy while his crusty eyes came to. There was a dream: something about being trapped inside a punching bag trapped with rabid furry creatures that were neither large, nor small enough, for Gerald to feel comfortable around. A size just uneasy enough for him to remember yelling at the top of his lungs for the little shits to get away from him while blocking blows from what felt like a million baseball bats swinging at the bag. Finally, the bag tore at the bottom. He was falling into a void. The furry creatures fell with him. One by one, they faded into the blackness. When he looked down, Gerald saw that he was cradling this ball of fur in the bottom of his belly. He hugged it tighter and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes, the streak of daylight on the ceiling he watched while falling asleep was gone. The pain was real, and he shouted until it felt like a thin strip of sandpaper was dragging through his esophagus. A cough followed. The convulsions hurt his stomach even worse. He cleared his throat and swallowed his saliva until the

sandpaper feeling had dissipated. He wanted to shout again, but the only sound that left his mouth was a lame wheezing.

Not realizing that he'd only been out for twenty minutes, Gerald slammed his hands against the floor and shouted, "where the fuck are you! It's been at least six hours! YOU STUPID RUSSIAN FUCK! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU!" His hands kept a firm hold on his stomach. He couldn't find the courage to tuck his chin into his chest to get a better look at the situation, "come on. Come on!" Gerald stopped yelling to listen for any sounds he may have missed in his momentary hysteria. Nothing. "You lied to me!" he rolled over onto his left shoulder to get a look at the broken down door, "you fucking lied to me! You went to buy your stupid doorknobs...didn't you? I knew it, goddamn it. I knew you were gonna do that! NO! You just ran off! What the fuck was I even thinking trusting a—I'm dead. Shit." The severity of the situation suddenly felt uncomfortably real. "I'm dead..." his voice was calmer now; his head, heavier. He closed his eyes again and mumbled, "I'm off to go hang out with my squirrel friends."

A few minutes passed before Gerald woke up again. The same sight of that ugly, cigarette-smoke stained ceiling greeted him. He realized, once again, that he was still alive, only this time he felt a lot less enthusiastic about the fact. His answer of *might as well* to the question: *do I actually want to be alive?* filled Gerald with a sense of perkiness that seemed to lift his mood. *What the hell? Might as well*, he sang the words in his head to an upbeat tune. The pain he felt from moving his body around was bad, but bearable. The pain from laying on the ground, motionless, was harder to endure, merely from the fact that his mind had decided it to be so. *What the hell? Might as well*. He gyrated his head side to side, listening to every little crackle that came from the mashing of the cartilage in his spine. Anything to keep the mind occupied. His fingers played a whimsical tune on an imaginary flute that rested on his stomach while he thought of more words to add to his song. *What the hell?*

Might as well—we're all gonna go to he—shit. Can't use the same...We're all gonna be so...swell. Might as well...go to hell. We're all gonna ring this...bell. Ding ding ding...hear me sing. Soon here I won't feel a thing. His aimless eyes caught sight of something shiny in the kitchen. A bunch of peculiar-looking drinking glasses with markings sat in one corner, some large gallon-sized glass jugs, labeled *METHIL ALCAHOL*, surrounded them. *Oh so sad...I'll be dead. A bleeding tummy full of lead.* He gave the idea of having a final drink a serious moment of consideration. *What the hell? Might as well. But I think I'll kill a John instead...* A minuscule sliver of hope convinced him to get a move on. He threw the imaginary flute off to the side and made haste to the kitchen by rolling onto his stomach and turtling himself toward it, leaving behind a dark stain as he trudged along.

Six feet further on, Gerald found himself at the doorway to the kitchen. By grabbing a firm hold of the door frame, he pulled his ass onto the yellow tiles and his back up against the lower cabinets. During his moment of rest, he felt the warm sensation in his gut spread outward and trickle down from his shirt onto his crotch. He cried out in pain. *What the hell? Might as well*, he repeated the words in his head a couple dozen times to numb the pain. The warmth made its way through his pants and onto the tile floor beneath him. His pants were completely soaked though and caused his ass to slide around on the tiles. He kicked a foot out toward the fridge to stabilize himself, barely catching it with the toe of the shoe. A small slip and his heel was now firmly planted. His stomach muscles finally loosened up. The scrunch of his lips resembled a smile, and he was finally able to get a full, satisfying breath. One hand kept pressure where it was needed, the other reached up and pulled open a thin drawer above his head. The clunking of metal. His fingers reached deeper, dancing around frantically. Several more clunks. Finally, an edge. His finger followed it until it came to a point. The rest of the fingers helped to bring it up into his hand until he could grab it. He made sure it wasn't going to

slip out of his hand before bringing it down in front of his face. He admired the four-inch blade, convinced himself that he wasn't dreaming, and placed it down on his lap. *What the hell? Might as well. Somebody. Soon. Will ring the bell.*

He couldn't find the strength to tear his shirt open. Embarrassed by his own weakness, Gerald groaned in anticipation as he undid his shirt one pearlescent button at a time. He finally saw the dark, leaky hole.. The discomfort grew worse with each moment of observing its intricacies. His throat went numb and he could feel his stomach fight gravity. "Are you there yet by any chance?" he threw a desperate glance at the busted door over his right shoulder. His fingers trembled as they inched toward the blade. "If you're there...I'm right here—in the kitchen." He cleared his throat, "HELLO! Are you there *now*? Please be there. Shit—I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, but I'm pretty sure it should look something like this—wait! DID I...? IS THAT YOU? I'm in the kitchen! HELLO? No? I swear I heard something. FUCK. Please...just be here already. I—I got this knife—that's about the only part of the process I think I got right. OK. Just breathe. OK. You know what? I'll give it one—I WILL WAIT ONE MINUTE. JUST ONE MINUTE! If you don't show up, I'm just gonna go ahead and get started without you. Do you hear me! I'm starting this! Here goes: fifty-nine...fifty-eight..." his energy was draining rapidly. He shut his eyes and attempted to relax. His lower jaw drooped. He slurred, "forty-seven...you—you know what? I'll just do this counting thing in my head, I feel like...this feels like...it's all just taking too much out of me right now. Once I get to zero I'm just going to stab myself... with this thing...or something..."

what the hell..."

His right hand, wrapped around the handle of the four-inch blade, lay in preparation by his side, its sharp tip scraped along the tile floor with every spasm of his restless arm. Gerald's lips parted just far enough to slur the words, "four...four...four...almost there...two...one—HUH!" He

peeked over his right shoulder again, only to find nothing but disappointment. The panicking left hand atop the .38” hole squeezed at it from all directions. The muscles in the same arm twitched in sync with the contractions of his lower jaw. His bloodshot eyes fought to look away from the hole as it pumped out intermittent streams of blood through a coagulated mess that clung onto his stomach hairs. “Just do it already,” the blade hovered over a clean patch of skin above the mess.

Having never watched documentaries about sexually aggressive dolphins, Gerald was unsure what to make of the feelings churning inside him as the blade neared closer. He pinched the edge of a clot on the surface between the blade and his thumb, tugging away. Tugging further. Then even further, learning that the length of a blood clot can be a lot longer than one would guess just by looking at the surface. He gagged while a dark maroon, shiny, long blob of what looked like an intestine itself plopped onto the floor. A part of him wanted to stab at the blob a few times, just to make sure no food or shit or whatever was supposed to be inside an intestine was there. But there was a deeper treasure to dig for, and so he placed the edge of the blade against the skin and scraped off the remains of smaller clots and dried blood. The sharp tip closed in on the black hole.

Bubbles of sweat clumped in the wrinkles in his forehead and rolled down his face when he took the first stab. He jerked back. A look of disbelief on his face. “What the fuck am I doing?” He struggled to remember at which angle the bullet had entered his stomach, hoping to mimic the trajectory. Unable to figure out the direction at which to stab himself with, he decided that at every angle, and rapidly, in case he were to pass out any time soon, would be the most efficient way to go about the operation. The bullet was in there, somewhere. If there was one thing Gerald was absolutely sure of...

His torn stomach muscles compulsively expanded and contracted. The task was becoming more difficult than he could have imagined. Every spasm felt as if it would break

his diaphragm. Each rapid inhale sent an unwanted stream of blood exiting through the exposed hole. The tip of the blade disappeared into the darkness, emerging repeatedly with no luck. In his panic, he didn't realize that his fingers had dropped the knife, despite this, they kept on stabbing. When he finally noticed, Gerald wouldn't give up, *what the hell? Might as well*, and squeezed at the hole with both hands as hard as he could, hoping to simply push the bullet out. The harder he pushed, the more adrenaline he felt surge through his body, and soon out of it. The energy drained from his hardworking hands as quickly as the fluids from his stomach. With each nudge his eyelids became heavier; with each pulse, his body lighter.

...what the hell? might as well...It might be time I say farewell.

He regretted not having that drink as he watched the refrigerator turn on its side.

PROLOGUE: INSTANT DEPTH

Those golden curls. It's all I can ever honestly remember sometimes. I can't stop thinking about this scar; I'm forgetting the laceration...

The soggy cigarette butt marks the epicentre of the circular ripple in the cold lake water. In the fading cloud of cigarette smoke, the last thought about the last ripple—the last little nothingness departs, and becomes one with the nothingness which is this air that I breathe. Breathing just so that my mind and body can continue to function, so it can continue performing these tasks which no longer seem at all necessary.

I breathed solely for the sake of breathing. My blood pumped from my head down to my toes simply to do it all over again. I ate just so I could live another day, just so I could eat once more. These simple functions I do not want, I don't want to feel like I need them. If I could get rid of them completely I would. I despise knowing that I'm living for the sole purpose of staying alive.

I will no longer live simply so that my body can perform these basic functions. I will no longer live just so I can keep feeling the same old feelings over and over again just

because I feel like it's the right thing to be doing.

When the cloud of smoke disperses into the air, it will cease to exist as a cloud of smoke. It will travel around with the air around me; it will go everywhere the air goes, following its every move. Its molecules will part from one another, still keeping their atomic structure as they go about in their own directions, wherever they want. Wherever they see fit. It will be everywhere, it *can* be everywhere and no one would suspect a thing. Everywhere and nowhere all at once, seeing, hearing, feeling every single little thing imaginable. Should the journey be too brief to take it all in, it wouldn't worry—it will know that one day it will circle around once more because it has all the time in the world to do just that. It knows that it can go on for absolute infinity. And in that infinity it knows that every single molecule that came from that cloud of smoke will eventually reunite. They will all at some point become the same entity once again. They will be whole again, be it for a trillionth of a second or for the rest of all eternity. They will reunite, here, at the same exact spot where they once separated. Where it all began.

I am a cloud of smoke. I don't need to remain here, there's no more use in it.

In this exact spot I will once again be standing, waiting for that moment to happen again. With this last puff of smoke, with this last ripple in the water I will at last leave this mind. This mind that's been corrupted. This impaired mind that has been mutilated by the thoughts its manifested. Its pain—manufactured. I've known about it for a while now, the things I convince myself are true, but even that doesn't seem to help anymore.

You've become too unstable, too weary for me to bear you around any longer. Too much of a burden to me, and everybody around you, to keep on existing. This isn't the first time you've done this and I cannot keep on forgiving you.

At some point in this infinity I may come back here and stand at the edge of this exact same pier. At some point the

planets and the stars will line up to exactly how they are at this moment and I will lean on the straw-yellow rail here with my elbows spread out to this exact same distance, with my right foot crossed over my left just as it is now. The same number of raindrops will fall in the same spots, drawing the exact-sized expanding circles in this cold lake water. The current will flow at this same gentle pace and this little wooden boat will wobble around in the same calm matter as it does now. The sun will strike this jumping trout so perfectly, the angle so right that it will reflect a beam of light into the eyes of this romantic couple sitting in this wooden boat, momentarily blinding them. Her husband will lean over and caringly wipe the water off of her forehead with his thumb and brush her golden locks aside to reveal her perfect, mesmerizing smile.

She smiled because it *was* the perfect moment.

At some point in this infinity I expect the same homeless man to pass me on the way to the pier. I will pull my wallet out in front of him and take out this soaked twenty-dollar bill and place it in his hand. He will give me that bewildered stare as I yank the half-smoked cigarette out of his mouth and place it between my lips. I will walk past him as I take a deep, long drag and walk down the pier overlooking the calm lake. The cigarette will become so soggy that it will separate at the filter and I will have to wrap my finger around it just to keep it in one piece. The cigarette will soak up the blood and water from my fingertips. The man in the boat will try to reciprocate the smile when he pulls her face toward his. He'll give her a peck on the cheek and rest his head on her shoulder and hug her with all the strength that he can muster. He'll never get to see the look on her face when he drives the knife into her side. She'll hug him tighter when he pulls the blade out, holding on to her weak body while she bleeds. He will lay her down gently in the boat and tie one end of a rope to her ankle; the other end to an anchor before throwing it overboard. He'll watch the coil of rope unravel until it finally yanks on her lifeless body. He won't waste a minute throwing the body overboard

afterward.

I want to feel the same rush of cold water envelop my skin as I jump out of the wooden boat. I want to feel the drag of my clothes as I swim back to shore, feeling that same fear that I may drown the second I stop moving, while contemplating whether or not it's worth it to keep going.

I will cut my right hand on the same seashell when I collapse onto my knees to get a full breath of air when I reach shore. I'll leave a bloody hand print on every boulder I crawl up and look back to watch the rain wash it all away almost instantly.

My feet will take me to the same pier where I stand now where I will see the sun reflect off of that jumping fish and be blinded by that same glare. My hand will reach out to her face, only this time I won't feel her wet hair against the tips of my fingers. When I open my eyes again, I won't see her giving me that same smile. I won't see that same twinkle in her eyes. I won't see the woman I loved ever again.

Over and over again and for the rest of this infinity.

And it's all your fault.

That's enough now. Step away from the window. Shut these drapes. Sit down. Relax a little. You need to stop thinking about it so much.

Get over it. You think *they* haven't?

I'm trying. I can't.

You can't expect it all to mean something.

What if it does? What if it can help me?

You know what helps.

I'm not so sure that it's working.

What the hell else can you do?

...

I think I'll write a book.

THE GRANDMOTHER, PART ONE

Little Jimmy's mother nearly jumps out of her shoes when Little Jimmy, being the brat he usually is, trips and falls into a mess of broken salsa jars splattered across the floor in aisle five. The sight of Little Jimmy's little hands and feet drenched in the red mess puts such a scare into his mother that she abandons her shopping cart and runs to tend to her son's situation. As delicately as she can, Little Jimmy's mother throws him over her shoulder and drags them to the mall bathroom where she can clean him up and get a better look at his appendages. Little Jimmy's mother, in her flustered state, neglects to inform a supermarket clerk of the dangerous mess waiting for its next potential victim in aisle five.

The supermarket clerk, who notices the commotion and inspects the aisle, finds the spill, along with a shopping cart full of goods he must put back onto the shelves, and internally proclaims to the world what a cunt Little Jimmy's mother is. He decides that, regardless if it might get him into trouble, he won't be cleaning up the mess this time, and runs for the back room where he employs the P.A. system and requests that an employee make their way to aisle five for an immediate clean-up.

This is the part where a familiar grandmother turns a corner and finds her moment of opportunity.

The gentle contact of the rubber foot of her cane absorbs the shaking from her old body. Her filthy slippers shuffle behind each six-inch increment of the cane's landing. Her breathing is excited. Her eyes focused. Her mind clear as day when she decides, with no hesitation, that today is the day. This is her chance. Her cane trembles more violently with every inch she comes closer to the pile of broken glass.

Back at the cash register, a bagboy tries his best to appear as if he's too occupied to hear the announcement coming from the speakers in the ceiling. His hands keep busy while he scans the area, hoping to spot another minion running over to aisle five with a mop, a yellow *Caution: Wet Floor* sign, and a huge, overachieving smile on their face. With every announcement echoing through the establishment he finds more and more eyes staring back at him, expecting him to fulfill some unspoken bagboy prophecy.

"Clean-up on aisle five. Clean-up on aisle five please." The unenthused voice on the P.A. system calls out, more frequently now. The bagboy can't take the pressure and prances over to the cigarette cabinet where he pensively stares at the stock and pretends to write things down on a scrap of receipt paper. Suddenly, he remembers that the cabinet is in direct view of the manager's office. He's been spotted. He freezes. There's no way out of it now, he thinks.

Meanwhile, in the manager's office, the man sitting in a chair that's just expensive enough for the other workers to be reminded of their place in the world is in a middle of an argument on the phone with a man sitting in a marginally more expensive chair. The manager is crying out as he can't seem to convince the man in the nicer chair to let him hire a dedicated clean-up crew for the supermarket. The man on the other end of the line fights him on the idea, insisting that such dangerous spills can't happen as often as the manager claims. His regular staff should be able to handle it just fine.

The bagboy catches a glimpse of his manager's unnerved face through the glass looking into his office, runs over to

the closest till, and starts bagging groceries. The young cashier running the groceries through looks over to the bagboy to her left and almost says something about aisle five needing a clean-up. She has a brief internal struggle, tries to figure out whether she'd rather feel power from telling this bagboy to do his job, or if she actually cares enough about this job and this place and these people to go out of her way and put in the tiniest bit of initiative to make this establishment a better place. She chooses the former. It's not a busy time at the supermarket, and the largest order she'd rung through in the last hour had been no more than seven items. It's easy living for her. She keeps it that way. The cashier clears her head and allows herself to fall back into the autopilot of scanning barcodes and punching in a number or two. The bagboy takes her indifference as an affirmation of his decision to leave the clean-up to somebody else.

Down at the far end of the mall, Little Jimmy's mother finds a public washroom where she can get a better look at her son's potential wounds. Little Jimmy screams and fights and kicks his feet while his mother attempts to pull his shoes off to inspect his little feet for shards of glass. She doesn't care that he kicks her or gets salsa on her coat, all she cares about is that her son is safe. But her patience is wearing thin and the other patrons in the bathroom give Little Jimmy's mother a dirty look when she has to raise her voice to get him to calm down for just one goddamn minute.

The bagboy, in an attempt to make it seem as if he's working extra hard, to not get called away, takes his time placing a stale-looking sandwich, an apple, and a store-brand soda into a plastic bag, making sure that all three items are touching the bottom before raising the bag up and handing it to the customer. He wants to be absolutely sure that not one item spills or dents or makes the customer's lunch time snack even one bit inconvenient. Suddenly, he feels a newfound sense of pride; for the first time in his life he realizes how fulfilling it is to actually put some effort into something. And maybe, just maybe, when the customer open

their lunch bag they might even notice his efforts. Just the idea of it seemed worth it. He leaves the customer with a smile and wishes them a nice day. He can't hide the smile on his face.

He's flying.

In his euphoric state, the bagboy doesn't hear the erratic coughs and grunts of his disgruntled manager approaching from behind. He snaps his head around when a voice of authority yells out his name and hands him the yellow mop-up cart. He reminds the bagboy of the announcement over the P.A. system and sends him on his way. The manager is taken aback when the bagboy shows no signs of resistance when he takes the mop and flashes a genuine smile. He's filled with enthusiasm the whole way there. The enthusiasm leaves his face when he sees a grandmother speeding toward the pile of salsa and broken glass.

Let's jump back forty years with our grandmother. Margaret will be her name, she has a son named Harold and he is eight years old. He's a standard kid who complains about standard things like early bedtimes and is too stubborn to understand why he can't raise a giraffe in his bedroom. He has no recollection of his father who died in a car crash five years earlier.

Margaret does.

Margaret remembers the photos on her husband's remains wrapped around a tree in the woods off the side of the road. Margaret remembers the feeling of guilt when she finally confessed to the police officer about her husband's drinking problem. She denied it profusely; eventually she broke down when the well-mannered, but persistent, police officer showed her pictures of all the empty liquor bottles that accumulated in the back seat of the wrecked car.

Margaret hated herself more than anyone for what had happened—she knew it wasn't *her* fault. She couldn't directly blame herself, but she felt progressively weaker when she'd think about the fact that she could never build up the courage to talk to anyone about this problem in the

family, her husband included. At one point she deemed it too late. She'd gotten this idea in her head that her neighbours and friends had already known that everybody in her household were alcoholics. No one had ever *directly* validated this idea for her, but everywhere she went, everyone that she saw, every word spoken from someone else would. Everywhere she looked she saw nothing but judgmental eyes.

But this was merely an idea in poor Margaret's head. And then he died, and that was all the validation she needed.

It's one year after the incident and Little Harold is six years old now. Margaret is sitting alone in the kitchen on a stool by the breakfast table. In her left hand is a picture of her dead husband; in her right—a glass of wine with not a single lip smear on the edge of the crystal. Stupid Little Harold—he cannot comprehend what his mother is going through while he plays with his shiny red firetruck. He plays with it when his mother is locked away in her bathroom. He's playing with it right now. He makes the sounds he thinks a firetruck would be make as it rolls on top of every piece of furniture Little Harold can reach in the living room, eventually making its way into the kitchen. Margaret has learned by now that if she ignores the firetruck for long enough, it will get bored and leave her sight in no time.

The firetruck rolls right past Margaret right down on top of the kitchen counter, past the toaster, and makes a leap for the breakfast table. It momentarily stops in front of Margaret to a sight that's become much to normal to wonder anymore about. If one were to ask Little Harold to paint a picture of his mother, this would be it.

The firetruck gets a rolling start and takes off from the table, shoots straight up in the air, and after a few jagged barrel rolls lands back on the adjacent side of the kitchen counter. It rolls over the rough terrain of the stove elements with a few *bum-bum-bums* before returning to the smooth granite countertop. A successful jump over the first sink. A rough landing on the narrow ledge before the second sink

that almost ends with a rough tumble. It recovers and makes another successful leap, landing back on the granite.

Margaret tries to not let any of the noises bother her. If she were really being honest, she would admit that there is very little in terms of introspective thoughts that Little Harold is interrupting with his playing. She doesn't know what she's thinking about. She doesn't know what she should, or even want, to be thinking. This act she's doing right now, she supposes, is the appropriate way to grieve for the sort of pain she's going through, and that's that. It feels right, yet, every passing moment of her mind drawing a total blank about her feelings fills her with a sense of guilt. Because occasionally, in this void in her head, an ounce of reason, an idea that flashes in her consciousness that she tries to suppress, a voice deep down whispers: *he deserved it*.

Margaret doesn't believe she has any right to tell Little Harold to play in a different room. She doesn't believe it's at all fair to ever get mad at him because she sees herself as a coward for not being able to tell Little Harold the truth about his father. At this age he wouldn't understand. She can't tell him a few years down the line, either, not when the truth may make it difficult to adjust once he starts school. She can't tell him once he's a teenager because who knows how he'll react when the hormones kick in. And what about once he's finally old enough to drink and learns the truth? Something might come of that, for sure, in case it is as they say: genetic.

For all she knows—*she* never knew his father.

The firetruck spots a cookie jar on the edge of the counter, and without hesitation, barrels toward it. The jar slides closer to the edge.

Margaret takes notice. Nothing is broken. Her focus converges on the picture frame in her hand when the jar is struck again. *This is going to happen*, she thinks. *This is going to keep happening*. She wants to tell herself that this is something she will be dealing with for a long time and that she should learn to keep her calm but the firetruck goes in

for another hit and her thumb crushes the glass in the picture frame. Her reflection crackles and pops in the picture frame as Little Harold's noises intensify.

The firetruck backs off, and after a few spins, screeches and slides back toward the sink. Little Harold announces his boredom; the swirls of wine in her glass become more rapid and random. Margaret finally looks up and watches as the shiny red firetruck trips over the metal lip on the counter straight into the sink, rolling and tumbling down toward the sinkhole, right out of Little Harold's little reach.

He demands that Margaret helps him, but she's too busy revelling in the feeling of the broken glass digging into the tip of her thumb. The sting she feels shooting up her hand helps to drown out Little Harold's pleas for help. The tip of her thumb is almost completely buried in the picture frame. The tension translates to the other hand where she holds onto the delicate stem of the wine glass.

Little Harold gives up. In his aimless wandering around the kitchen he spots the cookie jar yet again. His little fingers try to reach for it but no amount of incessant tapping brings the cookies closer to his face. He moans and yells and groans but if he has too many sweets before bed Margaret won't be sleeping again tonight. He finally runs over to Margaret and tugs at her elbow, spilling the wine in her glass all over his tidy white shirt. Margaret snaps and yanks her arm away from Little Harold. The glass breaks when it impacts the frame on the upswing, then slashes Little Harold's hand on the way down.

The next day Margaret receives a call at work from the counsellor's office at Little Harold's school. Her boss is not too happy about Margaret leaving work in the middle of the day, but she insists on account of it being an important matter regarding her son, the details of which she is not yet fully aware. She assures her boss that she won't be longer than an hour and intends to make up for it whenever he may see fit.

The counsellor sits Margaret down in a chair opposite her

desk. She calls for Little Harold to come into the office and join them so that they can all speak as a group. Little Harold has a bandage wrapped around his hand that conceals four stitches. The wound itches spastically when his fearful little eyes first see his mother. Margaret doesn't understand; last night at the hospital Little Harold hugged and kissed his mother once the doctors were done with him. This morning he was only a little shaken up when she drove him to school, but left her with a smile on his face. She'd never seen Little Harold like this. She'd never seen such a morbid look in his little eyes.

Margaret was not made aware that the school counsellor had spent the morning discussing last night's events with Little Harold. The story that the woman across the desk is telling Margaret is not what she remembers happening. She tries desperately to convince the counsellor otherwise. *Yes, she swung a glass.* She goes into every little detail she can remember. *Yes, there was liquor in it.* She's breaking down in tears trying to get as many words in as she can. *No, she doesn't drink.* It all sounds so stupid in her head. Little Harold's eyes grow with contempt with every tear she sheds. *No, she doesn't hit him—of course she doesn't fucking hit him!* The counsellor doesn't buy all of Margaret's crying and sobbing. *Of course it's not a regular thing!* She doesn't believe it should be and she *sure as hell had never done it before!* The counsellor refuses to hear any more of it.

Margaret begs the lady to believe her.

It must run in the family...

The counsellor tells Margaret about the liquor she could smell on Little Harold this morning.

Margaret clearly remembers giving him a bath before bed...

PLAYGROUND BLUES

“One of the slowest and most painful ways to die is if it hits any vital organs (and it usually does, they’re, like, everywhere),” Skinny Russian read from the four-inch screen off of his phone on the bus ride back home. He went with his usual and did a quick search on the internet: *how to survive gunshot wound stomach*. The search gave him 226,000 results. Choosing wisely, and being acutely aware at this point of how carried away he can get, he decided to start with the first result that came up: a thousand-member strong forum where gun enthusiasts discussed the most effective ways to protect their homes from burglars.

“Criminals shouldn’t have any rights! If your breaking into someones house your a scumbag and deserve a bullet! No mercy for them haha. Sorry!” said the man who kept a Glock 23 on him at all times, a .50 Desert Eagle on the bedside table, and a .308 Winchester to accompany him on long walks through the forest where he would take his rage out on unsuspecting critters.

“Not typically fatal,” wrote the man who kept a .38 snub-nose in his glove compartment, “if possible I’d try to shoot the attacker in the kneecap. But that could be more difficult depending on where he’s standing, how quickly he’s

moving, etc.”

“Your in for a lot of pain!” Another member added.

“Depends, what if it hit the liver?”

“In the stomach? Bad enough that you could die, I guess.”

The answers were unhelpful and lacked focus, driving Skinny Russian’s frustration further. With every mention of blood or vital organs, his eyes looked more helpless and he hugged the paper bags closer to his chest. With every mention of death he contemplated staying on the bus and seeing where it would take him. Wondering whether his efforts would even be acknowledged should the turnout be anything than the seemingly inevitable. His stop was only a few minutes away. The reading material reminded him of his love of learning new things. He continued to stare at the phone screen.

“I wouldn’t want to leave the fucker alive so I’d get my 12-gauge and rip a hole in whatever asshole decides to break in!” Wrote the man with the tallest flagpole in his neighbourhood. Skinny Russian scrolled further down the page, skipping a few entries along the way which had too many sentences written in capital letters. He eventually got fed up and backtracked to his original search results.

Abdominal Trauma, Most Painful Gunshot Wound, the titles all seemed too scientific-sounding to wrap his head around, too much information for him to absorb all at once. His flustered state of mind needed something simple sounding. An article titled: *Gunshot Injuries, came up*. Finally. The subsection was called: *Recovering from an abdominal gunshot wound*. The summary of the forum came down to the conclusion that all gunshot wounds are different, even to something as specific as the stomach. Becoming distracted, once again, Skinny Russian became fixated on a story about a man’s grandfather who survived two bullets to the stomach while fighting in World War II. Not only did he survive, but he continued fighting until his dying breath. It never mentioned for how long, yet Skinny Russian felt a rush of new hope come over him, then skimmed over the next few sentences describing the details

of sepsis and hydrostatic shock which came next. They were more words he didn't know the definitions of, nor had the time to research.

His obsession with lists was satiated when he arrived upon a five-step overview on how to treat bullet wounds, where the unwelcome opinions of online experts were segregated to the bottom of the webpage at the end of the article. The simplistic illustrations helped him to place himself in his own predicament. The short sentences were easy to digest. He felt less overwhelmed now. *Step 1: Call for Help*, this was not off to a good start. He scratched the back of his head and moved on. *Step 2: Act Quickly*, Skinny Russian assured himself he did just that. "Good, very good," he muttered. His bus stop was less than a minute away. His attention became divided. He read quicker now. *Step 3: Check the Airway, Breathing, Circulation, Deformity, Exposure*—again, too many fucking words! Unable to do any of the things he just read caused his frustration to skyrocket. *Step 4: Control Bleeding*. "Goddamn it!" he shouted at the phone.

Step 5: Be prepared to treat the victim for shock.

Then a terrifying image flashed through his head: a swarm of aggressive dolphins grinding up against him, pulling him into the water. His hands flailing in every possible direction, trying to grab a hold of something to pull himself out. Gasping for air while the creatures stare him in the eyes with a huge grin on their pointy faces. Mocking him. Cackling hysterically. *Skreee-kee-kee-kee-kee!* The high-pitched noise flood his thoughts while he drowns.

Fucking dolphins

Before he knew it, he'd already forgotten everything he just learned.

Below the list were a set of warnings that read: *avoid blood-borne skree-kee-keellnesses. Make sure any open wounds you may have do not come in kee-kee-contact with the victim's blood. Even with the best first aid, gunshot injuries may be fatal. Do not put your own life at risk when treating a gunshot victim.*

“Fucking dolphins,” Skinny Russian mumbled while stepping off the bus. He jumped down onto the curb, causing the glass bottles in the bags to rattle in a pitch that reminded him of the hysterical cackle he dreaded hearing. He fumbled to slip the phone into his pocket and trudged on. The sprouting blades of grass in the cracked sidewalk became flattened under his cheap sneakers; the leaky fire hydrant nearby ensured that they would live to rise another day. He stepped foot into the decrepit building, now overcome with a sense of self-assurance that he knew more about bullet wounds than the man bleeding in his apartment. Enough to have the upper hand, at least.

Skinny Russian rushed to the kitchen. Without thinking twice he fell to his knees in front of Gerald laying on the floor, spilling some contents of the bags onto the stained tiles. His own sense of self-preservation took a back seat when he took a wide swing with his hand that met the side of Gerald’s face on its way down. “Idiot!” he shouted. Then another swing, right to the ear this time. He stopped himself mid-swing when a raspy groan erupted from Gerald’s mouth. His drowsy eyes opened up. His chest convulsed. His body shuddered. Skinny Russian shook him by the shoulders until he was sure Gerald wasn’t passing out again. “Asshole!” He listened for the faint snorts that came with each breath of air bringing him back into existence. Skinny Russian instinctively went for another swing. Gerald’s conscious gaze stopped him. With a disgusted look on his face, Skinny Russian’s hands hovered over Gerald’s stomach, trying to take control of the situation. While Gerald came to, Skinny Russian began to recall a story about some prisoner who’d been stabbed forty times and still managed to flee from his offenders and make it out alive. *It will be alright*, he told himself. Yet, he couldn’t find it in him to say the same for Gerald.

“Fuckface...” Gerald’s voice crackled. The fact that he didn’t have the energy to reciprocate the slapping hurt more than anything. “I was waiting for you...but I went ahead and

got this thing started all on my own,” he aimed his finger at the hole in his stomach. Skinny Russian’s lack of acknowledgement led Gerald to jab a finger at the hole.

“Idiot,” Skinny Russian slapped his hand away.

“Quit slapping me,” Gerald groaned, “you know I could’ve killed you, right?”

“You almost just killed *yourself*!”

“The hell you talking about,” Gerald’s attempt at raising his torso up ended with him sliding further down the floor. Skinny Russian caught him and shoved Gerald’s limp foot against the fridge. “Come on,” his hands fell to the sides and fingered around for the knife, “where is it...” ignoring the slimy mess on the tiles. “Hey! Help me out here!”

“Idiot.” Skinny Russian took the knife and brought it up to Gerald’s face. “IDIOT!” he tossed it across the apartment.

“What are you doing? You need to get this fucking bullet out of me!”

“I can’t,” perhaps, if the bus ride was just a bit longer, he thought to himself, then he would learn to become a surgeon.

“You can’t?”

“*I won’t*!” But then again, the data on his phone isn’t limitless.

“The fuck you talking about? You *have* to!”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, please fucking do!”

“No, we have to leave it in there for now.”

Skinny Russian recalled a segment on a history channel he watched a while back, something about Terry Roosevelt having been shot with a .38 caliber revolver before starting a campaign speech. After the shooter, a disgruntled saloon-keeper from New York, was detained, Teddy went on with his scheduled speech, despite bleeding from the chest. Thankfully, the fifty page script folded over many times in his breast pocket, where the shot hit, made the wound much less lethal. “What caliber was that gun?” he asked.

“A *thirty-eight special*—why the hell does that matter?”

“Oh, it’s gonna be just fine!” Skinny Russian cheered,

then mentally patted himself on the back. *No such thing as useless knowledge.*

“Are you sure you can just leave this thing in there?” Gerald looked to Skinny Russian’s face for reassurance.

“Yes. I’m sure.” He gave it.

“How’s that, were you a doctor or something back in the Old Country?” Gerald smirked.

“No,” Skinny Russian gathered the contents of the brown paper bag. With a sarcastic Russian accent, he said, “I Google it.” With a smug look on his face Skinny Russian pulled out a bottle of cheap Polish Vodka. The metal seal on the cap made a satisfying crack as broke loose. He grinned and waved the bottle in front of Gerald’s face.

“Jesus Christ.” Gerald groaned.

“What...” Skinny Russian’s face grew wild with excitement.

“Really?”

“A problem?” *If they can do it in movies...* he reasoned. The time was as good as ever to try what looked so cool to him on the big screen.

“Were you not just at a pharmacy?” Gerald asked. But the sight of that clear liquid dancing around in the bottle made him wonder if he’d prefer this to go down any other way.

“Yes,” he tossed the metal cap to the side.

“Ever hear of rubbing alcohol?” Gerald chuckled.

Without saying a word Skinny Russian nudged the bottle into Gerald’s limp hand, “would *you* drink rubbing alcohol?”

“You’re ridiculous,” Gerald, using the strength in both his arms, brought the bottle to his face and took a sip, “and there I was...no less than an hour ago, questioning your Russianness.” He swallowed, revealing in the burn he felt in the back of his throat, while preparing for another swig.

“So what then,” Skinny Russian pulled out a second bottle for himself. In one effortless motion he unscrewed the cap and brought neck of the bottle up to his mouth, “is this an apology?”

“Not yet,” Gerald took a swig.

While Gerald was preoccupied with keeping the bottle to his face, Skinny Russian took the opportunity and poured a few ounces of Vodka onto the blood-encrusted wound. Gerald's torso contracted. He squirmed as the Vodka shot out of his mouth and nose in a fine mist. He gasped. Then coughed violently, spraying Skinny Russian's face with a mix of mucus and Vodka.

"You drink like bitch," Skinny Russian said with his sarcastic Russian accent before wiping his face with his shirt.

"Fucker! You poured that right as I took a sip! You did that on purpose!"

"HA!" Skinny Russian splashed some more into the bullet hole.

Gerald yelled in pain again. "Arghhh, asshole! Warn me before you do that shit! You're gonna make me choke, you fucking sadist!"

"A little Vodka in your lungs won't kill you," he chuckled. Skinny Russian put his bottle away and reached into the drawer above Gerald's head for clean blade. One-by-one the contents of the other bag were pulled out and placed beside Gerald's leg. A large pack of gauze. Two bottles of rubbing alcohol. Some tubes of antibacterial ointment. Tweezers. Odd, crooked-looking scissors. Painkillers. The *other* type of painkillers. A stethoscope. Gerald felt relieved to find that Skinny Russian actually managed to visit the pharmacy. Using the knife, Skinny Russian sliced open the four-pack of gauze, unrolled one, then cut it into short strips which he neatly arranged on top of Gerald's shoulder. One he was finished, he clumped one of the strips in his hand and used it to wipe off the top layer of Vodka-soaked blood. With each wipe his movements became more calculated. He found his rhythm, following a pattern now, as his hands drew circles around the wound, smearing the mess across the stomach while slowly closing the circle in, scooping the paste up when it reached the epicentre. When most the mess was cleaned off, he soaked a clump of gauze in rubbing alcohol and did a final wipe

down. Without asking Gerald for permission, he poured more Vodka into the centre, then dabbed a smaller piece of gauze into it. In and out. *Tap-tap-tap*. The bleeding hadn't stopped, but keeping the hole clear, be it for only a few moments at a time, allowed him to get a better glimpse inside. It was only then, when he looked into the void, that it struck him: he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. No clue what he was to do next. The thing that terrified him the most was that he felt no control over himself any longer. He reached that point of no return in another one of his projects that the ignorant optimist inside persuaded him into pursuing. But it was too late now. That battle was already lost. His only task was to keep the boulder still and steady at the peak of the hill of self-control. But he slipped, and once again, faced a difficult decision: let it go and see what the boulder tramples over on its path down, or chase after it, try to keep up, and hope to steer it in a less destructive direction.

He peered over his shoulder at the small mound of discarded gauze that had formed behind him. Its base was composed of a deep-maroon shade that transitioned to a lighter red as it went up, ending with a faint-pink shade at the peak. He turned back and brought the bottle of Vodka to his mouth. One ounce for himself, one into the void.

"Owww! Ok fine, you asshole, that *was* cool."

"What are you talking about?"

"The thing...what you just did—taking a swig before pouring some on the wound—no way you didn't plan that. HA!"

"I don't know what you mean, that came naturally." Skinny Russian couldn't fight the smirk emerging on his face. He turned away, embarrassed.

"I saw that!"

"Whatever."

"You're so corny! When was it—on the bus? You fantasized about it on your way here! Hah!"

"No," with his head still turned away from Gerald's face, Skinny Russian reached for another piece of gauze and

soaked it in Vodka, then haphazardly wiped away at Gerald's stomach, hoping that the sting would shut him up. "Shut up."

"Bullshit!"

"Quiet!" Skinny Russian filled his mouth with Vodka, but forgot to swallow when their eyes finally met. Gerald erupted into laughter when he saw the embarrassed look on Skinny Russian's face. Skinny Russian burst. The contents of his mouth shot into Gerald's face. He dropped the bottle and covered his mouth while coughing profusely.

"Fuck! That's disgusting!"

"You deserved it!" The commotion was over quickly and the room turned to silence once again. Skinny Russian unravelled whatever remained of the roll of gauze, then inspected its remaining length and width. Unable to contain himself, he finally asked Gerald, "it did look pretty cool though, *didn't it?*"

"Oh...enough already..." Gerald watched the gauze with caution as it neared his body. *Hope*, he thought, *an uneasy sense of comfort*. He used whatever strength left in him to stretch out when Skinny Russian needed to reach around. The silence allowed them to hear each other's breaths. Between each layer Skinny Russian lathered a bit of ointment into the fabric over the hole. The blood kept pumping, but with every new coat the spread narrowed. Gerald knew to take hold of the stray end when Skinny Russian searched around for the metal clips to hold the bandage. He clipped one on, checked its tautness, then applied the other. Gerald let go. His eyelids drooped. Further and further each time he tried to fight their weight. He sighed in relief, took a deep breath, then attempted to pull himself up. Slowly, no sudden movements now.

Inch by inch, Gerald's hips crept closer to the kitchen cabinet, straightening himself up. Skinny Russian watched, admiring his hard work. No more than a minute passed when he saw that the red patch on the fresh bandage was growing. The enthusiasm on his face disappeared. He put a hand over Gerald's shoulder, indicating for him to stop

moving.

“Yeah...I always liked how they did that stuff in the movies,” he took another long sip and passed the bottle to Gerald.

“So, is this it?” Gerald noticed the dark red expansion on his stomach. He reached for the bottle.

“I think so.”

“Am I dying?”

“You’ll be alright.”

“Is that how it goes in the movies?”

FRIDAY

PRACTICE MAKES CONFLICT

The setting sun splashed a deep mix of orange and red highlighted the curves of Christina's reluctant calves as they approached a familiar-looking sedan. The pulsating amber hazard lights reflected in the floor-to-ceiling windows of the lobby, in which, the concierge had long ago figured out what Christina did for a living, and lamented that it was not something he could afford on his salary. However, the wireless internet in the lobby was free, and the tall desk behind which he spent most his time left much to the imagination. Her two-inch heels dragged on the concrete walkway, snagging the occasional imprinted leaf in the never-ending pattern. She tucked a hand into her purse, feeling around for a familiar device. She stopped in front of the passenger side window and scanned inside to find a motionless figure staring straight ahead from the driver's seat. The figure didn't react when she tapped on the window to get his attention. "HEY!" Then slammed her palm against the window. The figure shook his head and made a motion with his lips that would resemble somebody saying the words: *get in*. Christina checked crackled the device in her purse. It appeared that the batteries were still charged. The figure said something again, louder this time, and so she

promptly made her way through the rear door and slid herself into the warmed leather bench.

She used the generous leg space to stretch her cold legs out, then crossed them, one over the other, to trap the heat. The warm air in the cabin warmed her lungs. She sighed while she rummaged through her purse for a picture of a man that resembled the figure sitting in the driver's seat. The same picture she'd studied with her morning coffee. Then again, with her afternoon bourbon. The picture that kept her up all night. Her boss assured her that the previous evening's events would never repeat. She even got a hefty bonus for having to endure the ordeal. Yet, the money wasn't enough to keep her from staying up all night, over-analyzing the events. Breaking down every detail of his face and who he was. It wasn't enough to suppress the incessant *what ifs*. Not then. And especially not now that she's in the car with another stranger.

She shuffled around in the backseat while expelling noises that almost resembled words. Her nails dragged along the warm leather. Cleared her throat several times—nothing was getting his attention. “hey...” she whispered. No response. She lunged for the headrests to pull herself up, but the gearshift lever switched to *DRIVE*. The car jerked forward, tossing Christina back into her seat.

At the peak of her restlessness she caved and broke the silence, “two days...” she waited for the figure to respond, then continued anyway, “three different drivers.” An uncomfortable chuckle escaped from her mouth. No response. She's had enough now. Her body relaxed and melted into the heated cushions. Her eyes wandered off to watch the freshly painted lamp posts speed past the passenger-side window.

The Driver's dark brown eyes, dead and unchanging in their expression, kept straight ahead as he took the sedan through alternating lights and turns with robot-like precision. His waxed head reflected everything from the remaining light of the day to the bright-white LED street lamps. The black, three-piece suit he wore absorbed any

light and blended in with the black leather seat. Christina observed him, then kicked herself for not having realized sooner that their job entailed a specific dress code. She released the taser from her hand and crossed her arms. *On the other hand*, she reasoned, she had made a promise to herself long ago that she would no longer get involved in these people's lives.

A little introduction can't hurt. She spoke up again, "Hey! You're not a writer..." she creeped in, "are you?"

Using the absolute minimal amount of effort in his face muscles, The Driver responded, in a flat tone, "no."

"Whoa," Christina slid back into her seat. "Just trying to ease the tension here," The Driver didn't reciprocate. She went on, "I don't know if you've heard what happened yester—"

"Do you really need to say what you were about to say?"

"Shit, man. I just thought that all you guys were..." something told her that it was a good idea to cut herself off right there.

"That we what? That we just love to talk? What part of my body language showed indication of an interest in any sort of discourse?" A long red light ahead. He stopped. Finally, he thought, and glanced over his shoulder to give Christina the look he'd been working on ever since the love interest from his old life rejected him for being too soft. A look ten years the making. A look he practiced as his morning routine, of yelling at the mirror, naked and flexing, while reciting an easy-to-read guideline that summarized in seven clear, concise points, everything that there was to being a real man. He kept the list taped to his bathroom mirror. It was set as a desktop background on his computer. He jotted it down on a business card to keep it in his wallet. A poster-sized version of the list, with supplementary illustrations, hung from his front door. "ANY? A slightest hint of it?" Now was as good a time as ever to let the world see him for what he had worked so hard to become.

Rule #1: Learn to make small talk.

"No," Christina shrunk in her seat.

“No. No I did not.” He didn’t mean to snap. But now was not a time to compromise and take back what he said, or even tone it down, at least. He turned back to the road, feeling relieved now knowing he could finally wipe the look from his face. His heated state of mind led him to backtrack through the day and ask himself what may have caused such an outburst. He’s supposed to *always* be in control of himself. He drove on, in autopilot. Using the noise of traffic and the lively night streets to act as a canvas where he could lay out his thoughts to get a clearer view of them. Then he realized: *he slept in this morning.*

Christina watched with more attention as a familiar set of lampposts stopped in front of her eyes. She moved up her seat to look over the window frame onto the ground below. The bright white lights illuminated a familiar-looking cobblestone walkway. Her body stiffened. Her jaw clenched. “Hey, what the hell are we doing *here*?”

“Same place as yesterday.”

“And the client?”

“Same guy as yesterday.”

“What! THURSDAY?!”

“It’s Friday.”

“No, that’s just what I called him—I don’t know the guy’s name—he was weird, man. I don’t want to see him again. I’m pretty sure we were done with him.”

“Doesn’t sound like it. Today you can call him *Friday*.”

“I said I’m not gonna see him again!”

“You don’t get to decide that,” The Driver threw the gear lever into the *PARK* position and sat back, occasionally glancing at Christina through the rear-view mirror.

“I get a say in these things, you know!” Christina yelled at the back of the headrest.

“Not according to *this*,” The Driver reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a purple sticky note, “*your boss* left it for me this morning. He called me in—I wasn’t supposed to work until Sunday, you know. I didn’t want to be here, but you try talking to the guy in the state he’s in

right now. He won't reason. I don't know *when* he'll want to talk to anybody. You know what's going on—are you sure you want to be interrupting him with your petty bullshit? I know you're usually his princess—but not today. And maybe not tomorrow, either. All we know right now is that this client is paying a lot for you to keep coming over. And *I*, against my will, have to make sure that you get here. Anyway,” The Driver brought the note to Christina's face, covering the text with one finger, “you want to know what this note says?”

“Sure.”

“It says: DO YOUR GODDAMN JOB!” He pulled the finger away to reveal the large bold letters.

“You can't talk to me like this.”

“*I* didn't write the damn thing. He said do whatever it takes—I'm doing whatever it takes. You want to complain later, go ahead. The results will be not what you expect and everyone will come out of it much more upset in the end.”

“I can't stand that Thursday guy!”

“I don't care! Go and do your job. You think *I* like getting instructions from a fucking sticky note? And don't be surprised when tomorrow you can call him Saturday.”

“What!”

“And Sunday...and so on. You can get out now.”

Rule #2: Be bold

“I can't do this—I'm gonna lose my mind if I spend another moment with that weirdo! Something's not right with him—I'm telling you! What if he hurts me?”

“He *won't*, he knows the deal. You're not alone, he won't do anything stupid...wish I could say the same for you.”

“What does that mean!”

“I mean that, judging from the few words we've exchanged so far, you don't exactly come off as *stable*.”

“Oh I'm gonna get a lot worse if you *make me go up there!*”

“I will, and caring about how you feel at the moment is just plain bad for business. So do as the note says, shut up, and get out.”

“No...”

“I said get out! You’re going to have to learn to listen to me! Get. The Fuck. Out! Out of the car, now!”

THE MILK WAS GONE

It wasn't long until Christina's blog was discovered by one of her long-time clients. A client who had developed an obsession with Christina, dedicating much of his time and money trying to learn everything there was to know about her. He was livid when he read what she had written about him. He was even more terrified of what she hadn't *yet*. After weeks of emotional turmoil, debating whether to turn her over to the police or incite punishment of his own capabilities, he settled on blackmailing her and see how things would progress from there.

Despite writing her entries under an alias and keeping her customers' names confidential, this client was still mortified at the thought that the world may somehow discover that his penis, while fully functional, was only marginally above average in its length and girth compared to the national demographic. In his mind, this was the leading cause for his crippling self-esteem issues. It's what led him to remain single and lonely throughout most of his late thirties. This client worked as a moderator for a website where attractive women would turn on their webcams for anonymous, faceless strangers who would pay \$2.99 a minute to watch them seductively eat their dinner and occasionally drop

something on the ground while wearing indecent outfits. Having frequently fantasized about seeing his own therapist in a scaled-down version of her usual skirt and blouse get-up, he offered to keep her blog a secret, if she were to simply perform a few shows a week on his website.

Christina's online popularity grew with no signs of slowing down. In no time she had risen the ranks to those who performed shows costing \$4.99 a minute—the sorts of shows where the models wore an even lesser amount of clothing and possessed the hand-eye coordination of a chimpanzee who couldn't drink from a water bottle without spilling it all on their shirt. She couldn't deny to herself that she enjoyed the attention, but that didn't stop her from being persistent in getting a straight answer from her blackmailer about the termination date of their arrangement. *Don't worry—soon enough someone new will show up, and when you lose your ranking—WAIT. What do you mean, lose my ranking?* For two dollars more per minute she could prove that she had what it took to surpass the rankings of those doe-faced twenty-year-olds with cheap bolt-ons she was competing against. Life was moving so fast for Christina. *Ok, now how much longer?* She was curious; she *had* to ask. *Soon, look—there's this up-and-comer, nice girl, smart-looking, all-natural, clients are already queuing up for her private double-digit shows. She's climbing!...CLIMBING? how fast? Fast—any week now you can bet your ass your inbox is gonna be barren. Barren?! How barren? Listen, it's hard to tell, some of these girls just disappear from the face of the earth one day. Some leave because they've made enough money for college. Some stay long enough to become internet-famous—this young one here—I'm seeing real potential, there's only so much marketing money to throw around and I have to make sure it goes to the right place. So what's going to happen to me then? We had an arrangement—I do intend to uphold its conditions. For how long? It's too soon to tell! Well, tell me something, goddamn it! Do I slow down? Do I stay later into the night? What if I fizzle out too quickly? Would you tell me? What then?*

PLEASE JUST TELL ME SOMETHING!

One afternoon she finally got her answer, but not in the way she'd been expecting, when one of her fellow workers at the university logged in to see her show for \$6.99 a minute the night before. Unable to contain his excitement, he had to spread the word to his male coworkers, not one of whom could keep their mouths shut.

She couldn't deal with the shame, and the day when Christina was clearing out her office and saying her uncomfortable goodbyes she wondered if the news had spread to her family. She shut her blog down before it was discovered by anybody else. She resented herself. She resented her weakness for not being able to keep a level head doing while doing her job. What made her crack? For months she wanted to call her father, with a single question in mind: how was *he* able to remain so strong working in the same profession? The call never came. The answer, she determined, would be something she would have to discover on her own. As time went on, she became more sure with each day that following in his footsteps was never a guaranteed way to garner his forgiveness. It would never fix her wrongdoings, since which she'd long forgotten what a hug from him had felt like.

The fur coat was still wrapped around her body in the heated apartment when she eventually came to. Christina was completely unaware how long she'd been standing there for, lost in thought. When she pulled the coat off she found that her blouse was soaked in sweat and stuck to her arms and torso. The stench of her armpits filled her nostrils when she lifted the coat over her head onto the hanger. She promptly pulled it back off, wafted it far from her face, then stuck it back. Acting nonchalant about it, Christina pinched the buttons on her blouse and shook it until it was loose-fitting once again. Her armpits—*shit*—not until she could sneak off to the bathroom.

With a practiced composure in her stride, Christina took two steps toward the client. A look on her face showed that she was ready to get going. The living room was lifeless and

dim and the corner where the man sat in the chair appeared to be in a world of its own, encapsulated in a dark vignette, the colourless gradient becoming lighter in shade as it spread outward from him. The last of the daylight had almost completely faded behind the horizon, spreading horizontal streaks of light that moved up from the wall to the ceiling. Christina dreaded every moment of this silence. She could see almost nothing of the man. She swore that she could blink three times and the figure would disappear. But the dread was real. The only sign she had that she was not alone was the faint twinkle in the man's eyes caused by the last rays of sun bursting through the seams in the blinds. Then he blinked and the twinkle disappeared..

"So," he spoke slowly, in a calculated manner. Each sentence was finished with a grunt and clearing of the throat, as if to indicate displeasure with having to repeat words he hadn't yet spoken, "I *finally* found someone. You did well yesterday. I went ahead and spoke with your boss after you left."

"What did you...speak with him about?" Christina blinked three times. No luck. Her calves tensed up. She slid her heels against the laminate flooring, making a clicking noise every time they snagged the seams.

"Well, I told him...I said that I took a particular liking to you."

"Was it my...*exceptional* dishwashing skills?" She said, struggling to contain the shaking in her voice. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. At last, the shape in the chair was taking form.

"No, Christina, it was your eyes. *She* had the same eyes. The same look. That was before the—you know."

"Damn it," she burst, then immediately sealed her lips. Her body felt light. She dragged herself to the kitchen island and leaned up against the granite countertop.

"I requested to see you again. I said I would pay more if it would have to come to that. When I mentioned the money, your boss said something about a particular set of skills which you possessed."

No

“Skills aside from washing dishes and cleaning floors—you know what I’m talking about.” He chuckled.

“I can make the bed. I can suck dick. I don’t know what else you’re talking about, pal.”

“He said you could really help me in...” he tapped his index finger against his temple, “...in here. He said he’s seen you work. That you really know what you’re doing. And I trust this man, if he believes you can help me—I’ll take it.”

“Look, I don’t do that any longer. Even when I did was never any—“

“I need help, Christina.”

“Why the hell would he, I never—“

“We’re going to start slow,” he cut her off with a one-handed clap. A deep, raspy breath got him relaxed. His eyelids collapsed under their own weight. He rested his hands on the armrests and tilted his head back. “We’re going to ease into it—that’s how it goes, right? When they just close their eyes like this and relax? What’s next?”

“No, usually you just sit in an office chair across the desk from me.”

“I have some problems letting go. I can admit *that*. It’s just my wife, you see,” his voice mellowed.

“I know...I know. I’ve heard it.”

“Oh, you weren’t listening...she left me. One dreary Thursday night she just left. Took right off. I don’t know if *I* know why. Why would she do that? Look at me—look at this place I own. I own even more places. I own a lot of things! I want to know what I did—where I went wrong. *If* I went wrong.” His sentences were breaking up, he had a hard time finding the words, “I don’t understand!” He slammed his palms into the chamois armrests, “why the hell would she just go ahead and do something like this? To *me* of all people!” He jumped up off the chair and stomped right past Christina, straight toward the door. “Why would she just walk away. I mean, who does that?! Maybe. *MAYBE* it’s not even something that I did wrong, you know? Just help

me remember.”

She just stood there, frozen. Expressionless.

“Please, just work with me here!”

“Why does it have to be *me*? There are actual professionals who can help you. People with the proper resources. People a lot more worthy of your hard-earned money. *I* can’t do it. There’s more to it than just listening to someone spew out every word that comes to your head! Yes, the talking bit is mostly one sided but what you’re doing is just pissing to the wind. Someone’s gotta guide you through it. *I can’t*, because—“

“Oh!” He ran to the far side of the living room and tore a set of blinds down from the ceiling, drenching Christina in the remaining ambient light from the outside, “but look at those eyes. Those eyes—that same look—they can help me remember. They’re going to help me bring it all back.”

“That’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

He kicked the broken blinds out of his way and stormed over to Christina, stopping inches away from her face. “*Say that again...*”

“Look, I’m sorry—but that is completely absurd. My eyes—really? Don’t you have pictures of her around here that you can look at for *those eyes*. Simple as that! I’m trying to save you time here.” She forgot to mask the sarcasm in her voice this time and shrunk down, waiting for what came next.

“Don’t talk back to me—I know what I need!”

“Then why do you need *me*?”

“What did I just say!”

“And what if I can’t help you?”

“Christina, pretty soon here you’re going to have to learn to keep your goddamn mouth shut and start listening me! SO...where do we start—my childhood?”

“I don’t know...it’s up to you.”

“Christina!”

“Yes! Yes...start with your childhood.”

“What do you need to know about it?”

“...”

“Christina!”

“...you can start with...everything.”

It wasn't long before walking around in her underwear in front of a webcam became her only source of income. She had managed to convince herself that going down this road wasn't as bad as she'd imagined it to be, as long as it was clear that this was simply a short-term thing—something to sustain her lifestyle while she regained her bearings. One night, a regular customer of hers, one that fancied the shows she'd put on for \$9.99 a minute, sent a two-thousand word long e-mail assuring Christina that he was not a creep when he admitted to hacking her sensitive personal information, including where she lived and the bank account she used to receive payments for her shows, and asked to meet her in person. He offered to drive the mere three-hundred miles from his home just to meet her, and even suggested a nice restaurant only five minutes from her home where they could have dinner. For a lump sum of money she wasn't used to having in her possession all at one time, he suggested that they could spend a romantic evening together, nothing more, *unless she* decided otherwise. After several weeks of negotiations and working out the logistics of the future date, Christina finally agreed.

The morning after, that same customer was unable to contain his excitement and may have told a few people. Christina was on her way to becoming a celebrity, she just didn't know it until over the course of the next few weeks her inbox was becoming flooded with similar messages. When she got to the bottom of it, she learned that her personal information was being handed out in exchange for website traffic. A quirky blog of one owner, reviewing classic movie posters, who just wanted others to see his work. It was none other than the same customer who first took her out.

Movie posters...no matter how hard she tried, it would never sink in.

LONELY MAN'S LULLABY

From a broken home to a broken job. From broken glass on the kitchen floor to breaking legs and faces of people I don't know. The same place but a different night, I sit in the same spot, the same broken person in my sight. Only with each and every night this person seems more broken than the last. I can't show that I care, but I want to know this person's past. Every one of us is broken—it's where our stories start. I just can't, I won't be left with another broken heart...

RULES OF THE TRADE

Everything comes to those who wait, was last week's inspirational quote The Driver received in his e-mail as a little thank you for his monthly subscription to *The Art of Balding* magazine. He read the quote over his morning coffee. He recited it again, in his head, after a hot shower, then scribbled the words with his finger in the condensation on the mirror. He found his eye in the bit of reflection the word *wait* cleared off and took it as a sign. Later that morning, before heading out to work, The Driver skimmed through an article from the same magazine and searched for the combination of words which provided him with the daily sense of courage he'd become so dependent on for these past couple of years. The article talked about how therapeutic it could be to take care of a bald head and how being bald was a sign of strength and confidence. Before his subscription, The Driver would often resort to reading about his condition on the internet for support. It provided the same temporary sense of relief, but sometimes, seeing results showing him both sides of the story would make him more upset than he were to begin with. It wasn't until he misread the title, and was halfway into reading *The Ten Disadvantages of Being Bald*, that he finally gave up

searching. Within a half hour the first inspirational quote *swooshed* into his e-mail inbox.

He who hesitates is lost, this morning's quote popped back into his consciousness as Christina tucked herself into the back seat of the sedan. Every streetlight that flashed by gave The Driver a chance to catch a glimpse of her mournful mug. He fought the urge to say something. An apology, perhaps—but the idea of her rejecting it devastated him. Now was not the moment, he decided, and tried to remember last week's quote.

A few lampposts passed by her window before he caved in and spoke up, "you're quiet...did he hurt you?"

Christina refused to acknowledge the noises directed at her. Still sulking. Her hands played with the taser in her purse. She pressed the soft tip of her finger into the cold, sharp prong, swallowing the pain shooting up her hand with a deep breath. Then again. Another deep breath. She pushed until the metal point tore through the skin, then rubbed the warmth between her fingers until it turned to a mushy paste that flaked off. She rolled the device in her palm, covering its every surface with herself. The feel of the now slippery red button instilled a profound sense of regret; she longed for something to help her forget it.

She opened herself up. The words coming from the front of the car became more audible.

"Look," his eyes kept to the rear-view mirror for the remaining few minutes it took to arrive at Christina's apartment complex. There was something more he had to say, but being so caught up in his own head had caused him to drive the front wheel into the curb and break his concentration, "...I just need to know if he hit you—it's part of my job."

Her body remained still. Her hand showed no sign of reaching for the door handle any time soon. Christina let out a deep sigh and sunk deeper into the comfy leather seat.

"Talk to me here."

"NO!" She shouted, before retreating back into her zone.

“He didn’t *hit* me.”

“Ok then. You can get out now.”

“I still can’t believe they’ve got me doing this shit,” her fingers danced around smooth surface of the chrome door handle. She dug her nail into the padded leather door trim, leaving an indent that flattened itself back out almost instantly.

“It’s your job—we’ve all got a job to do.” The Driver said, assuringly. “Why do you have to make this so difficult.”

“I get that. *I get it*. What I mean is I don’t mind dressing up in whatever stupid little outfit somebody decides to put me in. It’s all just a blur to me anyways. Being called names is nothing but white noise. Whatever gets them off—whatever. I don’t even listen anymore—”

“Yes, I can see that...”

“...I don’t mind the smells. Shit, it doesn’t even bother me that—”

“Go home, Christina.”

Rule #3: A Man...

“...But I CANNOT take any more of *this*—whatever the hell this is supposed to be. It’s been *this* for too long. I try and it goes nowhere. When I don’t give a shit the outcome is the same. *Whyyyyyy*. I know it’s my job! I know that—I completely get that. I took it for a while but I think I’m finally done.”

“You think you have it hard then?”

“Fuck yes I have it hard. You might get a gun pointed at you every once in a while, but at least your work doesn’t follow you home. Shit, you think you’d be strong enough to just leave it all once you’re done—just shake it off—but you’re not. This stuff sticks with you.”

“And now you gotta stick it on me?”

“Hey fuck you—what the hell was I even thinking talking to *you*—just another nameless driver. Mr. Personality here—as useless as talking to a lamppost. I don’t need your opinion—what the hell have *you* got to say?”

Rule #3...!

“You can leave now.”

“Who the hell are you telling me what to do? I will stay in this car as long as I want to. Do *your* fucking job. Come on driver—drive!”

“Get out.”

“Drive me around—that’s what you’re here for. Let’s go to fucking Disneyland. I wanna go on adventure!”

“That’s not how this works.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me—what is your job description? Show me that little sticky note of yours—show me how important you are.”

“We’re done for the night, leave the car before I pull you out myself.”

“Oh so fucking scary. You’re a big tough guy, aren’t you? I can have your balls cut off if I wanted to.”

“This is your final warning.”

“Better watch your mouth, shithe—“

Before Christina realized it, The Driver was already standing by her window, ready to yank her out of the car. He jerked the door open. It bounced back on Christina when she pulled her leg out, pinning her ankle against the frame. Her cry of pain was interrupted by The Driver when he grabbed her by the wrist and tore her out of the car. He wrapped his fingers around her neck and pinned her against the rear quarter panel. “Now you listen to me, you needy little cunt. I don’t know what the hell kind of service you’re used to, but catering to your every childish demand was not in *my* job description. Should I show you that sticky note *now*? I have absolutely no obligation to give half a shit about the senselessness that comes out of your stupid little mouth. There’s only so much I’m willing to take...you think whatever you say is worth listening to? You think you’re big time? At what point did you get it into your head that you have some sort of immunity? Were you promised you something? Don’t take it to heart. We *all* were.”

Christina barely caught a lungful of air. Her nails dug into his hands, but he wasn’t letting up.

“I don’t even know what the hell makes you think that I

even have to be nice to you, or even listen,” he loosened the grip, “or even *pretend* to listen. I’m just here to do ONE job—I drive you there; I drive you back. Simple as that. Can you comprehend that? Whatever issues you have with yourself, with others, with this world and everything in it—they don’t concern me. They don’t concern anybody. Get over yourself.”

The Driver finally released her when the scratching ceased. She stood there, motionless, afraid to walk away in the middle of his tirade in case he were to grab her again.

“Now, this is just a hunch...but whatever it is that you might want to decide to get yourself into while I’m around. Be it in the next few days, or weeks—however long *that’s* going to take, understand that I’m not going to be there to get you out. I don’t have to—and I sure as hell don’t want to. No. I’m only going to be right here, right in or around the proximity of this car. Not a single step further. Do you understand?”

“...Yes...”

“Be a grown-up and take some fucking responsibility for whatever it is that got you here. It’s something everybody has to do, *alone*.”

“I just...” Christina massaged the red indent of his fingers out of her neck, “I never thought I’d end up doing this—you don’t know what it’s—“

“No one does, Christina.”

Rule #3: A Man Knows When to Throw a Punch

THE COLLECTIVE COWBOY

The events that were about to take place happened sometime between the moment John pretended to be startled by the sound of a shiny red truck approach from behind, and when all time stopped just so he could gather up the appropriate pronouns to fruitfully describe the arrangement of the truck driver's brain matter around the interior of the cabin. The truck was already there. Time had already started. He *was* writing with a pen, after all. Despite being aware of the truck, John insisted on being startled regardless, because if he couldn't sell himself on the story, there was no way others would buy it. The truck had to be a living, breathing entity. Even before it had materialized into existence he had to smell, hear, see, feel, and even taste the truck with every receptor in his body which could interpret that appropriate sensation. The receptors would—

I'm going to stop you right there.

He stalled. The story could wait. It was totally there, he promised. The details of the story churned somewhere in the *to-do list* of his consciousness while he focused on meaningless descriptions of the truck, as if to satisfy some sort of word quota. John assured himself that it wasn't a waste of time to take a stab at describing the smell of the

crack in the bottom right corner of the windshield. *A crisp oreole.* His eyes felt around the shape of the truck's four studded tires and heard the taste of the warm rubber scrape against the asphalt when the brakes engaged, locking the wheels, as the red mass of metal slid toward him. John didn't even bother moving out of the way because he had already decided to come out of the ordeal unscathed.

The shiny chrome bumper was the first part to strike John. His limp body folded in half, conforming to the shape of the truck's front end, then sprung back as it was launched out onto the road. His face smacked into the asphalt. He made a note to set the ground's temperature to an even hundred degrees so that he could actually feel its heat next time around. Then wondered what it was that had been melting the soap in his pocket all this time. An asterisk appeared somewhere above his head. John knew not to look up at it as it would break the immersion. He was thinking too much again. *Was a hundred degrees too much? Would it burn his face, at least bad enough so that he would have to keep track of these injuries for the rest of the story? Would the story lose focus and start taking on themes he was going to abandon halfway though then have to backtrack and try to incorporate them into the rest of the story to make it seem as if he planned it all along?* He opened his eyes to a thousand asterisks floating above him. No amount of shaking his head would make them disappear. He didn't stare at them for too long before they began to look like butt holes. John was suddenly reminded of the time when—

His right cheek was only mildly redder than the left when he got up on his feet and saw The Collective Cowboy sitting in the driver's seat of the truck.

The Collective Cowboy's face was left expressionless while John conjured up insignificant details that added nothing to the story whatsoever. His unremarkable forearms were a blank canvas where John pasted a series of inconsequential tattoos onto. A red plaid shirt. Blue jeans. Just a placeholder, for now. The look on the driver's face took shape, something between a man with nothing to lose

going after what he wanted, and not realizing that what he was looking for had been in front of him all along. Something like that, *but better. Something in front of him*, The Collective Cowboy looked down at his feet. Something to do with a broken shoe.

Somewhere, somehow, the answer was in the shoe.

“The answer was *always* in the shoe,” John repeated the words out loud to reinforce the mental note. A funny and obscure enough line to end a story on, he reasoned. “The man had a broken shoe...” John continued, “...a broken man. If you can fix a shoe—you can fix a man.” John swore that it made some sort of sense in his head, all it needed was some time to marinade, “...and *vice versa*?” he added. The heel on The Collective Cowboy’s boot disappeared, sending the red truck to jerk forward when his foot slipped off of the brakes. He got his footing back and stomped on the brake pedal before the truck could hit John again. The missing heel appeared in John’s hand. He waved it to the driver, as if to show that they had come to some agreement, before making his way to the truck.

As John approached, a rush of pain shot up from the back of his hip bone, intensifying as it reached the atlas, before spreading outward to the sides of his neck. A look of guilt emerged on The Collective Cowboy’s face. John reflected it back to him when he couldn’t fight the idea that all of this could’ve been avoided had he just let the man keep driving and live his life. Everything about the situation felt more uncomfortable with every passing moment. The feelings were multiplied tenfold when John couldn’t stop himself from projecting the emotions he couldn’t put into words onto the stranger’s face. It didn’t help. He *needed* words. Be it an onomatopoeia to describe his breathing pattern or a string of increasingly intensifying sentences leading to a climax describing the build-up of anxiety inside of him, he needed something. Anything to cure the uncomfortable internal silence. The ground below John’s feet was a mound of words and his mouth was the shovel and this man in this truck was a hole he needed to fill that was blocking his

route. With every moment of this discomfort the hole became deeper and more inviting.

John simply turned away from the truck and walked in the opposite direction. He didn't make it two steps before his upper leg muscle seized, causing his ankle to buckle and collapse under his own weight. He fell onto the road. His hand shielded his face from the hundred-degree heat, burning itself in the process.

"Goddamn it!" John shouted, "I said I wasn't going to do this again!" He raised himself up and inspected the burned palm of his hand to find it had already healed, leaving an indiscernible scar on the surface. He tried his best to forget it as he trudged on, limping, hoping to steer the upcoming conversation in a direction he hadn't explored yet himself.

His limping became more prevalent with each step. The sensation in his hand became more numb with every calculated swing of his hip. With each stomp, the rush of pain shooting up his leg from the sprained ankle raised more questions in his head. A flowchart of exciting new *ifs* and *whys* erupted inside his imagination. A sense of new beginnings elevated his enthusiasm. John revelled in the exhilarating uncertainty of where the new journey will take him. He walked on faster, nearly forgetting to limp. The shiny red truck he left behind soon followed.

The neglected noose hanging from John's neck became more animated, emanating a faint shuffling noise as it scraped against his shirt with every swing. The piece of soap in his black jeans remained as a suggestively shaped bulge, only now, when it melted, the white residue rose to the top of his pants. Just in case, he thought, a distraction would be needed. Perhaps something to break the ice. The shiny red truck followed a few feet back while John worked out the logistics of the first impression. The Collective Cowboy's head was filled with questions to John's answers. The reactions to his actions. The contrast John so desperately longed for. Again, the truck was brought to a screeching halt, stopping with its passenger side window open to the man with a limp.

“Do I need to ask?” The Collective Cowboy asked. The hesitation in his voice was masked by an overabundance of confidence. “There’s no need to be dramatic about it, get in the truck, John.”

And just like that he’d already botched it. Not only did he forget to change the fucking name, he didn’t even give himself a chance at a proper introduction.

“I have to start over.”

Fix it later, just get in the truck, John.

“I was about to get in the truck,” John’s fingertips hovered over the chrome door handle, feeling the heat rising from them, before grabbing it anyway and pulling away instantly upon feeling the burn. *Hand. Burning. Scar.* “Shit,” he refused to look at his hand but the thought was still there: he was back where he had started.

“You’re over thinking it—a hundred degrees ain’t that hot.”

“Fine,” he grabbed the door handle again. It was only mildly warm this time. The door flew open to the sound of old weatherstripping unsticking from hot metal and rust breaking free from the hinges. “Neat,” he said, before slipping inside onto the grey cushions and closing the door behind him.

“Hold on just a minute.” The Collective Cowboy stuck the palm of his hand out to John’s face.

“What is it?” John’s curious fingertips skated around the thin layer of Armor-All on the dashboard. Struck with an uneasy sense of familiarity, he froze up.

“I saw the way you were walking.”

“Nope,” John stopped him right there. The driver’s voice sounded too familiar.

“I saw the way y’all was walkin’.” The Collective Cowboy tried again. John cringed and even hated himself a little for how horrid that sounded. He crossed out the last words spoken, then drew an arrow to the preceding line of dialogue, indicating it to be the one he wanted to keep. *Where was he again?* John’s face lacked the surprised expression the Collective Cowboy had come to expect since

first hitting him with his car only a few pages ago, and thus was even more surprised than John had originally intended him to be. John was stunned to learn that something had happened in his story which he felt powerless to stop, and was thus thoroughly surprised. His face, for once, showed genuine emotion. The Collective Cowboy was pleased now that everything was in order according to some feelings inside him that he was not yet capable of conceptualizing.

“What are you implicating?” John had to accept that the toilet humour he’d set up earlier to smooth the introduction was an embarrassment, but, given that all he had left was a dick joke, it had to suffice for now. His self-reflection was disrupting the momentum. It *could* go somewhere. It was hard to stay optimistic, but he had to move on.

“You shit your pants!”

“Hell no,” John exclaimed!

“Are you sure about that? I swear I saw the way you was...were walking—I could swear you were walking like somebody who shit their pants.”

“I didn’t shit my pants.” While trying to figure out the tone with the all the filler dialogue going on, John had completely forgotten about the setting. “I didn’t shit my pants...” John continued the conversation, as if on autopilot, while the environment took shape. Images of his recent memory cycled, flashing in and out of existence. “I didn’t shit my pants...” Suddenly, the blinding white light of street lamps flickered, magnifying in intensity as it washed over the Collective Cowboy’s face. The desolate desert landscape fought to keep a park from appearing somewhere in the distance. Some buildings with neon signs waited for them at the horizon.

A cactus appeared in front of the truck, and before John could give it a purpose, two branches exploded out the sides. The ends of the branches transformed into hands. The hands into arms. The flashing lights and the city road passing under his feet came to a sudden halt. John stepped out of the truck to inspect the cactus only to find that it was now a pile of flesh and bones. A bloody tire trademark trailed off into

the distance where John spotted a runaway bus. He wanted to run after it but there was a weight on his back stopping him. He looked down to see that his feet were sinking into a patch of sand. John checked his reflection in the car to find a bearded man climbing up his back, shrinking in size as he went. By the time he got onto John's shoulder the man was no larger than a baseball. He leaped onto the back of his head and caught a shoe from mid-air, then pressed it against his chest. The shoe absorbed into his belly while the man spun in random circles, eventually landing on the ground in front of John and running off. "The answer was always in the shoe," the man whispered as he ran, then transformed into a tumbleweed. It dried rapidly. A gentle gust of wind nudged it to come along for the ride. John watched it roll away into the vast desert, leaving a trail of a cracked desert road in its path. He nodded agreeably at the rising sun as it cast light at a half-sunken city in the desert beneath it.

Meanwhile, the Collective Cowboy sat square in the seat of the truck, unreactive to the surrounding changes. It's not like John planned on keeping any of it in the first place. It was time to get a move on, the scenery returned to the basics. John said goodbye to the sun, then turned back to the truck only to face a brick wall. He turned again, but the wall was persistent and followed his every move. The wall expanded sideways until it covered his peripherals. He looked up—it was still there. John covered his eyes with his hands but immediately they turned to bricks. He closed his eyes, but again, all he could see were bricks.

Then he felt a pressure against his face. He tried to fight it, only to find the barrel of a pistol pushing into the back of his head. Deeper and deeper until he could taste metal on the tip of his tongue. He turned to face the person he expected to see, but no matter how many times he'd turn his body, his head would remain in the same place. The harder he fought it the worse the pressure became. An angry voice shouted at the back of his head, "do you remember!?" Over and over again. Closing in with each moment before the words were coming out of his own mouth, "*do you remember!*" He

spread his arms out and planted his palms flat against the wall, then spun it around himself, only catching a glimpse of the figure behind him before it exploded into a fine mist of what smelled like semen. The mist dispersed into the air above him into a great cloud. The cloud scattered into a million pieces, then rearranged itself into a sequence of letters over John's head.

John looked up, the letters spelled out: FESTIVAL!

He watched, through the windshield now, as the clouds disappeared behind the roof of the truck. The Collective Cowboy drove on, his face filled with annoyance. John sat quietly, pretending not to notice the driver's exasperated sighs. The truck sped up with no indication of slowing down at any point. The intricacies of the landscape were becoming less detailed by the minute until everything around John had almost completely turned to a blur. He was drawing a blank again, and it filled him with more anxiety than he knew what to project onto. The less creative he felt about constructing the world around him the more trapped he began to feel. "Here we go again," he sulked. He looked down, completely unsurprised to see that the floor of the truck was made of brick. His foot, in an ankle cuff, was tethered to it. The harder he pulled the worse the pressure around his ankle became. He tried to relax. He imagined what a town filled with living, breathing people would look and feel like when he looked out the window, but all he got was a whirlwind of torn-up newspapers. The sound of their violent rustling became louder and more sporadic until it was all he could hear; the blanket of paper so large that it encompassed the sun in the sky, only occasionally allowing John to catch a glimpse of it. The desert flashed in and out of existence. Between each breath, each blink, it appeared further out. The chains pulled tighter. The grey cushion beneath him hardened; his nails broke away into splinters and he scratched away at it.

The sun sunk behind the cityscape. The cold, late-night autumn wind pushed through the cracks in the taped-up windows, causing the newspapers to slap against one

another. John stared up at the rusty beams in the ceiling. Underneath him lay a pile of splintered nails in a dry puddle of blood and fecal matter.

What are you doing, John? Get out of here.

"It's not right—none of it is right. I can't do it. It's not working." John tucked his chin into his chest and brought his hands up to inspect them, only to yank them away immediately when the smell hit him. He pulled his pants back on then got up on his elbows. The scabbing patch of skin underneath the ankle cuff burned to the touch of cold steel when he kicked his leg around. He pushed his back up against the brick wall and hugged himself, trying to trap the heat it. The chain clanked as he shivered, keeping him from sleeping. The sight of the pen and notebook by his side kept him awake further, calling for his attention. Assuring John that there was something there jotting down. He refused, yet, the muscles in his hand fought the will to stay still.

And you happier here then? You've got an imagination—why not use it? Now is not a time to prove anything to yourself, you know? Come on, let's work on it together: where are you trying to get to? Think, John. THINK!

"I don't know what I'm doing, man," he tried to shut his eyes but all he saw was a blurry desert speed past him. A sensation in his stomach as if he were going down a rollercoaster.

You're inspired. Run with it—don't deny yourself the pleasure.

"Fine," his indifferent eyes watched his hand break free and reach for the notebook. He grabbed the pen and opened a blank page. As his eyes closed, John scribbled down the words: *THE ANSWER WAS ALWAYS IN THE SHOE.*

RETURN TO FORM

John awoke to the tip of his pen lingering on the last leg of the letter *E*. “The answer was always in the shoe,” he said, words slurred as he regained himself. The pen dug deeper into the same point until it punctured a hole in the paper, transferring the dot onto the page underneath. “The answer was *always* in the shoe,” he swiped the tip of the pen through the page, tearing it in half. “The *answer* was always in the shoe,” he wrote it again. His other hand fought the pressure from the bottom of the notebook. “The answer, he said...” with one big swoop the pen took a hard right and flew off the side of the notebook. He brought it back, he cut another line. And another. He kept going until nothing remained of the page but a few shreds of paper. He jabbed the tip of the pen at the random lines on the page underneath, haphazardly at first, before an interesting thought occurred in his head, which he could not yet make words out of. That thought led him to carefully touch the tip of the pen at the start of one of the lines he drew, then follow across, where it intersected the line beneath it. He continued down until the one line crossed all the others. The thought had evolved to an idea. John didn’t think too hard and allowed his pen to try making sense of it. From the top of

the page, he sketched a slow, calculated circle, as wide as the canvas would allow, intersecting all the scribbles on the page. The circle continued, gradually shrinking as it converged to the centre of the page. Almost there, he was sure of it. The frustration of not being able to put it into words led his hands to draw the circles faster. The lines were less smooth. His movements less fluid. John tucked his lower lip behind his front teeth and squinted, as if to get a better look. The pen, again, dug into the page underneath. The circles developed edges. Soon enough, he was drawing squares. The pen slipped from his sweaty fingers. He picked it up and brought it up to the page, but all he could draw were triangles.

“The answer was always in the shoe, goddamn it!” He thrashed around. Between the sound of his grunting and the clanking of the chains, John couldn’t hear the footsteps emerge from around the corner. The man finally had him in his sights, amused by the childish tantrum, he let John have his moment.

“Enough of that now,” a voice said from beside him.

John seized up. A thousand questions ran through his head, none which seemed relevant to help him get out of the situation. “WHERE ARE MY FUCKING SHOES!?” He shouted.

“Really?” The Chairmaker walked over to John and stared down at him, “of all the things, John—your shoes? You know you’re going to die, right?”

John lost the strength in his neck and he hit his head on the concrete. He thought of the truck and the desert and the tumbleweed, but it didn’t help. A crack in the ceiling caught his attention. He stared at it, hoping that if he were to look at it for long enough that the roof would collapse.

“You’re not seriously going to ignore me right now, are you? Do you understand what is happening here, John?” The Chairmaker knelt down in front of John, matching his head movements. “Are you ready to talk *now*?”

“Am I...” John snapped out of it and stared The Chairmaker dead in the eyes, “Am I ready to fucking talk?”

Are you kidding me? You could've started with that yesterday!"

"Well I..."

"You can't be serious!"

"Yes—I am. I'm very serious. I thought I made that very clear?" The Chairmaker argued..

"By raping me?!"

"Rape? What are you implying, John? That I'm some sort of a faggot? You better watch your goddamn mouth before I make you shit your teeth, boy!"

"...what else would you call it then?"

"Fine, maybe it was rape. But I was trying to get a point across, and I hope that I had! It's a form of torture—nothing gay about it!"

"No, some people rape women, you know?"

"Oh you..." The Chairmaker aimed a fist at John's head.

"Fine!" John yelled and blocked the trajectory of the fist with his arms. "Fine, I get it—you're not gay."

"You're goddamn right." The Chairmaker kept his fist raised, just in case he would need it for later, "besides, I'm not the one writing in a diary, you pansy!"

"It's not a diary—I'm writing a novel!"

"Yeah, you and everybody else."

"Hey, who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Me?" The Chairmaker said, pulled a finger from his fist and directed it at himself, "I'm the boss, John."

"That tells me absolutely nothing," John kept his defence up, "The boss? What the hell does that even mean? The boss of what? Of who? Who the fuck are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I run shit, John. I run shit! And I am very fucking angry right now so if you don't start telling me what I need to hear—"

"Telling you what? You literally haven't told me a single fucking thing about why I'm here!"

"John, if this had been—"

"Seriously, can we both just admit that you're not very good at this—whatever this is—before we move on?"

The Chairmaker shook in anger, the tremble reverberated

through his body, throwing him off balance. He planted a fist on the ground by John's face to stabilize himself. "Boy, you are in serious trouble. Had this been any other situation you'd have been tied up in a trunk of a car somewhere on your way to a nice hole in the desert where nobody would ever find you."

"But..."

"But...this is something *I* had to take care of, personally."

"So...it's a personal matter then? What the hell did I do to *you*?"

"I didn't say it was a personal matter, you stupid shit! I just said that this was something I had to take care of personally! Meaning I can't trust anybody else to do it. NOT HOW I WANT IT DONE!"

"So you can't tell anybody else to rape me?" John preemptively raised his arms up in front of his face. The Chairmaker punched right through it, slamming John's forearm into his own nose.

"I *am* fucking serious John." He pressed into John's hand as it assessed the damage to his face. "I don't understand..." he punched with both fists now, wherever they would land, changing hands when the other one got tired. Soon enough he ran out of breath and needed to catch a break.

"Yes! Fine!" John hid behind his hands. "...you're serious."

"So tell me then."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me where Gerald is, you idiot!"

"Is *THAT* what..." John internalized how stupid he felt that moment for not making the connection.

"You were driving his car. You were driving my girl...for some fucking reason which I've yet to find out from you. What the hell were you doing? Sometime in all this commotion a Gerald went missing, and you appeared out of fucking nowhere. Who are you?"

"I'm a writer," the answer least likely to get him killed, he figured.

"Good for you, now where is Gerald?"

"Listen..." John stalled while trying to figure out a way he could stall even further. A part of him had wished that he actually had hit Gerald in the leg and that at any moment he limp into this room, alive and well. But knowing Gerald like he knew Gerald, he wouldn't expect to come out of it any better than he was now. At that point John wondered if he even meant to shoot him in the leg in the first place. He reasoned that by *intentionally* shooting somebody in the stomach, the chances of survival would be higher. In fact, *what if he wasn't aiming at all when pulling the trigger, hitting him in the head? That would be so much worse. He did a favour for Gerald, with the way he shot him. Of course he was aiming. He only shut his eyes right beforehand because he would've blinked anyway, saving himself from having to endure the shock. Even worse—what if he were to miss and Gerald were to grab the gun and shoot him? Well, then he wouldn't even be here to tell this man where...oh. That's enough for now.* John realized that his internal reasoning and decision-making abilities hadn't caught up with him yet. All he knew was that saying nothing was the only thing keeping him alive, even if he did run the risk of having a giant rubber foot being shoved up his ass. "I don't think I can talk right now."

"You what! NO! You *will* talk right now!"

"I can't—because...I'm...*mad* at you."

"Oh *you're* mad? John—really, don't make me lose it. I promise—it could get much worse than this. Much worse."

"Yeah what? Are you gonna rape me again?"

"Where is Gerald!" The Chairmaker jumped up and kicked John in the ribs.

"And die?"

"What?"

"Yeah, you said you were going to kill me."

"I was just trying to scare you!"

"But you *actually* raped me though—I can't trust you. Look at it from my perspective."

"Oh, big deal, John. Like you have anything to live for?"

"What if I do?"

“You got a family, John? Because I will find them.”

John didn’t answer.

“Somebody you care for?”

Nothing.

“So what the hell do you have to live for then?”

“What the fuck is it you want me to die for so badly?”

The curiosity was killing him.

The angry faces that oven made at the carpenter’s wife became more frequent and severe as time went on. Sometimes, even when he was around, she would still see it, taunting her, egging her on to tell her husband about it. See if he would believe her. Or worse, call her crazy and leave. She never would, and the more she kept these visions to herself, the angrier they grew. She would hear its voices at nights, while the family slept on the mattress only fifteen feet away, persuading her to come over for a harmless chat. Sometimes she would indulge. See what the fuss was all about, only to come back from it scared, disappointed, and unable to sleep further.

Although the voices had been appearing for some time before the fact, the carpenter’s wife now attributed the visions to her postpartum depression after having their first child. She had hoped that they would pass soon enough. She was certain that having to care for a newborn would keep her mind occupied. It didn’t. And now, according to the oven, she was an evil mother who gave birth to an evil baby that rightfully belonged to Satan himself. Despite all this, there was an upside to her new circumstances. She now found it appropriate to urge her husband to hurry up and turn his hobby into a more serious business. There was a real, selfless reason, for not wanting to live like bums along with their bum neighbours. It was time for a real home with a real oven. One she wouldn’t have to keep running at nights to keep the place from freezing. One of those fancy new electric ovens she kept hearing about that don’t have doors resembling the mouth of a fiery demon.

But the carpenter was confident his custom furniture was

one lucky prospect away from the future she dreamed of. He had constructed a mock dining set which, despite lacking the finesse and finish of something that would make them a lot of money, had the potential to be something interesting and unique. Proper tools, and a shop with all the necessities, was all he needed. The only thing between him and a life of success was a competent investor who would spot the carpenter's potential and throw at him all the money he would need for the final masterpiece, and any masterpieces to come after it. He would have to keep any doubts to himself, showing any signs of weakness in front of his wife would surely give her the leverage for that one argument he had little defence against, but was prepared to have at any moment. There were times when he would almost snap, give in, and confess his failures to his wife. Confess that there had been a lingering idea in his head that he does not, after all, have what it takes. But the longer he kept it from her, the more distant his doubts became. His head got bigger. His shop, messier. And his temperament, shorter.

With each near-breakdown another canvas of white paint emerged somewhere in the five-storey building. Its residents couldn't shake the curiosity. They had to find out for themselves who the painter living on the basement level was, but only to help him.

Despite all of their disagreements, his wife tried to remain understanding. From time to time, she would still encourage him. Sometimes, even she would believe her own words. But time was passing by quicker than either one of them had wanted it to. Her patience with the carpenter's ambitions became thinner with every inch of their son growing taller. The passive-aggressive arguments were nearing their breaking point. The only thing they understood about the situation was that they did not understand each other, or how to talk about it. The only comfort they found was in conclusions they drew and imaginary arguments they won in their own heads. Every night was a sleepless night. She would wake up to her baby screaming, only to find the oven screaming right back at her. Every night was worse than the

last. Yet, between the horrid noises, the oven often made promises of a pure friendship. They were tempting, as the man sleeping in bed next to her seemed to know less about her feelings than the oven threatening to burn her alive.

On one particularly cold night, when the oven was running at full blast, the fiery mouth woke her up for the last time. It had promised to rid her of all misery, all she had to do was feed it her child.

The offer was enticing, she stayed awake until four in the morning contemplating it. Cradling her child in her arms, only four feet away from the cure to all of her ailments. Not for a second did she doubt the validity of the results of the promise. When she turned to see her husband sleeping, a sudden sense of doubt came over her. She recalled the days when she still believed in him, but was immediately filled with a sick sensation that this sudden sliver of hope would soon fade, like it had every other time, and things would return to the dreaded norm. She couldn't help but to think she was getting in his way, simply because she couldn't find it in herself to remain supportive; no strength left to keep trying. She hoped that maybe their son would.

After laying the child in her husband's arms, she crawled back to the oven and yanked out the wire for the pilot light from behind it. The flame died, leaving just the gas running. She placed her head inside the cast iron cage, filling her head with thoughts of a bright future while the gas filled her lungs, and fell into a deep, uninterrupted slumber.

The Chairmaker paced nervously in front of John, occasionally priming a foot to go flying into his face, before stopping himself at the last moment. The thought of actually ending John's life was becoming closer to reality, to the point where he began to feel a preemptive guilt for how he would feel should he go through with it. A part of him wanted to walk back down those stairs and take the advice and help offered by the man downstairs, who sat in a chair nicer than The Chairmaker. His pride, and the words: *I will fucking handle it!* he professed with such authority earlier,

kept him from admitting defeat. *He doesn't have what it takes*, he could see those words float over the other man's head as he left.

"I DO!" The Chairmaker accidentally blurted out, forgetting that John was in the room.

"What are you talking about?" John asked.

"Shut up." The Chairmaker ceased pacing and stopped in front of John, leaning over him, he asked, "what do you want, John?"

"Hey, how important is this Gerald thing to you?" John recollected the random lines he scribbled in his notebook earlier, something finally making sense. He was close. *Actually*, this time. "Trying to fill in the blanks here."

"Goddamn it, John, don't you want all of this to be over? You're making things more difficult than they need to be? Look—just tell me where he is, how hard can it be?"

"I want to finish my book."

"Ok..."

"I don't want to die because I want to finish my book. That's a good reason, no?"

"You call that a book? *John can't take a shit*? I read through some of that nonsense before I felt too embarrassed to be in the same room as your *book*. What a solid start—the makings of a bestseller. Hah!"

"It gets more interesting..."

"*Really*? Wait, don't tell me—does *John* get to take a shit towards the end? Does it come full circle like that? Does he actually get to take a shit?! Oh my—I can't wait to find out!"

"It's literally a book full of notes. A little too soon to start judging, don't you think?" John said, defensively.

"I disagree. If you're evaluating your life's worth based on the...potential...of something so trite, then I will judge. Harshly. Because something much more important is on the line right now, and waiting around for a wannabe writer to finish his poop journal and get his feelings in order is not *FUCKING PRODUCTIVE!*"

"Hey! I'm a published author—I've actually written

several books!”

“Oh,” The Chairmaker was taken aback. “Are they any good?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you telling me that because you’re looking for compliments, or because you really are a shitty writer? So then...is all this...” The Chairmaker spread his arms out to the room, “...in your new book?”

“Something like that.”

“So you should thank me then.”

“Why the hell would I thank you?!” John yelled.

“Because I’m probably the most interesting thing that’s happened to you so far. I take credit for that. Once it’s done. Once you’re out, you’re nothing. So fine. Go live your life. I don’t care what you do. Just tell me where Gerald is.”

“Well, you *can* make the book more interesting.”

“I think my part in it is done, John. Tell me and I’ll leave you alone—you have my word.”

“That’s not enough.”

“Do you need to take a shit?”

“Not yet...”

“John, I’ll go out right now and buy you all the laxatives your stomach desires. Do you want the name-brand stuff? *The premium shit*? I can get you that. Pills or liquid or whatever form...just tell me what you want. If that’s what it takes for you to get past this blockage stopping the both of us from moving forward.”

“I think...” The squiggles, the lines. The way everything intersected! It all had to mean *something*...John wanted to shout it to the man’s face, he wanted to confront him, but that bit of doubt kept his mouth from saying it. He *could* be wrong...but things could be worse if the both of them knew that. For the sake of adhering to his own narrative, where he couldn’t be proven wrong, John kept his curiosity on a tight leash. “...that I’m not done here, *yet*.”

The Chairmaker’s face expressed little but the rage churning in his tired eyes. His body stiffened. His jaw trembled as the lower lip was pulled back to reveal a set of

clenched teeth. Slowly, he said, “John. I’m finding it extremely difficult to not be hurting you right now,” he dipped down lower, “do you know that?” His hands clutched the tops of his knees. “I really want you to know that.”

John looked up at him with a blank stare.

“You got that?” The Chairmaker repeated himself, then kicked John in the cuffed ankle.

John contained the cry pain while and keeping his gaze at The Chairmaker.

“I want the hooker.”

“What? Fine. OK. We’ll give you a discount.”

“We?”

“*Me*. ME. I will arrange something. A few free runs—how about that? Will *that* satisfy you?”

“No...no,” a mischievous grin emerged from the side of John’s mouth. “I want her to be a part of *this* with me,” he jabbed a finger at the notebook.

“I’m not sure I follow, John.”

“I want her to go on an adventure with me.”

“That’s absurd, John. Firstly, I won’t allow it. Second of all, after your last interaction with her, you think she’d really want to go anywhere with you? What the hell are you getting at here? What do you really want? What are you stalling for? You’re just going to make me more upset, and I will continue to hurt you and then what?”

“Yeah...I want her to go on adventure with me...then we’re going to have kids...then I’m going to kill her and—”

“Oh enough already!”

“I’ve invested so much of myself into this. I’ve gotta come out of it with something. It’s only fair—don’t you think? And like you said, yourself: I’m not getting anything more out of you here.” A nasal, maniacal laughter burst from John’s mouth that quickly turned to a fit of tears.

The Chairmaker stared, tense and confused. Paralyzed from the shock of the imagery flashing though his head. He thought of the precise arrangement of John’s limbs scattered across the floor he now stood on. *The first time is not the hardest*. He wondered how many bullets he could fit into

John's skull before he would stop feeling the pain. The order in which he would obliterate various body parts. Questions in his head regarding the need to keep going just for the sake of it, where the point of no return would be, and if he were the personality type that would long for more once it was over and done with. There was an anger so deep that the mere idea of John breathing sickened him. He wanted to kneel down and feel for John's heartbeat, then get angry enough about it to reach into his chest and tear the heart out, no matter if he had the strength for it or not. He wanted to keep standing there, riling himself up. He needed to snap. *The first time...you don't know how it's going to make you feel. You have nothing to be scared off.* "I'll have to get back to you, John." The Chairmaker kept a straight face as he turned around and marched out of sight, disappearing down into the creaky stairwell.

"Is that it?!" John's head snapped to the side, hoping to catch a glimpse of The Chairmaker as he descended. He shouted at the retreating dark figure, "you can't just leave like—that's not how you end a chapter—there was no resolution! We haven't established the point of this entire thing yet! Have you no respect for art? Goddamn it—I didn't even get to do the...to say the...well," John sighed, accepting that the man could no longer hear him. "Where do you expect me to go from here?"

TALL TALES

John was adamant that the noose were to remain wrapped around his neck for the entire ride. The Collective Cowboy had considered yanking it off, before being reminded that he were to remain a passive character who doesn't get to make any important decisions. An itch developed on the back of John's neck where the rope rubbed against it. He made a promise to The Collective Cowboy, that if he were to remain patient, that he would let him have a scratch at it. As far as John knew, the scratch would never come. The Collective Cowboy felt increasingly more restless each time John tugged on the rope or stretched his neck. The bar of soap had almost completely melted through the pocket in John's jeans, seeping through the bottom of his pants and onto the seat. John knew he couldn't hide it, not unless he were to remain in the truck for the duration of the story, however long that may be. The driver wouldn't let this go. And why would he, with all the effort he spent on cleaning the truck? John could feel the walls closing in from all around him. This wasn't even his domain. There was only so much he could control now. The truck's cabin was suffocating. He could, once again, feel a pressure in his feet that kept him planted to the floor. No room for movement. He couldn't

even lift his boot to press on the imaginary brakes when the truck sped up. This would be it, he thought, when John would decide that The Collective Cowboy would have to die.

“What brings you here?” John said it first, just so that he could get it right this time.

What brings you here? The words echoed back to him

“What brings you here?” The Collective Cowboy asked. “How’s about we quit stalling and get this show going?”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

You what?

“Yeah, really good.”

“What are you talking about? What is good?”

“Did I not say that out loud?”

“Say what?!”

“Right.” John snapped to it, “Yes, I said that I feel good. Really good.”

“Well yeah I heard that part...I was talking about—”

“You’re not supposed to be hearing *that* part,” John cut him off.

“Alrighty then. I suppose you’re gonna tell me what you’re all so good about then, huh?”

“It all started when,” John’s head fell into the headrest. His eyes danced around the desert landscape when suddenly they caught sight of the side mirror. In it, far off in the distance, emerged a familiar-looking lake. In the lake was a boat. The boat bobbed around to the wake of the gentle ripples in the water. The ripples were caused by the—

“I’m sorry. Not sure how that got in there.”

The lake and the boat and the ripples in the water were never there to begin with. John blinked three times to make sure that whatever wasn’t there had disappeared for good. He blocked the view to the mirror with his hand and looked straight ahead.

“Where was I?”

“You were with a friend of yours.”

“Right,” John gathered his thoughts, “So, I was with a friend of mine. Came to talk big business. He’s a big boss of

things and what not. Big things, corporations and lots of people working for him. But don't worry about, I'll polish this up if it ever gets into second draft, this is a placeholder. Anyway, I've suspected something was wrong in the business we were doing so I came over to confront him about it. Man to man. I knew it wasn't going easy. But I was sure it was the right thing to do. So I did what I had to do. I came over, invited myself over, as a matter of fact. He sure was surprised to see me, but I had a feeling, from the way he looked at me, that he knew I was coming. And of course he had to know that I suspected all this, so I had to take it one step further and work my plan around all the information both him and I had on each other, hoping that the information I was now working on would surpass—"

"So far this means nothing..."

"You're not supposed to edit as you write, I'll have you know. I'll make sense of it later."

"Maybe start with the truth then? Work from there? Or are you gearing up for another long-winded metaphor that means nothing, but sounds intriguing enough to catch some peoples' attention? *Confusing people into thinking you're saying something meaningful will be short lived. Everyone gets found out eventually.*"

"How do you know that word?"

"I'm a cowboy...it appears that we don't get put in the same category as hicks and hillbillies, in the vocabulary department anyway. *Me-ta-phhhhhhhorrrr—has a nice ring to it.*"

Why not just write what happened?

"It might not be interesting enough, then I'm stuck with something that might not be interesting for the rest of my life."

"And a four page long metaphor for something so clear and simple as to what really happened is your solution?"

"Dumb people love understanding metaphors, that I can always count on. Shallow or not, the fact that they were able to decipher it will bring them satisfaction. A happy feeling, which they will then associate with my writing. A feeling

which they will spread like a disease to other like-minded people. It's worked so far, anyway."

"But have you considered ever writing something good?"

"Maybe, I don't think I'm ready for such a task just yet."

"What's so hard about trying?"

"You already know how I'm going to answer that!" John snapped. "Right then, where was I? Or you? Where was this thing, sure: I knew something he desperately needed to know. I wasn't gonna give it up so easily, given everything was on the line and what not..."

Are you going to give us any details whatsoever?

"Just listen. ~~This guy, man. I knew something, and I was trying to figure out if he was ready to be told what I had to tell him. Yeah, that was the reason I came over. I wanted to help.~~

~~"So I'm all there. We're at this fancy-looking penthouse in this fancy looking building. We're talking whatever it was that I came over to discuss but before I know it this fucker's got me tied to a chair. My chest pushed up against the frame. My hands tied to my sides. My ankles to the wooden legs. I'm a little confused. Betrayed, yet, not surprised. As I had somehow expected this. He comes at me with a big black baseball bat and starts the whole thing by bashing my face in. He walks around and starts working on my back. My arms are gone. The bones in my legs shatter to pieces. It feels like he's breaking every bone in my body and I'm taking it like a man. I—"~~

All of your bones, really?

"John, this is embarrassing," The Collective Cowboy added.

"Just listen! Fine, he beats me to the point where I bleed from an obscure part of my head that's never really shown and there's a sleek-looking cut across the bridge of my nose—will that do for now? So he's beating me up back and forth, next thing I know he's pulled his dick out. It's pointing in my direction. I don't need this. It's totally not what I expected to expect but had already formulated an escape plan for. I think...thought. Whatever.

“So what do I do? I thrash around violently. *FIGHT ME LIKE A MAN!* I yell at him, hoping to divert attention from the fact that my shaking is loosening the joints on this stupid chair. His pants are—”

Were?

“What difference does it make? Look at where we are—is time even a thing right now? Leave me alone. ~~His pants are around his ankles now. He waddles awkwardly toward me. He’s heated. Super heated. I don’t know what got him so angry and horny in the first place—it’s almost as if he knew exactly what it was that I wasn’t telling him. Even though I didn’t tell him. Maybe he’s a lot more like me that I previously thought. Anyway, right as he’s about to penetrate me from behind the chair falls apart. The back legs break and I fall over onto my face.~~”

John’s face lit up, “HA!” he brushed his index finger against the newly formed scab on the bridge of his nose, “so that’s how I got it! See, it’s all adding up. Next thing that happened was I twist and turn my legs until the rope loosens up around my ankles. I spring up. The armrests had broken off. Parts of them still tied to my forearms. I prime them. ~~Fighter’s stance. Ready for whatever this motherfucker wants to throw at me. He’s yelling and crying. He’s unsure of how to express the embarrassment of being unable to tuck his erection back into his pants. I take the opportunity to lunge at him. One armrest to the chin; the other to his forehead. I keep at this until he’s down on the ground and I’m beating his face to a mushy pulp. The old man’s still got some life left in him...~~”

“ENOUGH!”

“...but I—”

“Of course you did. John, I’m ashamed of you. What do you say I just turn this truck around and take us back to that nice lake of yours?”

“But the lake isn’t real...”

“And that scar on your hand?”

“I could’ve cut it anywhere, it doesn’t matter.”

“John, tell me the truth.”

Fine. I didn't shit my pants

The Collective Cowboy lifted his hands off of the wheel, leaving the truck to drive itself. He made a fist with his left hand, leaving the index finger to stick out. With his right hand up, he pinched his nose and glanced at John. "If I told you, from the bottom of my heart, that I smell no shit? Could you say the same thing?"

"Yes."

The Collective Cowboy stuck a pinkie finger into each ear. The rest of the fingers played an imaginary flute out from the sides of his head. He spoke, "and if I swore to you, that I could hear no shit whatsoever. Would you do the same?"

Yes.

"And when I cover my eyes, John, do you promise to see the same amount of nothing which I see?"

"Every bit of it."

"A n d w h e n I c l o s e m y — — ,
— — — — — ?"

" — "

"Well then, John, in that case then I'd say you have a problem." The Collective Cowboy crossed his arms over his chest. The truck drove on. "Do you know what this monkey does?"

"Of course I know what it does, I thought of it, didn't I?"

"And are you content with that? Are you going to be another useless monkey like this one here, or will you spread your wings and fly?"

"I'm gonna fly. I'll be a flying monkey!" I shout

"That's goddamn right, you're no no-shit-doing monkey, you're a gettin'-shit-done monkey! Spread those monkey wings and fly!"

John spread his arms out as wide as his joints would permit. One arm out the window; the other in front of the driver's face, obstructing his vision. John's face became drenched in enthusiasm as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "What the hell!" John opened his eyes to find that he was still in his seat, "it's not working. Why isn't it

working!” he shouted, then stuck his body out of the window, trying to capture the wind with his hands.

“It’s not that easy, John.”

You think a monkey can fly with all those thoughts clouding his brain?

Heavy thoughts make for some heavy clouds. What are your clouds made out of?

“My seats, John.”

“Oh...right.” John tucked his arms back in. He focused on the open palm of his right hand until a six-shooter materialized into existence, then aimed at the driver’s head. The hammer pulled back in harmony with the squeeze of the trigger, coming down in a swift jerk and snap that startled nobody in the shiny red truck. The Collective Cowboy’s skull opened up on the far side, blanketing the driver’s side window with its contents.

The truck kept rolling at full speed. John spread his arms out again and began to feel pressure build up underneath his monkey wings. He closed his eyes to feel the cool desert wind on his face. John did everything he thought he was supposed to, yet, the monkey still couldn’t fly.

INTERLUDE: THE PROJECTIONIST

I don't know how to talk about what happened, there wasn't exactly time to sit down and analyze the situation. I don't know how to start it and I don't know how it will end. All I know is that you're in the truck of my car suffering through your last few moments of your meaningless existence and I'll get to do that thing guys like me have always fantasized about doing. I wish I could tell you where we're going. But I can't. I won't. The less you know the lower we keep the risk of you persuading me to change my mind. Even thinking about telling you anything fills my head with uncertainty. I dread thinking about the look on your face and the words your dying mouth would try to say: *it could've gone differently*. Shit, I can feel it—I'm losing my edge. Since when am I this fickle? This city and everyone in it is several miles back now; our past, it seems, is not. It's sitting right there in the back seat, your surrogate, burning a hole into the back of my skull with her judgemental eyes, then grabbing at whatever bits fall out to analyze them. I can't look back at her. Acknowledgement of her presence right now is basically an invitation to her asking that question she keeps asking. And tonight, with what happened and with what's about to happen, I get the anxious feeling I

might finally answer. I'm now realizing that I may not be in as much control as I always thought myself to be. The job is done and all I'm doing now is making sure it stays done. And I choose to do it here, like this, *with you*—and why not? If I really set my mind to it, I'm sure it would feel almost as good as the real thing.

I act as if I'm unaware of what's going on inside her head, the conclusions she's drawing. I am aware, at this moment now more than ever. She's looking for a slip-up. I don't know if she knows this is my first time. Was I being that obvious about it? Will she learn from it as much as I have? What will I do? Oh how will I act? How do I feel? Like you actually care. Jesus, how stupid do they think I am? Her wanting to tag along with me, with *you* here? As if she has nothing better to do with her evening. Especially given the occurrences earlier. As if she doesn't mind tagging along for the ride with all that shit in her hair. I can smell it on her; I know she can smell it on herself. I know that the disgust I feel is a fraction of what she feels right now. But she's with me now, fighting it, just to be here in this car with me and you. I hope you thought it was for a damn good reason, at least. I assure you, it's not. Let me count the ways in which I've been ahead of your nonsense all of these years. An orphan? Yeah, right. Auntie May's got a big mouth, and it's safe to say her opinion of you may have rubbed off on me, hmm, if only there had been a way to avert all that. A name change leaves a paper trail—how long did you think that one would hold out for? How long until I was to start asking myself all of these questions? How long until I wouldn't care if I were to get an answer any longer? You weren't going to tell me anything; I think that's become clear by now. So here, tonight, I'm saying everything I want to say and that's going to be the end of it.

Did you honestly think you would get away with this? You think she'll bring us closer together? Is that *really* what you want? Where did you get her, anyways? What's with all the rules, why the special treatment? Why in the hell did I just put a bullet through your chest for her...*because* of her?

I am in control of it, of myself. You would know that if you paid an ounce of attention instead of hovering around *me* like a loser. Eavesdropping on the going-ons, spying on me. Are you looking for a way in? Too late—that door's closed.

While you lay there in my trunk, bleeding out, I want you to think long and hard about your *own* life decisions, do you talk about that to her? The things you should've told me. *Her*—this Christina. This hooker with a mind of gold? She who is supposed to be so smart, but not smart enough to hide that look on her face right now. Or maybe she wants me to see that look. I don't think I know. What am I rambling on about?

What did she tell you, huh? What in the hell got her into his car with me? Who's the babysitter here? *Me* or *her*? She could've been more subtle about it, you know? Maybe then I wouldn't have guessed something was off. But now I despise you even more.

Knock knock, Gerald, anyone there?

Shit, how do I start this off...

Man, I do feel rusty. Perhaps this was the wrong night to give this another try...

I lose my composure for just a moment and my fingers slip off the steering wheel and immediately I hear a curious sigh come from the back seat. She's not letting off. What does she want to know? What do I have to tell her? Do I have to tell her anything? Is there an endgame or are you just curious to see where it goes? You're not doing this for me, that I know for sure. If anything good ever comes out of this...nothing will—no point even thinking about it.

I'm getting sick of this look she's giving me. Why do I have to be the one stressing over what she might think about me, about what I'm going to do to you once I pick out some arbitrary exit at this desert road and dispose of what's left?

There it is. Not too far now—the turnoff I didn't know I was looking for.

Here goes.

* * *

He just killed a guy—was that his first? How are you supposed to tell these sorts of things?

This was never in the book.

Or was it?

How I wish you never got involved in this in the first place. It was because of me—isn't that what you said? I was doing fine before you came along. I was my own man, making my own decisions. You're the one that got bored or lonely or angry or whatever it was that you felt that you decided that finally something had to get done, anything.

Why do I have to take you so far out? I could've dumped you miles back—the ditches are endless. Shit, I could've left your body at the hotel, I sure as hell left a pool of your blood there, the gunshot was heard regardless. What the hell difference does me coming out all this way make? That's really it then, isn't it? I came here to talk with you. I came here for an answer. What a better way to have a chat than when I'm in control of all the circumstances. We're doing it on my terms, at a place I choose. At a time I chose to do it at. She can be the witness to it all.

She can be the messenger, for now. And from what I imagine, for ever.

It's making more sense the more I think about it. She should've known, if she had really wanted to help, that to help guys like me you can't ever let us know that you're doing it.

Guys like me...guys like me. Lady, you're dealing with a turtle here. No, even worse—a hedgehog. So back off!

Your blood in my trunk now—another something else I missed—what a mess this will be. What do I clean it out with? Make a mental note. Maybe I'm not as smart as I thought I was. I know I can be a hot-head, but I feel that it helps me make quick decisions. Making any decision is always better than no decision, that's how I always saw it. I can't say the same for you. When was the last time you took control of your own life?

* * *

What have you gotten yourself into...

Goddamn it, these are bad people. There are no two ways about it. It's simple. So fucking simple. Yet here I am staring at the back of this sociopath's head, feeling guilty about not being able to connect with him on an emotional level. Feeling useless for not being able to help him. I don't even know what the hell he needs from me but the optimist in me tells that I can give it to him.

Optimist? Or did I mean opportunist?

Maybe he's what I needed. I'm sick in my own way I guess. I'm fighting the notion that perhaps he's not actually a bad person.

Maybe he's just like everybody else: a victim of circumstance. What a cop-out. I'm a hack for even thinking that. It's the end of the road—get your thoughts straight now.

Where do you start?

I'm running out of ideas.

My restlessness is at an all-time high. She knows it. She can smell and hear and see it. It makes me sick knowing that I almost actually want her to see it. I can't take it any longer. Fuck it—I do need to talk to somebody. How do I start? How do I do it when I know that you're the one that set this whole thing up? How do I win? How the fuck do I beat you? Does it even matter any longer?

Is this it? Am I admitting defeat?

There's my exit up ahead now—a dirt road running through some canyons, nothing special. I pull a hard right and head east, directly into the sunset. With every swerve in the road, every opening in the canyon reveals the blinding sun, pulsating in and out, that slows me down with each bright flash. My hand alternates between acting as a secondary visor and helping to steer me through this winding road safely. Every stretch of downhill is met with an uphill that goes on for twice as long. The rock face becomes shorter as I near the top. Maybe this is exactly

what I needed: a long-winding road, some time to myself, a solitary rock face, a clear head, the calm sky, my own thoughts, a deep breath, a long stretch, a fresh view, a different feeling.

I'm close now.

A different perspective. Maybe she is helping after all, maybe talking won't even be necessary. I'm feeling better already.

I stop at the plateau. With this sun burning my eyes I can barely make out the faint outline of this place where I grew up. Looking out to this city without lakes I suddenly realize this is the furthest I've ever strayed from it. This city where I feel so familiar. This city that I'm looking right now is *not* my city. This is just a faint blur. A blank slate. A completely unrecognizable, shapeless blob. From here I don't see a single crack in the pavement. I don't see a familiar tree, or a lamp or a postbox or a coffee shop or a face or a car or a park or a memory. This is not my city. Right now, this little blur on the horizon is whatever I need it to be.

This city, you: my most prized projection. My masterpiece.

I hold that thought and step out of the car, walk around to the trunk and rest my hands on the lid. I look out to the sun, fighting to keep my eyes open for however long this will take. I hold on to everything I've said as I open the trunk and see the shape of your body. Your face is nothing but a faint outline of a head that pulsates in flashes of blue, red, and purple circles.

The details will reappear soon enough.

I need do this quick.

I throw your limp body to the ground and it kicks up a thick cloud of dust that surrounds us in a bright apricot-orange-coloured blanket, shielding us from the car, from her, from the city. I pause to get my breathing just right. When I feel in control again I pull my gun out and yank the action back. The first round slips into the chamber. My finger hugs the trigger. For a brief moment your face appears on this canvas of the blue and red and purple and that's when I let it

loose.

One is all it takes.

I win.

The back door opens and I watch the sun project her silhouette onto the bright cloud of dust when she steps out to face me. She walks towards me; I meet her a third of the way there. She's still picking flakes of dry cum out of her scalp when the dust settles. Her face takes shape, on it, I see a look that makes me uneasy. The sun is almost completely below the horizon now, appearing as nothing but a faint red and orange blip. Behind her, the city without lakes takes shape underneath the rising moonlight and my nervousness is peaking. I feel it eating away at my composure. Her eyes grow larger and more inviting. Her shoulders droop and her limp hands fall by her side.

She waits for me to look her in the eyes. I give in. "Gerald..." she finally breaks the silence, "...is there anything you want to talk about?"

SATURDAY

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

Perhaps it was from stress from moving up in his job, the anticipation of having the thing he sought for so long finally being in front of him, that had caused his morning ritual of flexing his muscles and yelling at the mirror while naked to become interrupted by the reminiscences of his past life. More specifically, the events that had led him to being the complete man he thought himself to be now. He felt an immeasurable sense of pride overcome him while his fingertips grazed the cold steel of the pistol he now had the privilege of tucking into his belt. No longer was he the guy who sat around waiting for something interesting to happen; he was now *the man with a gun* who sat around waiting for something interesting to happen.

An artist is an artist, and so when it comes to facing irony, regardless of the circumstances, one should embrace it, appreciate it, take advantage of it, and ultimately, own it before it makes a joke out of you. When The Driver developed balding at a young age, it didn't deter him from his dream of becoming a hairdresser. It only drove him further. He allowed it to become his inspiration. It was a fight he wanted to fight. A fight he had already lost, one could think of it that way, but to him it was a sign of relief.

A release of pressure. He was now free to go about his ways and pursue the life of an artist with zero expectations. He were to make life itself a piece of art. And every quirk, misstep, and bad decision were nothing more than another stroke of paint on his ever-expanding canvas.

Unlike his parents, The Driver hadn't even once questioned his sexuality when at twenty, against the will of his parents, he enrolled in the hairdressing program at the local community college. On a few occasions he would hear girls talk about how sexy they found it when a man could get in touch with his feminine side. How fast they would throw themselves at such a man, had he ever existed. That wasn't the main factor in determining his career choice, but it served as another valid reason he could present to his parents when defending his life decisions, or at the very least, his sexuality. He had a solid case, nobody wanted their son *would* to be a loser who couldn't get a girlfriend at his age.

The Driver felt more alienated with every miscommunication and passive-aggressive argument he had to endure. His pain of being misunderstood and unsupported was all he thought about. He had no idea what to do with it all until one night he saw a famous quote carved into the door of a bathroom stall that summarized all of his pain and misery in a way that finally made sense to him.

The pain kept coming in small doses each day he worked as a barista to pay for his education. His parents allowed him to live with them as long as he needed to, as long as there was no talking back when they reminded him about his poor life choices. Many nights he thought about running away from home. Occasionally, he would pack up a few bags with his belongings, while the adults were asleep, leave the home, and walk around the block a few times. It was the rush he needed when doubt about his life choices would be too difficult to deal with.

There were nights when The Driver's parents would have guests over for dinner, and he would sit at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping, waiting for that moment when the

topic would inevitably shift to the going-ons of their offspring. *He's going to business school next semester*, he would hear. *He's going to be a lawyer, just like his father*. Different nights. Different friends. Different careers. *Oh he's just working now—trying to help his folks out by saving money so we won't have to pay for all of his school*.

What a good kid, they would always say, *I wish ours were like that. Right now all we hear is: I want to be an actor or I want to be a writer or I want to save the planet...*

Oh it's just a phase—believe me—ours had it, too.

By the age of twenty-three, The Driver had whipped up enough lattes to get him through the first term at the community college. At that point, his parents were willing to see through the unnerving hilarity of it all and finally sensed that perhaps he had some idea of what he was doing.

But the class was a let-down and by the time he changed his mind about his career choice the refund period had expired. Lack of hands-on experience aside, the other students were not the swimsuit models he had envisioned. Nevertheless, he had an easy time bonding with his peers, as most of them had to endure some sort of struggle to get them where they were. They too were rebels, outcasts. Artists willing to do whatever it took for the world to see them as they were, no matter the cost. Having finally made friends of the opposite sex, he could get insider information about what they *really* looked for in a man. But the answers never gave him satisfaction. It almost seemed as if everybody had different wants and needs and basing his entire identity on *sensitive artist* didn't leave much room for growth, not without compromising the friendships he'd worked so hard to build. Reinventing himself was not an option. He was stuck.

There was one prospect, though. She had blue highlights and a lisp-inducing tongue piercing to express her individuality. She heard plenty about his life, and shared enough of her own, for some sort of assured romantic connection to potentially form between them. But no amount of listening to the bands she liked could keep her

interested for long enough before someone with more personality came along.

The idea of becoming a hairdresser began to lose its appeal.

Rule #4: A Man Does Whatever Makes Him Happy

The blue highlights escaped his mind at the sight of the fur coat coming closer to him. As slowly she could, while still technically moving, Christina strolled out of her apartment building. Her hands tugged at the ends of the scarf, concealing the rash around her neck. Not wasting a moment for pleasantries, such as acknowledging the human being in the front seat, she planted herself in the rear bench and slammed the door shut behind her. She immediately crossed her arms; her legs followed. Her mouth kept a perpetual frown for everybody to see. The sedan rolled straight ahead; her glossy, wind-dried eyes gazed in every direction but.

Through each flash of the constant street lamps and traffic lights, Christina watched his face get washed over with white, red, and green before disappearing back into non-existence. Between every longer streak of neon lights, his eyes could be seen more clearly in the rear-view mirror, fixated, watching the same flashes of colour gleaming in hers. The only times The Driver would pay attention to the road were in those moments of his non-existence, where she couldn't see him for who he was.

The Driver's phone rang, interrupting his moment of introspection. He was startled at first, then the feeling of impending disappointment overtook him when he saw who was calling. The phone rang an annoying two more times before The Driver answered it. He said nothing in wait for the voice on the other end to speak first.

"Did you really call her a cunt?"

Not the first words The Driver was expecting to hear, he glanced over at Christina and bit his lip, shook his head, and out of sheer guilt, saved the anger for when he turned back to the road. "Yes, but—"

“Jesus, boy—do you realize how disrespectful that is, calling girls cunts, left and right?”

“It was only once!” The Driver yelped, “besides, I don’t see the big deal—I hear you calling people cunts all the time.”

“Goddamn it, boy, monkey see, monkey do—like children you all are! Monkey children! Stupid monkey children. I’m going to be straight to the point here, I had only two things to say to you, now that’s turned to four and we haven’t much time. I’ll be brief: one, I don’t like the tone you’re taking with me, not one bit. Two: you never, *ever* call a girl a cunt, unless, of course, she were acting like a cunt. But it takes years or experience to recognize when the moment is right, otherwise it will blow up in your face. Three: I get to call a cunt whomever I see fit because I’m Irish.”

“But I’m Irish, too!” The Driver pleaded. Christina couldn’t help but be amused by the one sided conversation she was hearing. She felt her mood lighten up.

“You’re not Irish—you’re a half breed born in America. Have all the pride about your roots that you want, it’s not gonna make you any less of a phoney, ye cunt.” The voice took a minute to get its thoughts straight, “...and *four*: do you happen to remember what day it is, and how this day is almost at its end and a certain task we do on this day has not yet been completed?”

The Driver took a long, disgruntled breath before answering, on his exhale, “...yes.”

“And what day could that be?”

“Saturday.”

“Yes, it is,” the voice momentarily lost its vigour. His tone softened up, “it’s been three days, how have we still not found him...”

“Are you asking me—because I haven’t—“

“I know it’s not your job, but it would really be of great help if you were to look. You are, in one way or another, part of the family—ain’t ya?”

“Just a half-breed, apparently.”

“Oh, quit being a pansy, boy, *he who thinks he deserves to throw the sacred word around*. I’ve had enough of you for now. Pass her the phone.”

The Driver attempted to mask the embarrassment on his face with an overly sarcastic scoff as he handed the phone off to Christina. With a limp backward-flick of his wrist the phone slid off the palm of his hand and fell into Christina’s lap. With a curiously optimistic tone, she spoke, “yes?”

“Hi, honey.”

“Hi?” She figuratively scratched her head.

“You’re not a cunt. I just wanted to remind you of that again. You did the right thing by telling me, don’t think less of yourself for it.”

She felt an uneasy sense of relief emanate through her body, as if being cured of a disease she didn’t know she had in the first place. “Umm, thanks!”

“He doesn’t get to call anybody a cunt...I just want you to know that.”

“Gotcha, are you...?”

“No, honey, things ain’t been too good around here. I worry more and more with each day. Are you sure that you told me everything? You absolutely sure? You were distressed, perhaps you missed something the first time around.”

“Yea...yes, in front of this client’s house—that was the last place I saw him. In *his* car. You know this.”

“I know. I know, just wanted to...nothing else? You know how I—“

“There’s nothing else, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, Christina. How are you holding up in there? I know I haven’t been as attentive as I should be lately, I just want to make sure you’re doing alright. Are you happy? How’s the client—he hasn’t hit you or anything, has he?”

Christina glanced over at The Driver, biting her lip.

“...He doesn’t seem to be one to hit girls, this one. I know him from some way back, he’s a good one to hang on to, gots some money on him, too. You’ll get used to him.”

“I can’t say that I’m a fan of the guy...”

“Less than usual? That’s a shame. Things will get better, I promise. Just hang in there for me, alright?”

“Fine.”

“Be good, kiddo. Pass the phone back to him.”

Christina threw the phone over the passenger-side head cushion and left The Driver to fumble around while driving to try to dig it out. He pulled over, growled at Christina, then reached into the passenger footwell for the phone.

“Saturday, you were lined up for it. Haven’t met him myself but hear he’s quite a character—no sense in complaining now, just get it over with—you know what to do.”

“It’s not my job!”

“It is right now, watch your tone with me.”

“Let the others do it.”

“*The others* are helping me out with something more important. You got a problem, kid, you want to have a chat with Uncle Tom about this? You know what he’s gonna say”

“I—“

“He’s gonna say that thing he loves to say to everybody... as if the guys needs any more catchphrases...What’s he gonna—“

“Do—“

“DO YOUR GODDAMN JOB!” The voice interrupted, breathed heavily into the speaker a few times, and hung up.

The Driver hyperventilated, hoping to tame the beast he felt was going to explode out of him at any moment. He thought he had it under control, until he heard a subdued snicker come from the backseat. He burst and let out a snappy, tourette-like “FUCK!” at the top of his lungs, and chucked his phone at the floor. The sedan rolled on. The endless flashes of colourful neon no longer provided him with moments of introspection. He ignored the gentle ins-and-outs of the white and the red and the green all the way until he arrived at his first stop of the impending night. The passenger swiftly exited the car.

As he pulled away, The Driver began to question the sanctity of his seven golden rules.

*Rule #4: ~~A-Man-Does-Whatever-Makes-Him-Happy~~ A
Man Does His Job*

MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

As far as she was concerned, Christina was a superstar. Her online fame grew larger than she could have ever predicted. It took less than two years for her to transition from being stuck at home in front of a camera trying out outfits and toys her fans had bought her to deciding what foreign language travel book to buy next, week to week. Her vacations were endless; her companions were not the serials murderers or rapists she had initially presumed them to be. Christina found solace in the idea that her new ventures shared a great number of similarities with her past career, except now she had more freedom than ever. She constantly reminded herself of how much she hated all the paperwork, how cramped her office was, how nothing she read in scientific journals or heard in seminars ever really inspired her to become better at her job. She loved that, aside from the occasional souvenir or extravagant bouquet of flowers, her work didn't follow her home any longer. If anything, she was doing more good to the same sort of men which she'd usually find sitting across from her in that little office than before. There was no longer any pressure, from either party, to perform, to maintain any sort of persona, and best of all, to reach any sort of climax. When her new clients wanted to

talk, they would simply start talking, sometimes it would even lead to some sort of resolution. Sometimes it would lead to nothing at all, and that was alright with them, as there as no plan to fix anything to begin with. Seldom would the sessions actually lead to intercourse; now and then Christina would even be the one to initiate it.

The one thing she hated to admit the most was that she found herself to be content with it all. It was not the life she had picked out. It was not the life she had worked so hard for, or in any sense, earned. The discomfort ate away at her; nothing seemed to add up, yet, everything was, in every sense, perfect.

Sometimes she even confided in her companions. It took her a couple bottles of wine over the course of the day and the fresh breeze of sea air off the coast of Sicily, but eventually she broke down, and for the first time showed real regret about throwing all her life's work away for something she knew was fleeting.

It came down to two outfits for today's session: a standard burglar outfit, complete with a black turtleneck and a balaclava, or head-to-toe camouflage that arrived three sizes too big for Christina. "Pick any one," he had them laid out on the kitchen counter for her to choose, "just be invisible. You get the idea."

"Ohhh boy," she sighed, for once more concerned with the immediate decision to be made in front of her rather than the strangeness of the situation she found herself in. "These are...conflicting," she put one hand on the black sweatpants, the other on the camouflage, and pinched the material of each outfit to feel for one that would be less abrasive against her bare skin. "I'm a little...conflicted."

"We haven't much time, don't waste it."

"Well, technically," she hated where her enthusiasm was taking her, "you've already paid for the whole night."

"No," Thursday pointed at the clock on the microwave, it read 19:45. Christina looked at him, then back at the clock, then again back at him, still no idea why any of it was

relevant. She stared at him and shrugged. “we only have 7 minutes until it starts, get dressed.”

“The colour of this camo doesn’t even match the kitche —“

“Hurry up, goddamn it!”

Her instructions were to remain quiet, stay put, and keep out of sight. The kitchen counter created a barrier between her and Thursday, where he sat on the couch with a companion. She kept out of his line of sight, peeking out now and then to sneak a look. Christina regretted her decision to pick the camouflage outfit over the burglar get-up when the cheap material rustled with her every movement, provoking Thursday to break his concentration and yell at her to quiet down.

“You’re not here yet!” he shouted, “how fucking hard is that to understand? I can see your head poking out. Get down. Stay down!” She fell to the floor. “Do you get it?”

“Yes?”

“Wrong!” he jumped up from the couch and stomped over to the kitchen, leaned over the counter and stared down at Christina, “wrong! I really need you to get it. Look!” He pointed his finger at the microwave clock, it read 19:59, her head stretched back toward her spine to get a better look at the microwave display, “we’re already behind schedule!”

“Well...sorry!” she cried out.

“Don’t be sorry! Just don’t be here!”

“I don’t get it? Should I just leave?”

“What? No. Obviously not—you’re here to work, to help me. Just be a fly on the wall and shut up, please.”

“Fine.” She dipped her head back down and rubbed the back of her sore neck.

“Don’t look, just listen...you’re not supposed to see us here yet.”

“Us?”

“Christina!”

“OK...ok.”

* * *

Christina, bored out of her mind, lay on the floor watching specs of dust fly off the ceiling fan above her head. Thursday sat on his recliner with a bottle of bourbon in his hand mumbling something to himself. He observed the smooth lines and creases of the shiny-skinned companion on the couch across the room from him. A few rapid gulps out of his bottle provided him with the boost he needed to get on with the session.

“That day. That *Thursday*, you were supposed to be at work. *We* finally had some time alone.” The bottle rolled out of his limp hand and struck the hardwood floor beneath him.

The sound startled Christina. She rolled onto her elbows and shuffled to the edge of the counter to see what happened.

“Stay put,” he wrestled his old body out of the recliner and dragged himself to the couch, “I finally had a moment alone...with her.”

He stood in front of the couch now, staring down at his quiet companion, while stroking the upper part of his thigh. His hand closed in on his groin, then massaged the area in slow, calculated circles. His eyes remained closed. The noises coming from his droopy mouth cycled between slow moans and deep growls. He blinked several times to catch his focus, then followed the smooth lines of the companion down from the feet all the way to the head. He paused, turned around, and sat down on the far side of the couch. With his ass planted in the cushions, he stretched one arm out and rested it on top of the couch, only inches away from the lifeless body sitting to his right.

Christina waited impatiently on the kitchen floor. She planted her sweaty hands against the cold kitchen tile and tested the firmness of their grip. Primed and ready to tuck herself back into the kitchen should she upset the man again. She closed her eyes and lent her ears to the sounds coming from the other side of the counter.

“*She won’t be back for a while*, I told her, *it will be ok*,” his restless fingers pulled at the cushion seam. Christina pushed herself further out, barely catching a sight of the

couch. "I told her it would be alright, that she had nothing to worry about. She had no idea what was happening—I don't blame her." Another few inches, she spotted a knee that was quickly moving out of view.

"Shh," he heard her.

Christina lay frozen in wait for Thursday to get up, storm over, and yell at her. The ceiling fan turned a couple hundred more times, but nobody came. She didn't hear a sound. The green digits on the microwave changed several times before she finally took a chance and asked "who was she?"

"Quiet," his eyes kept straight ahead while he kept the other end of the couch in his peripherals, "you're not supposed to be here. Not *yet*."

She took his lack of rage as an opportunity to get a better look. Then he moved again. "Goddamn it," she muttered, and in an act of defeat, rested her heavy head on the kitchen floor to ease the tension in side of her neck.

"I don't know what it was," Thursday turned his head toward the prop, "it just hit me all of a sudden. No," he shut his eyes and rubbed his face with a free hand. "That's a lie, it hit me many years ago, today though...that day, I mean... that's when I decided I couldn't control it any longer. It was odd, the way it came to me. It really did feel like a decision. Usually there would be some sort of fight, an internal struggle. I would hate myself for even thinking it. But that Thursday I simply thought; *yes, yes I should*, and it just felt right. You know?"

"Uhhh."

"Hey," Thursday spotted some blonde curls peeking from behind the kitchen counter, "you there?"

"Yes?"

"You're not asleep, are you?"

"No."

"So, what do you think?"

"I uhh...really don't know what's going on. Am I still not here?"

"No, you're not. This is really hard for me, I want you to understand that."

"I get it, but you're not making it easy for me to—"

"Fine. Fine! Just...do what you have to. Please just don't get in my way. Try to stay out of sight and be discreet."

"Ok."

Equally curious and repulsed, Christina watched as Thursday caressed the smooth beige thigh of the blow-up doll sitting on the couch next to him. Standing, examining him from the far side of the counter, her eyes followed his wrinkled hand squeeze the latex leg, stretch down around the ball of the knee, wrapping his fingers around it, then squeezing until the sound of screeching plastic broke his concentration. He moved further into the leg. With each squeeze, each slow stroke, his eyes filled with more desire. His eyelids drooped. His other hand grabbed at the couch cushion in front of his crotch and tugged at it every passing stroke.

"I know she would see me looking at her this way, she never said anything so nobody ever really made a big deal about it. I couldn't get her out of my head. I would think about touching her thighs like this wherever I went." He released the cushion and stroked his inner thigh. His right hand took a firmer grip on the doll, raising it up over the couch seat, enough to rotate the lifeless body around, and brought it up to where their eyes could meet. "I'd see her looking back at me...in a way that, well, I guess in hindsight, wasn't as inviting as I'd remember it, but it wasn't exactly repulsion. She would've said something otherwise, no? Well, she didn't, so I kept on looking—I saw something there, I know it. You know?"

Before saying a word, Christina raised an index finger and brought it up to her chest, asking for permission to speak. His trance-like state gave her question no satisfaction. "Am I still not talking?" She went ahead anyway.

"What. No," he shook his head and rubbed his eyes, "I just don't want you to talk when..." he nodded at the blow-up doll, "...you know."

“Uhuh, it’s kind of hard for me to tell when *that* isn’t.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Like I was just saying earlier...you know?”

“Know what? There’s not much to work from here.”

“I told you that I’d see her looking back at me, that’s something. What could it have meant?”

Christina brought her hand up to her face, just far enough so to conceal the uncontrollable rolling of her eyes, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Look,” she leaned up on the counter, gathered her thoughts, and said, “it means...I don’t even know who or what you’re talking about, if you want me to really help you you’re gonna have to let these things out.”

“The details don’t matter.”

“Yes!” she argued, “they do!”

“Isn’t all this in a textbook somewhere...like a general list of answers to this and that which you could just recite to make me feel a little better about this whole thing?”

“Not really, besides, if such a book had even existed, and worked in a manner which you just described, there wouldn’t really be a need for people like me.”

“Prostitutes?”

“Whichever.” She replied snidely.

“Fine, Christina,” he patted the leg of the doll, “it was a girl, does that help.”

“No shi—,” she stopped herself. “That doesn’t even...fine, you know what,” she paused to let him think she was actually trying, “maybe you just saw whatever you wanted to see, does that work for you?”

“But when I looked—“

“*Maybe*, you wanted something, her, so bad that any evidence pointing to a resolution not ideal to your desires was quickly thrown out because it didn’t fit into your theory of...wait—confirmation bias—there ya go!”

Thursday looked down at the floor, dejected. His hand slipped off the latex leg and fell to his side.

Christina leaned in, “confirmation bias is when—“

“Yes, goddamn it, I know what the hell confirmation bias is!” Thursday grabbed a leg of the doll in each hand and sat it into his lap. He wrapped his hands around its lower back and pushed it closer into his body, grinding its lifeless torso against the top of his leg. “Maybe, fine! Perhaps it was never there to begin with. Sure, I admit, I made it all up in my head. But you have to understand, Christina, I just really, really wanted it. Real bad. There was nothing I wanted more. Can you understand that?”

“Listen,” Christina found herself putting more effort into the session than she had originally set herself up for, “passion—it’s a wild thing. Passion makes us love, or obsess, it can make our dreams come true or even hurt others. Passion can drive you crazy—it usually always does. It’s a beast that’s always lurking underneath and the most you can ever do sometimes is simply be aware of it, of when it might strike next. It will always try to blindside you, and if you let it—it will win. It will destroy you. I mean, geez—you think this is weird? I had a guy who was hopelessly passionate about staircases—I shit you not. Stairs—he had pictures, some framed, on every square inch of the walls at his apartment. He learned woodworking, for fucks sake, turned his entire bedroom—slept on the couch in the living room—turned his entire bedroom into a workshop where he would design and build miniature staircases. I thought it was kind of endearing, really, at the time. Kind of hoped to see a future for him in interior design or something of the sort. Perhaps an architect, who knows. I tried to encourage him, even, I wanted him to do good in life. I remember the bruises all over his body, he wouldn’t tell me where they came from.”

“What happened to him?”

“Well, the passion was not of the sort which would normally be associated with ambition, in the traditional sense. It was a fetish, actually—climacophilia—the guy was turned on by falling down stairs, took him forever to get comfortable enough with me to tell me. All this time, when he rambled on about the intricacies of the materials, the

styles, the heights, the patterns, railings, the...whatever else he told me about stairs, it was all to do with designing the perfect staircase which he would've at some point thrown himself down, dick in hand, probably. He usually wore a helmet, for the recreational fall here and there, but this one, he promised, he would go without. Raw, as bareback as you could get, as he put it. He might die, if he ever gets around to it, but he might also have the most extraordinary experience of his lifetime. But hey—that's passion, so if you want to go ahead and stick your dick into that doll of yours—go for it, go crazy—let your passion run wild. It sounds like you really wanted it, and if you did get it, as I've yet to see—was it worth it? Because think of it this way: you got exactly what you wanted, and how many people can say the same thing about their lives? There's your silver lining, if anything.

Hey!" it dawned on her, "this is a little awkward to ask now, but what *is* your name?"

Thursday was taken aback by the question; Christina was taken aback by his reaction. "You expect me to tell you, after all *that*?"

"After what—what's the big deal."

"Sharing such personal information about another client, that's extremely unprofessional, I think I'm going to retain some privacy, knowing now how you deal with such delicate information."

"Oh come on, there's no oath of confidentiality to swear in as a hooker. There's no licence to lose! Ha!"

"There's still the matter of respect, is that a concept you're familiar with?"

"Look, I wasn't trying to—I only did it to make a point—to help you. That is what I'm here for, after all." Having inspired a newly found sense of confidence in herself, Christina couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth. It was almost as if she wanted to do a good job for once. She released the tension building up in her body and put back on her listening ears back on. Her cold blue eyes invited themselves to conversations. Her shoulders fell to

her sides. The joints in her elbows became limp. Then it hit her out of nowhere, and she was not ready to fight the words that came out of her mouth next: "...I'm sorry, can we continue?"

Without saying a word, Thursday shut his eyes and left his fingers to wander around the inside of the doll's legs. A twitch developed on the side of his mouth that quickly turned to a series of uncontrollable spasms. A deep, trembling growl grew from the bottom of his throat and intermittently burst through a crack in his lips. His fingers inched closer and closer toward the untouched hole.

When he was finally inside, Christina asked, "who was she?"

Thursday froze, his head snapped toward Christina with deadly precision, "you know who she is! You know goddamn well who she is, you bitch! But you're not here yet!"

His words pushed her against the stove behind her until she hit the back of her head against the microwave. She couldn't find it in herself to say a word. Not a peep left her mouth as he continued yelling.

"NO! You're not here, so get out! GET OUT! YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE! GET THE FUCK OUT OF THIS HOUSE NOW!"

ON THE OTHER SIDE

“Somebody knocked!” Skinny Russian’s enthusiasm lasted a lame few moments before a weary sense of suspicion came over him. “Nobody knocks, who in their right mind would be so nice to me?” his self-loathing stepped in. The knock came again, harder this time, and sent the door swinging open far enough for the chain lock to engage, sending the sound of an uncomfortable metallic clank emanating through the living room. The suspicion turned to fear when he looked through the peep-hole to find the face of The Driver staring back, not a face he recognized, but the look of the sort of people he’s become used to seeing a lot of lately. “Saturday, shit!” he yelled under his breath. He sprinted to the kitchen sink and threw a bunch of cutlery around to make random noises, hoping it would sell the, “in the kitchen! Give me a minute. I’m working! I need a goddamn minute or this whole place will go up in flames!”

“Come out, now!” The shouting came from the crack in the door.

“Wait! Just wait!” Skinny Russian left one hand in the sink to continue making noise, rolling a pan around in the basin a few times, then pulled out a dirty fork and struck it against the glass of his blender. He spun around and stared

in amazement that Gerald had not yet woken up. The noise would not guarantee it would last long. Another knock came, followed by a bang on the door that tested the strength of the chain lock. Skinny Russian needed a plan and so his quick thinking led him to reach for his phone and do what he thought himself best at. In the search bar of the internet browser, he typed the words: *hoe long cholkhold die*. He checked the first result.

Two to four minutes, the answer appeared on his screen. Skinny Russian ran to the couch where Gerald lay asleep, stretched his left arm beside Gerald's head and wrapped his right around his throat, grabbing him in a chokehold. Ten seconds in, he realized he was doing something very wrong, released his grip, and fell backward. His face full of fear. He cautiously crawled back toward the couch and pressed two fingers against the side of Gerald's neck. A sigh of relief at the feel of a live pulse. "Stupid!" he cried out, "idiot!"

"Hey!" the banging resumed, louder and more persistent now.

"Give me one fucking minute, damn you!" Skinny Russian needed more time. He rushed to the kitchen and opened the fridge, then instantly slammed it shut, "almost done!" he shouted.

"I'm getting really impatient here, pal. It really stinks out here, you have one minute before this here door goes flying." The knocking ceased.

Skinny Russian slammed the fridge door a few more times, just to be sure, before he pulled out his phone again. *How long chok someone to fall asleep*, he typed. Four to seven seconds—just the answer he was hoping for. He skipped back to the couch and put Gerald in a chokehold. "One second...two," he counted under his breath, "three," Gerald's leg twitched, "it's fine, it's fine, uhhh, fo—six...seven!" He let go and stood up, watching over Gerald. Minimal movement. Breathing looked fine. He figured he'd find out how long the involuntary nap would last at a less pressing time and sprinted past the couch and into the bedroom.

“Twenty seconds, I’m warning you!”

His feet came to a screeching halt in front of the mattress on the ground. He bent down and stuck his hands underneath it. In one swift jerk he flipped the mattress to the far side of the room to find an old double-barrelled shotgun he inherited from his father, which was often used to shoot ducks, oppressing road signs, and ultimately, his own head.

“Ten seconds.”

Skinny Russian felt an unfamiliar rush of vigour flow from his head to the hands clutching the shotgun. He admired the look of the veins popping out the top of his bony fingers when he gripped the steel barrel tighter.

“Five seconds!”

Not running, but taking deliberate steps that were too long in strides to look natural, he made his way over to the door. Without thinking twice he stuck the barrel into the crack in the door to show the person on the other end what he was getting himself into.

“Hey now...” the voice spoke cautiously.

Skinny Russian was relieved to see that the door did not go flying as the man on the other end had promised. The sudden sense of relief made him weak in the knees. The adrenaline made him more anxious. The barrel of the shotgun was still up in the air when he finally spoke, “it’s Saturday...already?” the spirit in his voice faded halfway though the sentence.

“Yeah,” The Driver cleared his throat several times, “I feel the same way.” The Driver felt compelled to challenge the man on the other side of the door to see if he was really capable of doing something rash, or at least, if the shotgun was loaded, but ultimately decided to not risk death or injury for a job he wasn’t even happy to be doing to begin with. “This is new for you?”

“What is?”

“*That*,” The Driver reached through the door and poked at the barrel. Skinny Russian yanked it away, then pushed it closer in a direction more in line with The Driver. “When they told me about you, *that* was not what I had expected.

They said you even pissed yourself once.”

“It was a spill, I was only crying because it stung!”

“You cried, too?” The Driver chuckled, “and now you’re —“

“They startled me! I was in the kitchen, working, when the door was kicked down...I was pouring alcohol out of a big heavy jug when they came in and I jumped and the beaker went flying down and I got it all over my dick. If they’d really wanted to tell a funny story they would’ve told the truth—that my dick stung. But they never listen, those savages!”

“I’ll take your word for it, you know what—I’ll make sure the boys over there learn the *real* story when we’re all done here, how about that?”

The shotgun in his hands became heavier, “fine.”

“So what changed then? How come you’re such a tough guy now all of a sudden?”

“I never get a chance to go and run for it.”

“So why not keep it close by?”

“Because you guys are fast. So fast. Each time I play the scenario out in my head I always imagine you guys with your guns already out, there’s nothing I can do, and if you see the thing anywhere near me I can just picture those bullets flying at me before I get to say a word. Nobody ever knocks, I guess that’s the point—so I never get a chance to go and run for the shotgun.”

“Lacking a little confidence, aren’t you?”

Skinny Russian trailed off at the thought of Gerald. He turned around to check on him. Breathing looked fine from where he stood. No sign of waking up as far as the signs he knew to look for. He turned back to the door. “You knocked!”

“Yeah, so?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re thanking me for knocking? How poor *is* your self-esteem?”

“Better, actually, now that I got a chance to fight back.”

“But we’re not here to fight—you know that.”

“No, jerk, you’re just here to kick my ass!”

“Oh I’m sorry, I seem to be doing something very wrong here! Here, let me step back and break your door down so we can do this right then!”

“NO! No-no-no-no-no! I’m out of doorknobs!”

“You’re what?”

“Never mind, shut up!”

“OK listen, I need to get this moving along, just let me in...” The Driver pushed at the door and felt the weight of a human being on the other end pushing back. “Come on, just let me in!”

“No!” Skinny Russian yelled. He readjusted the direction of the barrel according to where he thought the man stood.

“You know what, man?”

“What!”

“I’m not too crazy about this here gun pointed at me,” he inched away from the barrel. “Just put it away, can we be civilized? When have I hurt you?”

“You’re all the same! God, I wish that brain implant chip existed!”

“What?”

“The brain implant that would program you with some manners!”

“I have absolutely no clue what you’re going on about. Buddy, listen. I’ve let you be the tough guy for a little while, but unfortunately it’s gotta come to an end. Do you really think you’re the only one pointing a gun around here? And no, as I’ve already proven, by not breaking your door down, that we are not all the same.” The Driver became more impatient each time the shotgun grazed his shoulder. A layer of sweat formed in the hand keeping the pistol pointed at the door.

“Oh yeah, prove it!”

“Prove that we’re not all the same? Maybe if you stuck your goddamn head out and saw me you would be satisfied!”

“No! Prove that you have a gun pointed at me.” He waited. Then a sharp knock came from the other side of the

door. "You bullshit me!"

"I no bullshit you," The Driver laughed, "how long you been in this country? They told me you spoke weird, but that just came out of nowhere. You keeping up with appearances or something?"

"Shut up! Prove to me that you have your gun out."

"That *was* my gun, how much more proof do you need?"

"I want to see it!"

"Yeah, right. How the hell am I supposed to keep it fixed on you from behind the door if I'm sticking it out to show you?" he knocked the muzzle against the door a few more times, "look, man, I don't want to be here."

"Then don't be," Skinny Russian pleaded. His divided attention made it easy to forget about the man on his couch.

"I'm going to be perfectly honest with you. I'm really dying to be honest about something right now. I don't give half a shit about what I'm supposed to be doing here, at this moment, you, anything. Look at this..." The Driver reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out a folded purple sticky note, on it, the words *DO YOUR GODDAMN JOB* were printed in large bold letters, he unfolded it and shoved it through the crack in the door. A hand reached over the barrel of the shotgun and snatched it.

"It's...vague," Skinny Russian said.

"Right?" The Driver scoffed, "this is it, these are all of my instructions, day to day. It's got nothing to do with you, it's got nothing to do with anything. It's all about appearances, this entire job, nothing actually gets done. I don't know why I'm talking to you about this, these last couple of days have been strange. I get it, routine is essential for so many things to work, but the routine keeps getting fucked with lately, and it makes you step back and try to make sense of things. But there's something so fulfilling about the routine being fucked with, you try to fight it at first, but then you realize that it's not the interruptions that you're angry with, it's the routine itself that you're angry with, and how you're not getting nearly enough of these interruptions in the first place. This routine, man—I'm

telling you, it's really something. You know what my boss tells me to do, tells us to do?"

Skinny Russian frowned at his busted doorknob.

"I don't know if he just doesn't care, or if he doesn't know what the hell to do in the first place. I just know that he needs to keep us busy, to keep this routine going, otherwise we might step out of line and start wondering why we're doing any of this in the first place. It's almost comical, the instructions we're given. I hate to tell you, but kicking the door down is step number one, point my gun at you, ask about the money. Oh, and, just so you know, I have no idea what you actually owe, I don't think he even expects to get it back. Another thing I hate to tell you, breaking a bone or two is a *must*. See, what I figure is, you come home after roughing up a guy or two, and, unless you're a complete psychopath, you're bound to feel a bit of guilt here and there. This guilt, man, this guilt makes you vulnerable, and when you're vulnerable, you can be manipulated. You can be bossed around more easily. That's what I think. I don't want to break any bones."

"Really?"

"Yeah! Not one bit. Shit, half the time I come back with more bruises than the other guy! Fists are so fragile, knees get sore—I can't tell you how many times I tried to knee a guy in the stomach only to hit him right in the pelvic bone when he limped back to evade it—that shit is painful. Fuck!" The Driver slammed the palm of his hand against the door, spooking Skinny Russian to drive the shotgun further into The Driver's side. "Sorry about that, I'm just a bit upset. Do you mind if I..." The Driver spun around and rested his back against the frame of the door, completely forgetting about the shotgun barrel grazing his torso as he slid down to the ground.

"What are you doing?!" Skinny Russian scooted over to look through the crack, only to find a corner of The Driver's shoulder in sight.

"Still here, don't worry." The Driver checked his pulse and cracked his neck a few times. "Yeah...I guess

everybody's a bit upset sometimes. It really comes out of nowhere. What a weird day—you're a weird guy."

"What is happening..."

"And *you* obviously seem upset about something," he scoffed, "I'm not wrong, am I?"

"Now's not a good time."

"No it's fine, I gotta do something with this time. At least make it seem as if I'm doing my job. You're not a priority, trust me. The big guys are going through some shit right now. Shit—everybody seems to be. It's in the air, can you feel it? You're good for now, I guess. Although I can't say the same thing for next week, this isn't a permanent thing for me I don't think."

"You were right," Skinny Russian gave in to the pain developing in his elbows from holding up the shotgun and let the barrel rest on the ground. He got down on one knee in front of the door and put his face into his hand, "*I am* upset."

"You just need to let it out sometimes, I know how strange all of this is, but I just can't help it. I guess that's what happens when you keep it in for so long, you have no control of how or when it wants to come out. What are you upset about then? Woke up on the wrong foot?" The Driver whipped his head around to the crack in the door, half-expecting Skinny Russian to be standing there with open arms and welcoming eyes.

"I thought it was the wrong side of the bed? Isn't that how the saying goes?" Skinny Russian said.

"I guess it depends on where you're from. I don't know what's been happening to me lately, feels like whatever foot I wake up on, something always feels off."

"I did ballet, when I was about five years old. I know— weird Old Country things—every kid did ballet. I was always told I danced as if with two left feet. That's how I've always felt. I think that's been life for me—learning to dance with two left feet. Shit, even that feels too ambitious sometimes—to hell with dancing, sometimes I feel like I can't even walk."

"Yeah..." The Driver's mind wandered off, "some people

don't even get to have a bed..." The Driver looked for ways to further extrapolate from his analogy when he was suddenly struck with a moment of clarity, "I think it just hit me. This whole thing with you, with *us*—us bad guys I mean." The excitement he felt from coming to some sort of conclusion stopped any attempt at first realizing the weight of the words that came from his mouth next, "this is a family business, and we are nothing but the house cats in that family. We need to be kept busy, because busy, for a life this simple, means some sort of happiness or satisfaction with our meaningless existence. *You*, jobs like this, *are* the routine. The assignment when guys like me start to step out of line, when we talk back, misbehave...whatever...this here is something to put us back into our place. Trust me, Uncle Tom is a lot more diplomatic when it comes to his more important clients. Yup, we are cats; and you are nothing but our ball of yarn—that's all he saw in you—and from the looks of that cannon in your hands, I'd say that you are becoming unraveled. And I gotta be honest, I'm starting to hate myself just a little bit."

The Driver took the moment of silence to evaluate the things he said, and suddenly felt anxious upon thinking how it may have made Skinny Russian feel. He tensed up and listened to any sounds coming from the other side. His eyes spread as wide as his face muscles allowed and stared dead into the wall across from him. The Driver's head became too heavy for his neck to hold up, his chin dipped down below his collarbone. He began to feel a profound sense of shame come over him. The sort of shame one would feel after unwittingly sharing an intimate part of themselves with another and wanting to close up immediately afterward. The idea of seeing Skinny Russian face now terrified him. He fought a tear when he heard a sound come from the other side of the door, hoping for a response that would soothe his conscience. Just a few simple words to ease the tension in his chest. The Driver wondered what it would be like to have this man as a friend, as no amount of talking to the man in the mirror brought on feelings of this magnitude

before. He basked in the idea of this fantasy friendship's ultimate demise and compared it to something of a Shakespearian tragedy—which, in a sick way, made him long for the man's companionship even more.

Feeling blindsided by the words, Skinny Russian collapsed onto his other knee, wrapping his hands around the upright barrel to keep himself up. By the time he was able to process everything that was said, the entirety of the guilt, self-hatred, and remorse he felt over the last few days for attempting suicide had completely vacated his conscience. The muzzle of the shotgun began to look more appealing by the second, but the indecision about whether he should use it on the man behind the door or on himself left him transfixed and unable to do a thing.

The Driver collected himself and got on his feet. Facing the door, he remembered what his reflection looked like in the mornings, during his ritual, and did his best to project it onto his face. "You know what, man. Do you realize how much worse off you are when you have somebody to talk to? Things, ideas, pain starts to materialize inside your head—things you never would've thought to express in the first place. Feelings that you had no idea could even be there. And then you start talking to somebody, and all of a sudden all this shit starts pouring out. Molehills suddenly become mountains. And I don't know if these are things that were in me to begin with, or just some shit I'm making up on the spot in a sick, desperate attempt to connect with somebody. Either way, forget everything I said. Got it?"

Rule #5: A Man Doesn't Talk About His Feelings...

...unless it's with another man

Skinny Russian pulled himself up by the barrel. He brought a hand up to the door and drew circles with his fingertip around the peep-hole. He sighed, then covered up the tiny lens with the palm of his hand. "You knocked... thank you."

"I don't know what to say," The Driver chuckled, "this isn't what I expected."

"Funny things happen when there's a gun pointed at you."

Skinny Russian scoffed.

“Yeah...” The Driver tucked his pistol into the back of his pants, “fucking hilarious.” He spun around and began walking away before an idea came to him. He strutted back to the door and said to it, “hey, one more thing.”

“What is it?” Skinny Russian said nervously.

“That shotgun you’re carrying—it’s a classic, isn’t it? I think I’ve seen one like it back in the day. Got some markings, engravings, on the stock and action? Maybe a duck or some intricate squiggly lines? I’m just curious—could you check for me?”

“Uhhh, what?” Skinny Russian indulged him. He brought the shotgun close up to his face and inspected all the little details, “there’s a pattern, on the...wood thing—“

“The stock, yeah, spin it around, there should be something underneath the trigger, tiny letters—that thing could be worth a fortune, you know.”

Skinny Russian felt a rush of excitement at the thought of another business venture. His examination didn’t come out to anything. He looked closer and closer, his nose only inches away from the trigger guard, “uhh I’m looking, but I don’t—“ when suddenly the door came smashing into the shotgun. The shotgun into his face. Skinny Russian howled in pain.

“Sorry, friend, but when the next guys come by and see you without any bruises, they might get suspicious. Just covering my own back—hope you understand.” The Driver disappeared.

Between the tears in his eyes and the blood trickling from his nose, over his mouth, and down to his chin, a crooked smile emerged. A short maniacal laughter escaped from between his teeth. He placed a hand over his mouth to stop to stop it, which made the built-up laughter twice as deranged when it finally escaped him. He laughed for what felt to him a solid two minutes before realizing that his hand was still covering his mouth, and that he was smearing a thick paste of mucus, tears, and blood around his entire mug. He felt a rush of an uncomfortably sexy euphoria rush

through his body that inspired him to take the same soiled hand and smear the blend across his face to the forehead, over the bald peak, and all the way to the back, ending at the atlas.

When the laughing died down, he glanced over at Gerald and felt silly for forgetting about him for so long. He looked back at the peep-hole, chuckled, and whispered into it, “Henchman #1.”

A THOUSAND DOORKNOBS

His plan now was to prove to the entire world that he could make the best damn biodiesel the world had ever seen.

Skinny Russian recited the recipe for his biodiesel mix under his breath while staring into the throat of a 600 millilitre beaker on the counter, aiming the nozzle of a large jug of methyl alcohol into it. A few small puddles formed underneath the stool where he sat in front of his blender, some spilled onto the kitchen counter and formed a pool around his work area, the majority made it into the beaker which was then promptly emptied into the blender along with some of the other ingredients. Skinny Russian verbally patted himself on the back for having the brain capacity to remember the recipe by heart, only rarely did self-doubt set in, but it was never for a duration long enough for him to want to double-check his work. He set the blender to its third-lowest speed and watched the mellow churning of his bright future come to fruition. His self-admiration was interrupted when he realized that the vibration of the blender had caused his wobbly kitchen counter to shake to the point where the pool of alcohol crept toward the half-empty bag of lye sitting a few inches away. His bony, chemically burnt arms stretched out past the blender to barricade the pool of

alcohol from reaching the paper bag. He realized that a paper towel was nowhere in sight, so, with one arm holding down the barrier, he used his other hand to rub the alcohol into the stained counter top until it evaporated. The alcohol fumes seeped into his nostrils, burning into the cavity where even his pinkie finger couldn't reach to scratch it. The burn continued to spread outward, behind the eyes, where a series of short tears emerged in the inner corner of his eyeball. He couldn't keep his eyes open. The pain got to the best of him; he squeegeed the pool of alcohol onto the floor, grabbed the corner of the counter, turned his head away, and let out a sneeze that sent a shock of sharp pain emanating through the centre of his chest. When he finally opened his eyes he saw that Gerald was awake and watching him.

Gerald was surprised at the lack of strength in his voice when he said, with a bored, sarcastic look on his face, "just what in God's name are you doing?"

"What?!" Skinny Russian called out over the sound of the blender spinning.

Gerald decided to save his breath and not call Skinny Russian out on his stupidity until the noise died down. He took the time to explore around his wound, lifting and tugging away at the soiled bandages. The blood was dry to a crisp and it provided him with a sense of comfort. He followed the comfort down to the other end of the bandage, all the way to his pelvis, to ensure that it was properly dry all the way through. Wanting to explore deeper, he poked a finger at the centre of the bandage and immediately cringed at the sharp pain that shot from the surface of his stomach deep into his bowels.

"What?" Skinny Russian shouted as the blades in the blender spun down. The whirr of the motor fizzled out. "You're still alive!" he called out, enthusiastically.

"Hey! I am!" Gerald cheered as loud as the pain in his stomach permitted.

"Yeah..." Skinny Russian flashed a cocky smile, "of course you are. What the hell did I tell you?" He hopped up from his stool and strutted over to the couch. "I can't believe

I did that,” he knelt down in front of the bandages and gazed in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Gerald chuckled, “you sure did something...can’t say what, exactly. All I remember is that you muttered some shit in your people language and drank a couple bottles of vodka.”

“Bullsheet!” Skinny Russian said with his sarcastic Russian accent, “I not tolk liek dis!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. All I heard was: vodka, vodka, Google, vodka,” Gerald waved his hands randomly in the air, “and then something came of it. But now I’m alive, so thank—“

“You’re—“ Skinny Russian interrupted.

“—Thank god for the internet.” Gerald attempted to slap Skinny Russian with the back of his hand but it only resulted in a gentle graze.

Skinny Russian swatted it away, “hah! Next time ask the internet to wrap bandages around you. We’ll see how that works out, and I’ll just be over in my laboratory.”

“Your lab?”

“My *laboratory*,” Skinny Russian corrected Gerald. “It’s where I do my work.” Skinny Russian shot a finger at the mess in the kitchen.

Gerald lifted his head up just far enough to look past his toes and into the kitchen. Hoping now, with any semblance of context, he could make sense of what he was looking at earlier. The blender filled to the brim with a murky yellow liquid didn’t look like anything one would drink, besides, Gerald figured, given how he saw Skinny Russian drink earlier, this was not a man who put any sort of effort into making cocktails. The large paper bag of what looked like dirt gave no answers either. His thoughts took a turn for the worrisome when he spotted the swarm of flasks and beakers sprawled across the kitchen counter. And, although he couldn’t read the labels way back from the couch, the huge jugs of liquid looked awfully *chemically* to him. He became more concerned. With a rising suspicion in his voice, he finally asked Skinny Russian, “what...*work*?”

“My business.”

“Jesus Christ. Are you so deprived of company that you have to stretch out every conversation or do you just have no sense of what people are trying to say? What business, exactly?”

“The *business*,” Skinny Russian got worked up, “for which *you* people come by and kick my ass over. You know, the one which I owe money for.”

“What the hell does your business do?”

“BIODIESEL!” Skinny Russian snapped, but then quickly retreated when he recalled his earlier encounter with the door and realized that Gerald would’ve had no idea of what was happening around here anyway. “Biodiesel,” he repeated, softer this time.

“Oh thank god,” Gerald eased up and sunk into the couch. He let out a relieving chuckle and said, “I thought you were some sort of terrorist, making bombs and shit. Like, some deadly lethal gas-like bombs—you know?” Gerald saw that Skinny Russian was not amused. He tried to ease his dissatisfaction, “...you know—like in those movies...with Russian terrorists?”

“That’s retarded.” Skinny Russian shook his head in embarrassment.

“No I really thought—“

“In *what* movie,” Skinny Russian interrupted, “did a Russian terrorist group ever use chemical gas bombs? Stupid. Stupid!”

“Guess I don’t watch all that many movies...” Gerald stalled, hoping that maybe in the back of his mind he could actually remember a movie he saw that met the criteria in order to prove Skinny Russian wrong. He came up with nothing. “No, really. I thought that you were gonna blow both of us the hell up. All those chemicals and beakers and shit. Add on top of that all of your stress—you gotta be careful, man. At least while I’m still here—afterwards go and do what you want. Never mind that. Fuel—I guess that’s fine.”

“It can still blow us up.” Skinny Russian lied.

“Goddamn it.” Gerald rubbed his eyes, the energy he exerted from talking for so long had drained him to the point where he felt as if he was perpetually waking up, despite being awake for almost a half hour now. “So what’s your plan then? Sell this biodiesel out from the front yard? Sell it from your house? Who in the hell is going to buy fuel from you? Why?”

“This is just a practice run!” Skinny Russian said defensively. Feeling the soreness in his knees from crouching in front of the couch for so long led him to walk over to the kitchen and grab his stool. He placed it in front of the couch, sat down, and continued, “once I’m in business,” an ambitious smile emerged on his face, “it’ll be a much bigger operation. I’ll have a real lab, real equipment. Not this bullshit I use now. I won’t have to pay high-schoolers to steal lab equipment for me any longer.”

“That is ridiculous,” Gerald scoffed, “you borrowed money from an Irish loan shark for a fucking practice run? Ever heard of banks?” He swung his arm out to hit Skinny Russian on the shin, “you’re a real piece of work, man.”

“Well, I thought I talked a good game. That my ambition really shined through. I thought that’s why he was so eager to lend me the money. He saw that I could really make it. That was until...”

“What?”

“Never mind.” Skinny Russian closed up. “Besides, what bank would lend *me* money? Not with the corporations and big banks and oil all being tied together—you know how that is. I had to bypass all that. I had to *work* the system.”

“Oh yeah, for sure,” Gerald said sarcastically, “and don’t forget the chemtrails that dissuade us from following our dreams and program us to be sheep and eat only junk food.”

“Shut up.” Skinny Russian concealed his embarrassment in the palm of his hand, pretending to scratch his forehead. “I know I have something here—hey!” he regained his enthusiasm, leaned in toward Gerald and rested his elbows against the tops of his thighs, “did you know you can use cooking oil to make fuel. I thought that to be the coolest

thing when I read about it. See that glorious blender over there?" Skinny Russian pointed at the kitchen counter, "it all started with that. Well, almost. It all started with a broken blender. One much worse than you see now...anyways... you can even, get this, you can even *reuse* cooking oil. See, my brother owns a fast food joint across town, we can be business partners. I get his used oil, he gets..."

"Uhhh," Gerald got it before Skinny Russian did.

"...He gets...fuel."

"Then who makes the money?"

"I c-could..." the realization that he might be witnessing his dreams collapsing that very moment manifested themselves as sudden stutter in his speech, "find, peo-p-ple. Does your car use diesel?"

"No, my car doesn't use diesel. Besides, even if it did... look at this fucking place. I'd be scared just to use the bathroom in here, let alone buy fuel from you."

"It'll get better!" Skinny Russian said, "my brother and I, we will—"

"Gosh, you dream real big," Gerald laughed, "reusing cooking oil...you sound like a vegetarian, you know that? Also, what the hell—you said your brother *owns* a restaurant—why not borrow money from him?"

"I," Skinny Russian retreated, "we...I...I haven't talked to him in over twenty years."

"Uhhh," Gerald felt a pain emanate through his body due to the sheer amount of embarrassment he felt for Skinny Russian, "you are fucking killing me here, you know that?"

"I'm used to it," Skinny Russian puffed up his chest and stood up in a defensive stance. "*Also*," he looked down at Gerald and stared him deep in the eyes, "there's nothing wrong with used oil. Sure, it's got dirt in it—it's got imperfections. But you can still make something good of it. There's no reason to toss it away, there's untapped potential there." Skinny Russian backed away from the stool and paced methodically from the front door to the couch, gradually speeding up while he built himself up to ask the question, "this John, who was with you," Skinny Russian

stopped by the door and spun around to face the couch.” The ball of yarn was thrown out of reach.

“Yes?” Gerald’s eyes filled with hatred.

“Are you still planning to—“

“Fuck yeah I’m gonna kill that cocksucker!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? He shot me!”

“Bullshit.”

“No. *Not* bullshit! You were there, weren’t you?”

“But why does he need to die?”

“He fucking shot me, with my own gun!”

“Say it again.” Skinny Russian leaned against the door.

“Say it again, slowly” the ball of yarn began to unravel; the cat, confused by the new circumstances, stood frozen in disbelief.

“He shot me, with *my* own gun.” Gerald said, slower and with more thought in his words, then drifted off as if there was more to think about. He quickly snapped out of it, more confused than before, “what the hell, man. Is there some sort of subtext I’m not picking up on here?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“What?”

“What’s the subtext?”

“I...It’s there.”

“Ok, why don’t you tell me what it is? I’m not a fucking mind reader. Do you even know what you’re trying to say?”

“I don’t know...it’s just a feeling. It felt like there was something there. Don’t you feel it?”

“Feels to me like you’re an idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot—maybe I’m just not so good with words, that doesn’t make me stupid!”

“Then maybe you should learn to keep your fucking mouth shut, or at least think before you talk—that’s what separates normal people from morons such as yourself. Everyone thinks stupid shit all the time. You’re not an idiot for thinking it—you’re an idiot for not knowing what to filter out.”

“There was a feeling there and you know it!”

“Man, fuck your feelings already!”

“Did it feel right to give John your gun?”

“...”

“Hah, I got it!”

“Got. What?”

“The subtext!”

“Ok?”

“Your feelings are...off...you need to listen to your feelings...Hah!”

“That’s it?”

“It’ll do for now I guess.”

“Were you feelings...*on*...when you borrowed money from a comically sinister-looking Irishman who goes by the title of *Uncle Tom* to buy yourself a new blender?”

“...”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Practice what you—”

“You always have something to say. Don’t you? Gotta have the last word. Gotta say the coolest shit. You think you’re so cool, don’t you?” Skinny Russian wasn’t sure if it was a newly discovered sense of confidence, or a total lack of hope for the future of his well-being, that led him to say that. Whatever it was, he decided to test it out. “Do you know why he shot you?”

“Why don’t you tell it to me in feelings?” Gerald said sarcastically.

Skinny Russian stormed over to the kitchen and dug around in a few drawers before coming out with Gerald’s pistol in hand. Walking over to the couch, he decided, depressingly so, that it was the latter of the two feelings when he placed the pistol on the stool in front of Gerald.

“What are you doing, man?”

“Take it,” Skinny Russian nudged the pistol toward Gerald. “Take it!”

“Fine,” he took the pistol, the weight of it felt heavier than he remembered. He couldn’t hold it up in the air for more than a few seconds before having to rest it back down on his belly. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing. If

you think you're gonna get something out of me..." Gerald popped the clip out and found, to his surprise, that all the rounds were exactly where he had left them, "hmmm." Gerald swung his head over to Skinny Russian and made a point of showing the look of confusion on his mug, "no way you're *that* dumb..." He shoved the clip back in and yanked the action back only to find the loaded round flying out. In a knee-jerk reaction, his hand reached out to grab the round as it rolled onto the floor, but the pain in his stomach reminded him that he should not be making such drastic movements. "OK, fine. What are you doing?"

"How does it feel?"

"Feels pretty fucking natural, what the hell do you want from me?"

"I want you to show me something—show me how cool you are. How tough you are. I want you to point that gun at me and tell me to do something I don't want to do. I have your phone—you want it? Wanna call your buddies?"

"OK!"

"OK, what?"

"Get my phone!"

"Nah." Skinny Russian crossed his arms.

"That's now how this works, you idiot! You were supposed to leave the bullets out and then reveal to me later that it was never loaded in the first place. What the hell do you expect to happen, I have a loaded gun and you will do what I tell you to do!"

"But you won't shoot me."

"Probably true! But if I raise it up and point it at you for long enough, you'd be just as terrified as if you thought I would shoot you in the first place. I know this game better than you. Don't make me waste any more energy."

"I don't buy it, you people aren't nearly as scary as I thought."

Gerald's index finger slithered along the trigger guard until it found its way inside. He squeezed the handle until the grip felt comfortable. He found the strength to pull the pistol up off of himself, and by digging his elbow into the

couch cushion, was able to raise the barrel far enough to point it straight up. His eyes filled with exasperation as he tried to pivot his elbow far enough to point the muzzle in Skinny Russian's direction.

"Have you ever *actually* killed somebody?" Skinny Russian leaned an inch to his left, just far away from the trajectory of the potential bullet.

"You're goddamn right, I kill motherfuckers all the time! And I'll kill you if you don't do as I say!"

"Coming from a guy who got shot by his own gun?" Skinny Russian straightened himself up, threw a condescending grin at Gerald, and went back to the kitchen to resume his work. "I don't know what I was so scared of in the first place."

"HEY!" Gerald cried out, "get the hell back here!" He threw his head back as Skinny Russian escaped his peripherals. "HEY! How about this!" He pivoted his arm the other way until the barrel of the pistol looked up into his own chin. "What are you going to do about *this*?!"

Skinny Russian glanced over, the lack of expression on his face sent an unnerving sense of discomfort down Gerald's spine.

"There's more than one way to do this," Gerald scratched the joint in his index finger against the cold, sharp corners of the trigger.

"Huh..." Skinny Russian ran the palm of his hand against his forehead and said, "feels powerful, doesn't it...having somebody else's life in your hands?"

THE STING

Gerald wouldn't say a word for the last few hours, but had made absolutely sure that Skinny Russian saw the dejected look on his face. He grudgingly co-operated with Skinny Russian, putting in minimal effort possible, in getting his own body out of the way as he unraveled them from his torso, inspecting the damage. Whenever their eyes would meet Skinny Russian would hold the gaze; Gerald would look away almost immediately. One bloody layer after another the gauze became darker and darker. The final layer made a sound that was uneasy for both men's stomachs when the gauze took with it what remained of the thick red paste, revealing a small black hole encompassed in various shades of purple. Gerald's silence turned to speechlessness. Whatever strength was left in him faded. Skinny Russian threw the soiled bandage off to the side and promptly put a few fingers into Gerald's chin, indicating for it to tilt up so that he would stop looking. Gerald fought back, just for the sake of. "Stop," Skinny Russian pushed harder.

"Well?" Gerald muttered while attempting to look past his nose and catch a glimpse of what had Skinny Russian looking so worried.

"Well..." Skinny Russian took a fresh clump of gauze and

wiped around the bullet hole, scooping up the red paste in circles until it got to the centre, where it was darker and thicker and resembled a moist scab of sorts. Skinny Russian pushed at the scab check its firmness. He checked for Gerald's reaction as he pressed harder. Soon he realized that puss began to seep out from the crack and so he stopped, then promptly wiped it off before Gerald could see.

"How is it!" Gerald shouted, rolling around on his back in order to break free from Skinny Russian's hold on his chin. He didn't have more than two seconds of freedom before his chin was held in place once again.

"Don't look!"

"Goddamn it!" Gerald attempted to pull at Skinny Russian's arm but the strength wasn't there. Gerald gave up, allowed his head to fall back and took a deep breath. In a defeated tone asked, "that bad, huh?"

"Just be quiet, please." Skinny Russian held his hand on Gerald's face, then let go, keeping his hand hovering over it, to see if he would comply. Gerald's eyes promised him that he would. Skinny Russian took to his knees in front of the couch to watch for Gerald irregular breathing. Beads of sweat formed on Gerald's forehead, bursting and running down his temples when he scrunched his face, then bunching up in his eyebrows, eventually rolling down to his chin. A cautious palm on Gerald's forehead confirmed Skinny Russian's suspicion when he felt its heat. He unrolled a short length of gauze, tearing it off with his teeth, clumped it into a ball, and set it down on the hole. With Gerald's assistance, Skinny Russian wrapped one round around the torso to keep the gauze ball from falling out and clipped the fabric in place.

Skinny Russian stood up, wiped the sweaty palm on the side of his leg, and gathered everything he needed for a shopping night out on the town.

Gerald woke up, shouting in pain at the ceiling. His bloodshot eyes scanned the living room for help but none

was there. The convulsions in his stomach broke the fresh scab, pushing out streams of dark red and mustard goo. Without even looking at it, he could feel each spasm tear it further, little by little, until there was a long, uninterrupted crack forming across the fold in his belly. It wasn't long before enough of the liquid broke through the single layer of gauze and ran down his side, onto the couch.

"Hey, Russian!" Gerald shouted. The built-up tears stung his eyes. "Hey, Boris!" No answer.

"Yuri!" He took a deep breath and dug his hands into the couch cushions, almost thinking that he could somehow pull himself up. "Vlad?" he soon gave up. Gerald couldn't blink the tears away. He rubbed the discharge from his eyes with the back of his hand and hyped himself up to have a look at something he knew would make his night much worse.

Gerald swatted away the clump of gauze from the top of his stomach. His curious eyes led his chin downward; the strength in his sensible neck fought against it. He fingered around the slippery mess until it felt something resembling a hard, rugged texture. If there was something he was looking for, he thought, this would be it. No need to look. He revelled in the enlightening, optimistic feeling of the wound being sealed brought. The scab became the centre of all good and hopeful, a moment of peace in which he was able to almost completely ignore the throbbing pain emanating through his weak body. The top of the scab reminded Gerald of the textured grip on his pistol, although as much as he wanted to, he could not place a different object into his mind that would resemble a similar feeling. The sharp lines around the edges of it felt like the rim of the empty casing that would eject out of the same pistol. He wasn't sure of what to make of the connections he was thinking up. For a moment he even wished John was there to write it all down for him because it sounded so... artistic, if that was the word for it. But then again, he wished it were John who was making artistic observations about bullet holes in his own body, placed there by none other than Gerald himself, of course.

“I need...*something*...here!” A new, stronger wave of pain interrupted his contemplation. He tried to relax, count his breaths to help work through the pain, but the next wave stiffened his neck to the point where his head pushed into the armrest so hard that his torso lifted off the couch, almost as if a stake was driven into his lower back. The wave passed and he fell to the couch again. His tense hand hovered over the wound, almost as if the pressure inside his stomach would somehow cause the bullet to fly out for him to catch. Finally, he relaxed his hand, allowing it to fall, only to have the tip of his finger catch the corner of the scab on its way down, pulling it off completely. He was terrified of the look on his own face when he realized what had happened. His shaky fingers danced around the soaked couch cushion, looking for that which he didn’t want them to find. When they did, he finally looked down at the purple and the black and the red and the mustard and shouted, “FUCK!”

He couldn’t decide if he should keep his eyes open and fight this futile fight or simply close them and see where the night would take him. Between his moaning and shuffling around on the couch he caught glimpse of hope resting on the carpet only a few steps away—a bottle of vodka: the answer to all his shortsighted problems, aside from the shortsightedness. There wasn’t much left, perhaps a few sips, enough to wet the lips, perhaps; definitely not enough for a full-priced cocktail. The thought of gulping it all down lost its appeal when his lack of confidence told him he would cough it all back out anyway, given his sporadic breathing. Gerald yearned to feel the burn of the liquid on his wound, just to see if he could feel it. Just to see if there was anything left in that part of his body that could feel at all different, because at that point, he himself didn’t even know which areas hurt and which didn’t.

A few quick jabs at the thighs got him pumped-up. He kept going until, squeezing his hand tighter until the knuckles went white. His right hand covered the hole in his

stomach to prevent any dirt from getting inside as he rolled himself off of the couch. His body left a dull thump when it hit the filthy carpet below. Gerald was now a step closer toward his new goal.

He kept the bottle in his peripherals while he planned out his next step. He couldn't decide if he should breathe through his nose, which was pressed into the floor now, and smelled a fresh stench of urine which Gerald, with all his pride, denied was his, or breathe through his mouth, which raised other issues regarding hygiene. He compromised and did whichever came easier with each new breath. It mattered little, he decided, when he was suddenly struck with a sense of comfort in knowing that his right hand was still in its place, doing its job of protecting the precious wound from the foul, stained history of the carpet.

He tucked his left arm underneath his body and rolled over again, landing only a few inches away from the bottle. An excited, trembling hand reached around his head and found the neck of the bottle, then dragged it down along Gerald's body, up from the collar-bone, across his chest, finally coming to a rest on his upper abdomen. His other bloody hand jumped in and helped to get the cap off.

The remainder of the bottle was on the verge of spilling as it tilted toward to the wound. Miraculously, the spillage was minimal. Gerald didn't let the sting overwhelm his sense of relief when the last drop left the nozzle.

Between the jerks of the knees, the twitches of the eyebrows, the itchiness of his nose, the hollowness of his lungs, the pain in his head, the skin drenched in what stopped smelling like sweat hours ago, the blurred vision, the nausea in his throat, somehow, a new feeling emerged. Something he knew he didn't long for, but something he wanted more than anything, whether or not it made sense to anybody, let alone himself. Somewhere between the humiliation, the broken pride, and that tears he didn't bother to feel ashamed about, he felt a sting deep in his stomach spreading outward in every possible direction. For the first time in days Gerald felt more alive than ever.

More than anything, he needed that sting to last.

RIGHT AS RAIN

“Ticarcillin...” he brought the four-inch screen closer to his face to get a better look at the minuscule text. The bright white light illuminated his face, accentuating the unflattering shades of purple under his eyes and the meat-starved shape of his cheek bones. His scrawny fingers pinched the screen to enlarge the text, he tried again, “... ticarcilling-calvu... *clavulanic* acid!” The look of satisfaction on his face faded the second he glanced up to see the reaction from the pharmacist, who, at that point, had developed a keen eye for customers who looked like Skinny Russian, as well as the most efficient way of getting such customers to vacate the premises as quickly and safely as possible.

Skinny Russian read the look exactly for what it was. He persisted, thinking the house-brand digital thermometer he placed on the glass counter legitimized his cause somehow. A moment of sympathy, perhaps. Give him a chance. Hear him out a minute, before that look manifested itself into the words he hoped wouldn’t leave her mouth anytime soon.

Rows of fluorescent lights, an uneven mix of tungsten and daylight bulbs, flickered above the rows of over-the-counter medicines and off-brand fast food snacks. On the other side

of the counter, where the real treasure was held, the lights remained a clinical bright white, perfect in their spread with just the occasional gentle wave of gas in a tube. Underneath this light, the younger pharmacist-in-training hid behind a pill dispensing machine. Half of her head peeked out from behind the massive stainless-steel enclosure whenever she wasn't looking down at her phone to make sure she still had the number 911 punched in. Her finger hovered over the green button that would connect her to local authorities. She waited for a signal from her supervisor, who seemed to have the situation under control. A simple press of the green button, she thought, could end somebody's life. It could save hers, but just as well, if she didn't, another junkie could get his fix—and what's the harm in that? For a moment she daydreamed about the neon lights flooding in from the outside, and how they provided opportunities beyond her wildest dreams. The pharmacist-in-training wondered if this was the right job for her.

"Tiracillin-clavulanic acid!" with more vigour in his voice now, he asked, "do you have it?"

The older pharmacist was kind enough to allow Skinny Russian to get the name right before speaking. In a cold, blunt manner she replied, "That drug is administered through the IV."

"Yes! I can see that *here*," he pointed to the screen, "I'll take that too!"

She rubbed the bridge of her nose, "Listen here, whatever list you got going on *there*, I can tell you right now that I probably can't sell any of it to you."

"But—"

"Not without a prescription."

"OK," he zoomed in on the next item on his list, "OK, just listen," his fingers shook. He read the next one down, "how about piperacillin-tazo...*tazooooo*—"

"Tazobactam?" She interrupted, "can't do that one, either."

"What about vancomycin?" he scrolled further down. "Come on, at *least* that one?" he asked, as if he knew what

for.

“That’s useless without any one of the other two. Listen, no prescription, no pill.” She leaned in toward him and stretched a hand out over the thermometer, “do you want to pay for this now?”

“Please!” Skinny Russian let his hands fall to the sides. A nervous tick emerged in the corner of his lip. He unconsciously grabbed bit at the inside of his cheek, “Please listen to me—I’ve got an infection—a deep one!”

“Then go see a doctor—it’s what we all have to do. There are still some clinics open at this time. Use your...” she waved her index finger at his phone, “...find one. Come back here. We’ll take care of you.” She paused to make sure she had his attention when she said, “let’s not have a problem here.”

“You don’t understand—I can’t!”

“Then I can’t help you.” Her fingers closed around the thermometer and dragged it across the counter toward the cash register. “Is that cash or credit?”

“Hold on!” Skinny Russian’s hand involuntarily reached for the pharmacist’s.

“Don’t touch me!” she swatted it away.

“M’am?” The trainee whispered.

“I got it.” The pharmacist said, without turning back.

“Sorry!” he yelped.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she composed herself quicker than Skinny Russian could lift the phone up to his face again.

“Ok, look! These are easy: Augmentin!”

“No.”

“It’s not for me, it’s for a friend!”

“Then have your friend see a doctor.”

“Cephalexin? He can’t.”

“Then call for help.”

“I already told you...I can’t! Bactrim?”

“Sir, pretty soon I’m going to have to ask you to leave the premises.”

“No, look!” Skinny Russian reached the phone out inches

away from her face. She immediately covered the screen with her hand and wrestled the phone down onto the counter, “you’re not looking! It said: *for uncomplicated... mild, moderate*—that sounds safe! Who the hell is going to get high off of antibiotics—I don’t understand why you’re making this so difficult for me!”

“It’s just the rules, we all have to follow them.”

“Shit. God—this fucking country!” His face and voice shrivelled up. He slipped the phone into his pocket and searched around for money to cover the thermometer. A few crumpled up ones emerged in his hand, somewhere in there was a five, just as filthy. The dirt from the bill rubbed off on his finger, and through a seemingly inconsequential stream of thoughts it came to him, and in a final hurrah, he shouted, “penicillin! Mouldy bread...Mouldy bread! Anyone can make penicillin! Hah! Even *I* know that one. It’s been around forever, now way *that one’s* hard to get.”

“I can’t give you that one either.”

“FUCK! A person is dying—I just need something here! How heartless can you be?”

“Sir...” she said “...I’m going to need to you watch your tone now.”

“White?” A voice called out from behind the pill dispenser. The pharmacist-in-training brought the phone up beside her face to display the three numbers that would save her and her boss from a violent death by a junkie. The older pharmacist glanced over, shook her head to indicate a *no*, and promptly turned back to Skinny Russian.

“White?” Skinny Russian tried to get a look at the trainee’s screen but she hid it out of sight by the time he realized she was even there. “What white?”

“Code white,” the pharmacist clarified.

“Code white?” Skinny Russian stared at her, mystified, then reached for his phone to look up what it meant.

“It means: violent person,” she waved her hand at Skinny Russian, indicating that his phone won’t be necessary for that one. She kept a condemning gaze at him until he ceased fidgeting.

“But I’m not...” he looked like a puppy that just got its paw stepped on.

“I know you’re not,” she assured him, the best she could, that it was merely an accident.

The price came up on the cash register display when she scanned the barcode on the thermometer. She repeated the numbers to him and grabbed the wad of cash from the counter. One by one she unfolded the bills, checking on the man between each one to ensure he was still stable. The cash register dinged and the drawer full of money slid open. She looked up once more to check for sudden movements, then dropped some loose change onto the counter.

He made a fist around the coins and looked her dead in the eyes. A final hurrah: “can you at least tell me...”

“Tell you what now?”

“If...at least...that maybe you have them *back there*?” his eyes followed the trainee shuffling back and forth between the cabinets behind the counter. “Anything?”

“Can’t tell you that, sir.”

“FUCK!” Skinny Russian snapped, throwing the loose change across the counter, hitting the pharmacist’s lab coat and the shelving behind her. She slammed the cash register shut and stepped away. Looking back, she saw the trainee waving the phone with the magic numbers displayed on the screen, her thumb primed and ready to hit that little green button. A frightened nod told her to go ahead and press it. Skinny Russian grabbed the thermometer and frantically backed out of the pharmacy, occasionally looking behind him to make sure the exit was clear. “Maybe you’ll tell me WHEN THERE’S A FUCKING GUN POINTED AT YOUR FACE!” The glass door swung open with a kick and then he was gone.

“They all say that.”

CLEAR AS DAY

He needed more, he thought to himself, while laying there on the dirty carpet, staring into the ceiling. The sting faded quickly and left his body with an uneasy sort of emptiness, worse than what he had felt before he administered it. The bottle of vodka was depleted, or so he presumed. No, he really did finish the last of it. He was sure of it? Two bottles—that was it. That was all that such an unorganized, unprepared, scatter-brained moron like Skinny Russian would think to get. Two bottles, between an Irishman and a Russian, what a joke. He conjured up more negative things to think about his caretaker, anything to take his mind off of the problem at hand, but given the situation handed in front of them, Gerald thought Skinny Russian did an alright job. At some point, he figured, should he get out of all of this alive, he might even thank him when the time comes. Now wasn't the time, yet Gerald couldn't help but rehearse the words of gratitude in his head, trying to get a feel for what they would sound like.

The imaginary apology in his head was drowned out by a series of increasingly loud moans and groans emerging from his mouth. He began to feel every irregularity of his pulse. Every throb and toss and turn would remind him of the loose

strands of muscle that couldn't perform their function. His stomach, or at least what he thought to be his stomach, churned. He gave himself the benefit of the doubt—perhaps it was simply due to a poor diet. Canned beans and boiled potatoes are not exactly gunshot-recovery food. But neither was vodka. But neither would his regular diet be. No food heals gunshot wounds, stupid.

He was utterly conflicted. Life seemed much simpler when he didn't have so much free time to analyze every minute thought of his everyday going-ons.

The vodka was definitely gone, but a glimmer of what looked like a clear glass jug on the kitchen counter caught his eye. A proper lab would have the necessary equipment for clean-up or sanitation of equipment. Something alcohol-based. Something to get that sting back into his body. He put his doubts aside once more and hoped that Skinny Russian was smart enough to at least keep a bottle of rubbing alcohol at his lab. *One-and-two-and-three*, he counted, and the right knee lifted up, his heel dug into the carpet to ensure it stayed there. The left knee followed. He pushed himself back by his heels an inch closer to the kitchen. An inch closer to that sweet, sweet burn. His left hand remained on the soggy wound while his right did its best to reach behind the knees to help with each lift. Another inch, another lift, stretch, and push. He looked to the ceiling for any recognizable stain or patch, anything to use as a reference point. Anything that would ensure he was making progress to validate the pain he was putting himself through.

No more than two feet down the path his heel slipped. Then the other one. He pushed on the ground beneath a few more times before his legs gave out and finally collapsed. The backs of his knees felt something warm that quickly turned wet. He realized it was that puddle of urine his heels were slipping around in and, once again, placed the blame on Skinny Russian. It was of no use to keep going this way. His fragile state of mind couldn't take any more failed attempts before giving up altogether. He wasn't so much bothered by the fact that his nice clothes were soaking up

urine as he was by the idea of giving up, when, for the first time in his life, he was finally given a chance to fight for something. He felt embarrassed about how dramatic all of these thoughts sounded in his head. But it kept him going. It worked. Besides, there was nobody around to hear them, anyway—what’s the worst that could come of it? He immediately thought of John again, and the words *he* would use to put these nonsensical thoughts onto paper. Would it sound just as trite? Would *he* be able to make sense of them? His anger fought the curiosity. “Fuck John,” he muttered, shutting the internal fight down before a resolution came to him.

That white ceiling. That blank slate—too much thinking. Too much wondering.

The destination was the kitchen counter and that was all he needed to focus on. The new form of transportation was to be on his side. He rolled over on his left shoulder. A wobble forward. A few wobbles back. It was a struggle, but he finally regained his balance. The right elbow rested on his side, his hand kept pressure on the wound. He took a moment to ensure his sideways plank form was perfect before proceeding to jerk his left elbow forward, ignoring the carpet burn, then pulling on it to drag his body ahead. His limp legs dragged along. Before he knew it, he was a few feet past the puddle of urine and on his way to that glass jug waiting for him at the kitchen.

The friction became easier to deal with once he landed on the slippery kitchen tiles. The balancing became more difficult, but it mattered little—he was in the kitchen now and close enough to read the label on one of the glass jugs up above him: METHIL ALCAHOL. Festival!

He turtled himself for the remaining length of the kitchen floor toward the corner of the lower cabinets. His tired arm reached up for something to grab onto and managed to get a tight enough grip on the edge of the counter to keep his body upright. His body contorted in all sorts of shapes before it figured itself out and managed to get him up onto his knees. He pressed his face into the cabinet. One inch at a

time he lifted himself up; the glass jug slowly revealed itself over the horizon. He wasn't dreaming, he really did read the word *alcohol*. He wondered what it was Skinny Russian was in such a hurry to leave the apartment for—everything he needed was right there in front of him. It didn't occur at that moment, to Gerald, that another moment of benefit of the doubt was due. Not with that gallon jug of hard-earned work. Not with the solution to all his problems right there in front of his face.

The hand keeping his body up remained clutching the edge of the counter. The bottle glimmered in his bloodshot eyes. Tunnel vision. Tunnel senses. The hand around his wound hadn't communicated with Gerald for some time now, were it able to speak, the words would be: *you're leaking!* But he wouldn't listen. Pinkish-yellow streams ran down the palm of his hand and through his fingers, then down his forearm and into the sleeves when he stretched it out past his head and over the counter. The jug was barely within his reach. He rapidly fingered the side of it. His shaky hands looked like they were performing a keyboard solo, playing at one hundred beats per minute. One tap at a time the bottle shifted closer to him. *Staying alive, staying alive*. And closer. *Another one bites the dust*. So close that he could palm the side of it and use the stickiness of his hands to drag the bottle up to his face. He read the label one last time, just to be sure.

This was it.

Sweat trickled down from his forehead and into the corners of his eyes. He ignored the burn. His eyes were manic. He pressed the jug so tightly against his face that the words METHIL ALCAHOL became a blur of incomprehensible black squiggles. He embraced the feel of the clinical coldness of the glass against his cheek and let the fingers holding him up slip. A short fall, but there was no other way. On the way down, the kitchen counter clipped his chin and he tasted blood on the tip of his tongue. His ass hit the tiles with a blunt thud and shot a wave of pain up through his spine. It didn't matter, when he looked down,

leaning against that kitchen counter, he found that the jug was still in his hand and fully intact.

A deep breath. Then a few more, until he was perfectly still. He felt a sterile burn spread through his nostrils when his weak fingers popped the cork off. He tipped the jug, slowly, calculating the trajectory of the liquid with every degree of tilt. When he was absolutely sure of his aim he let the contents of it spill onto him.

When the bottle finally hit the floor, he rubbed the clear liquid into the coloured mess with both hands, nice and slow. Gentle circles. The pinkish-yellow mess on his stomach diluted until all that remained around the hole was a faint red smear. Round and round. He kept going.

He didn't need anybody else's help now.

Nice and slow.

All was well.

Round and round he went.

THINGS THAT DON'T BELONG IN THE KITCHEN

“Hey!”

SLAP

“Hey Asshole!”

SLAP

“WAKE!”

SLAP

“THE!”

SLAP

“FUCK!”

SLAP

“UP!”

Skinny Russian ceased the slapping to empty a litre-sized bottle of water onto Gerald's stomach. “You stupid son of a bitch...”

“HEY!” He called out cheerfully at the first sign of movement. With both hands he grabbed onto Gerald's head and held it upright, then tilted it toward himself, trying to get a better look at his half-dead face. His breathing was more or less in order, but that was not what he was keeping an eye out for. “Come on now,” he shook Gerald's head, carefully, making sure he didn't slam it into the kitchen cabinet behind

him again.

“Whu...” A sound emerged from Gerald’s droopy mouth.

“You’re a stupid idiot.” Skinny Russian released Gerald’s jaw, leaving his mouth free to make noise, “stupid stupid stupid. SO stupid. Shit.” He leaned in at the first crack of Gerald’s eyelids opening to get a closer look at them.

“It’s a side effect,” Skinny Russian snapped his fingers in front of Gerald’s eyes, somehow expecting a reaction other than absolutely nothing when he did it a dozen more times. He finally stood up and cleaned the kitchen perimeter to make way for Gerald to vacate it.

“Uhhh—side effect of what?” Gerald tried his hardest to focus his eyes on the fresh set of bandages wrapped around his torso, but it was to no effect. All he saw was a milky blur of white, black. A dark pair of pants paced back and forth in the background. “Hey!”

“What!” Skinny Russian picked up the empty gallon-sized glass jug and brought it up to Gerald’s face, “*this!*”

“Side effect of *what*—fucking...dying?”

“Where’s your water? Keep drinking water—all of it. Don’t stop until I tell you to. Got it?”

“Fuck, fine.” Gerald finished half a glass then handed it over, “please tell me what the hell is wrong with my eyes. I can’t focus on shit.”

“Methanol.” He held the glass jug up in front of Gerald’s face, “it’s a side effect of methanol.”

“...?”

Skinny Russian rotated the label on the bottle toward himself and read off of it, “*Methil Alcahol*—can’t you read? *Methil Alcahol*—the most important ingredient in biodiesel.”

“Well, shit—it said—”

“*Also*,” Skinny Russian interrupted, “the most expensive.”

“Look, man. I was dying...it said alcohol on the...and with the vodka and everything I just thought...”

“Do *you* know *why* you’re not supposed to drink

antifreeze?” Skinny Russian placed the jug on the kitchen counter and pushed aside.

“Hah. Well shit—what idiot would drink antifreeze. It’s a good thing I didn’t *drink* your stuff— this methanol, though—right?”

“YEAH. Fucking great!” He knelt down in front of Gerald and inspected his face and limbs, “you feeling the shakes yet?”

Gerald lifted a hand off of his thigh and watched for any signs of shaking, “I...don’t know. A little—maybe just weakness?” He let the hand fall back down and released a sigh of relief. “How do you know all this shit? Meddle with some soviet scientists...” he snickered, “back in the Cold War days or something?”

He didn’t reciprocate the humour, “I Goo—“

“Right. Of course you did,” Gerald said. His neck began to lose its strength and his eyes shut against his will.

“Hey, stay with me here!”

Gerald awoke to find himself face-to-face with the same patch of ceiling he’d been staring at for the last three days. A blurry figure of a man hovered over his head. He fidgeted nervously until the feeling of a cold glass being nudged into the palm of his hand filled his body with a long-awaited sense of calm. He knew what he had to do, so he grabbed the glass as tight as he could and got to work. He felt a bony hand press into his upper back, lifting him into an upright position. Another hand came to keep his head from falling backward. One gulp. Two. On the third he took the rest of the glass down. A set of skinny fingers snatched it out of his hand. He was slowly let back down again to rest.

“Yeah...” the blurry figure pushed Gerald’s legs over to make space for his own bony ass to take a seat. A reassuring nod; a comforting pat on his thigh, “you’ll be alright. I just read that methanol can work as a disinfectant...sort of.”

“Sort of...eh?”

“More water, now.” He grabbed another full glass from the coffee table, where an array of five more sat in wait, next

to them, a translucent-orange prescription bottle. Skinny Russian popped the cap and shook a few pills into the palm of his hand, then brought them up to Gerald's face. "Swallow."

"How nice of you," he complied.

Skinny Russian watched the pills go down the drain, then looked back at the bottle on the table. After taking all the time in the world to think about asking the question, he finally spoke, "do you consider yourself to be a bad guy?"

Gerald's face indicated that he wanted to deflect, yet, he couldn't help but to answer, "well, I am a criminal, technically." His voice became more chipper, "in terms of being a bad guy—shit, I don't know. Feels like I'm a decent guy, sometimes. In a blink of an eye though, moment to moment...I don't know—I can go either way."

"Hmm."

"Who's to judge, right? What about you—must've done some time here or there, no?"

"No, actually I haven't. But I don't know if I should've. My brother and I..." Skinny Russian closed the lid on the pill bottle and shook the pills around in his hand, watching them tumble around, "we used to think that yelling the words *shut up* at somebody was the worst insult ever. We were eight, or ten—something like that. Learned it from Sunday morning cartoons. *Shut up!* we yelled it out of our balcony at strangers on the street, when our parents weren't home. We yelled it at each other when we fought. I even said it to my teacher in school once, under my breath, but I think it was loud enough for her to hear. *Shut up!* One day we were feeling extra bratty, running around our apartment complex, knocking at strangers' doors and yelling at them. One man, one old man opened the door and started chasing us, he's had enough of our bullshit. Through the hallway. Down the stairs. He called us all sorts of names; we just yelled the same thing over and over back at him: *Shut up!* He chased us all the way to the stairs, that's where we thought we'd lose him. We did, in a way, he tripped, fell. Broke his neck. Died.

“We were never caught. But the guilt caught up with my brother who eventually tattletaled on us and told our father and mother. We were properly beaten, standard stuff, but it didn’t end at that for dad. He became angrier and more anxious each day. He moved us around the country a lot, in fear that we might get deported, should somebody find out what we did. Soon enough my mother had to leave him, she couldn’t take the paranoia and getting slapped around as often as she did. She took my brother; I stayed with my father—out of guilt, or out of fear—I’m not sure. He hit everyone a lot. Maybe if I’d been the first to tell him the truth about what we did I’d find it in myself to leave, too... but then again—he was a scary guy. Maybe I had no choice to begin with.

“I don’t think we were ever really poor, but my parents always made it seem as if we were. They were always scheming, always thinking up ways to get money quickly from some new venture every other week—there were never any long-term plans. With every little success came a feeling that they’ve done something wrong, that the payoff was undeserved, because they’d always shut us in and hide when it came, in case someone might find out that they earned a bit more money than their neighbours, or just in case there was the slightest chance they made a mistake in the process that would catch up with them. We felt like criminals, despite never actually committing a crime.

“I don’t know if I’d call myself a criminal,” he put the bottle of pills back down, “but when I see a grapefruit at a grocery store for a dollar-fifty I will ring it up at the self-checkout as an orange.”

“Grapefruits are overrated,” not used to being on the receiving end of stories, Gerald felt the need to add anything to the conversation to let the other party know that he still existed, “hey, what time is it, anyway?”

“About one in the morning.”

“You know...I killed a guy once.”

“Go to sleep.”

LIFE AND DEATH OF A NARRATOR

“Fly, monkey!” he said to himself before passing out.

He said it again when he woke up, sometime in the morning, or mid-afternoon. Whenever it was that John’s captor served him a breakfast or lunch consisting of a microwave-dinner meatloaf, an apple, and a glass of tap water. Perhaps that’s what did it—the tingling developing in his stomach. The sensation that something was finally moving around in there.

Progress. Sweet, stomach-churning progress.

“Fly, monkey!” he said to The Chairmaker instead of a *thank you* when his meal was delivered. He reasoned that if he were to act delirious enough, it would buy him more time to figure out how to get himself out of this pickle he found himself into.

“Fly, monkey!” he whispered to himself, or to the ceiling, even when nobody was around. He wasn’t *actually* going crazy, or so he told himself, but simply practicing making his hysteria sound authentic. Maybe, even when he wasn’t looking, his captor was just behind the stairs, peeking, listening to every sound that John made. Perhaps there was a microphone listening to his every word. Every breath. Every movement. No, halfway through the day—or was it the

other half?—during some half of the day he became completely sure of it—there was no way somebody wouldn't be keeping an eye on him. There *must* be a hidden camera somewhere. He knew of the secret he was keeping. It was too important. *He* was too important.

Sometimes he wasn't even sure if he was saying the words aloud. "Fly, monkey!" Over and over and over again, all the way into the evening, in every voice of every actor in every movie he could mimic. Of every person he'd ever met. At the peak of his delirium-in-denial, he imagined what it would sound like if a cat, frog, or an elephant were to speak the words. He was *sure* he could hear it, but couldn't bring himself to try writing the sounds down on paper using traditional letters. "Fly, monkey!" It just made sense. And so what if he couldn't put it into words...don't you people have any imagination? *It sounds like what it sounds like.* Quit pestering him with all these questions. He doesn't owe you anything so just fuck off!

Fly, monkey: The reluctant manifestation of the regrettable inevitability of his personal, unique case of writer's block, which can sometimes take forms such as: *It was a cold autumn afternoon* or *Chapter 1* or a vague question one does not yet hold the answer to but will surely figure out what it means once sometime toward the end somewhere. He was totally and utterly stumped, then a familiar voice repeated the annoying words back to him.

"It was you!"

You called?

"No! It was an accident! I didn't mean to—"

Don't be ridiculous, I wouldn't be here if you hadn't wanted my help. Self-denial is dangerous—it leads to vulnerability. Before you realize—the next step will sneak up on you and fuck you right in the—

"I get it."

I have to be honest with you, John. I'm not a big fan of where you left us off. You had something there, first draft, maybe. But there was potential. I felt so close to you, we were one again. We were so good. We just went with it, like

the good old days, and it got crazy—but good crazy. Exciting crazy. And then you had to go and try to fly away from me.

“And I would’ve done it, too, if it wasn’t for that meddling narrator.”

Har, har. If you really wanted to, you would’ve. But you know you can’t.

“And why not?”

Because you want to stay there. You can’t fly, not with all that gravity—that’s what’s holding you back. I’m not the one inject reality into it. If you really thought it was some lame fantasy world you would’ve had no problems leaving the ground. But you know that you have nothing here. Absolutely nothing. Your notebook is a mess. It’s garbage. Come back to us. Get back in the truck, John.

“Why do you always speak with a British accent when you’re trying to be persuasive?”

You’re the one giving me the voice in the first place. You chose it because you know it works. You want to listen to me. Who are you lying to?

“Son of a bitch.”

Drive the truck, John.

“But I don’t wanna.”

Go to the lake, John.

“I already did the lake. I already drowned her. Twice now that I’ve killed her—what more do you want from me?”

John had long forgotten of his fear that somebody might be listening in on him. He lay down on the floor, trying to focus on anything his eyes caught sight of to mute the sounds in his head. He spotted every crack in the ceiling. Followed every crevice. Counted every hole in every wall, but found everything even more uninteresting than the fire hydrant from the park. He had run out of ways to describe the manner in which those torn newspapers over the windows flailed with the breeze. There was nothing left to wonder about what was on the other side of the supposed elevator shaft he was chained to. The patterns in the ceiling told no stories. The chest where Chief Blackfoot lived was

nothing more than a chest.

No secrets to tell. No secret treasure. Just a simple, fucking chest.

He wrapped his hand around the notebook and formed it into a cylinder. Squeezing it, then letting go. Over and over and over again, in a slow pulse. Then, like out of nowhere, a voice spoke from above.

I think this is it for you, John. You've finally written yourself into a corner

"Wait, who are you?"

Who are you talking to, John?

"Huh, didn't you hear that?"

Hear what?

He can't hear you, John

"Hear *who*? Why?"

Because that's how I want it. I hate that I had to intervene, but it's time both you and I came to face the fact that you're just not that interesting. I don't know where this was supposed to go. I thought I would just wing it, but it didn't work out as I intended

"Well no shit I'm not interesting. I've been chained up to this wall for the last three days, what the hell do you expect me to do? Keep thinking up wacky shit in my head just to keep them—whoever they are—entertained? Did *you* put me here? What the hell did you expect?"

I thought you'd find your own way out, or a purpose at least. You do fine with the others but leave nothing for yourself in return. Now look at where you are. It's them or you, as if you didn't know that. I will always be them or you

John, you're acting very strange, and if I have to come out and say that then you know something is wrong. What the hell are you doing? Are you writing without me? Acknowledge me—I need to know what you're thinking! Let me in!

Don't listen to him, it leads nowhere. You keep going down that road and all that will happen is you'll find yourself standing on some imaginary pier staring at circles in the lake. Forever and ever into some sort of infinity,

always moving but stuck in a comfortable loop

"I am so fucking confused. How do I know you're not my narrator taking on another form, shit gets weird inside my head sometimes—for all I know, he...you're just trying to trick me again into going down that road."

I'm not

"Oh yeah—prove it! Make *him* say something I'd never hear him say!"

John is afraid that if he were to write something other than a convoluted metaphor for the pains and wrongdoings of his past life he will come to realize that he actually can move on. But, once he does, he will find out that he's just another regular Joe with nothing to make him unique, nothing interesting to say, and then he will have to face a difficult choice: remain who he is, or actually put effort into creating something meaningful. But effort is scary, isn't it? Terrifying thing to think that all that effort could potentially lead nowhere John I didn't mean any of that I don't know what got into me—

John needs a minute to process what just—

"That's bullshit! I could've thought that up all that on my own."

Harold

"Don't call me that!"

Harold Harold Harold

"I don't need this right now!"

You toss the notebook across the room

Stop what?

Why? Why stop? Are you getting uncomfortable? You lie to yourself, you lie to your narrator that you want to move on and tell a different story, but nothing's going to change, there'll be no moving on until you get out of the same character you've made for yourself all these years. Show them who you really are, take a risk

"Why are you doing this? What is happening?"

I guess it's a Deus Ex Machina of sorts

"What for? What do I get out of this?"

It's not for you. It's for me. I think...I don't know. Maybe

I just needed somebody to talk to, Harry. You, of all my characters, would understand the feeling

“I see...” you say, suspiciously

Well, look at that, I guess self-doubt is pretty fucking transparent no matter how you project it. I’m a hypocrite, Harry. I’ve been too hard on you. Sometimes a convoluted metaphor *is* the only way to deal with it. People don’t need to understand. What matters is you get it out there, in whatever shape or form. That you’ve separated yourself from it in whatever way that you are capable of. What matters is that now it’s out of you, and it’s easier to step back and look at it from a different perspective. Self-reflection doesn’t work when it’s all inside your head. You know this. You *always* knew it. This is why you do what you do

“Ohhhhhh boy...”

Oh, don’t worry about it, besides, what’s a writer but a functional schizophrenic?

John, take a deep breath. Relax. It’s just withdrawal—you realize you haven’t had your medication in a while.

“I was doing just fine without you, without the medication.” His empty hand now longed for the notebook. John rubbed his fingers together, imagining feeling the texture of its imitation-leather enclosure. “The fucking medication made me fuzzy. I’m more clear now.”

What’s wrong with fuzzy? Fuzzy is good, fuzzy is warm.

“I’m fine now. I think I’m better. Besides—the medication was a fucking cliché, anyway.”

Fine, John? This isn’t fine. Look at what you’ve gotten yourself into. Look at where you are. Do you—

“Like this? Do I like being here? Yes, I’m good. This is where my character would say I feel more alive than anything, isn’t it?”

There’s a sudden silence in your head

“Hey! There’s your fucking change! Are you listening? I’ve changed, I’m different now than where I started!”

John, who are you talking to?

“Shut up!”

John, I feel betrayed. Tell me what's going on. Are you OK?

“Yea, I’m doing good. I am doing—

FUCKING GREAT! See, who else can complete your sentences like that? Let me in, please. I’m on your side! Who else can you think of that can say the same? Everyone you’ve met has been nothing but trouble. Nothing but pain.

“I need to go on an adventure.” John stood up, but his knees immediately collapsed when he found his legs to be asleep. He made fists of his hands and pummelled his thighs to bring them back to life. With a shake in his joints his legs slowly came to. Pins and needles erupted in his calves. It was uncomfortable, but the more he focused on it, the quicker the discomfort seemed to dissipate. Before long he could finally get his legs to wiggle. John clapped his kneecaps together to ensure all systems were functional.

He stared intently at the brick wall in front of him. Mind racing. The longer he looked at, the flimsier the construction appeared to him. Before long, the wall may as well have been made out of cardboard. The bricks were all chipped. The mortar turned to dust underneath his fingernails. The thought of how effortlessly karate masters were able to chop through such bricks assured him that what he planned on doing next wasn’t as stupid as it seemed. He took the chain and tugged at it. One tug. Two tugs. Soon he realized that the baseplate wasn’t completely flush up against the wall. There was a gap. It was minuscule, but he was sure that the tugging had created it. Up and down, side to side. He tugged harder. Little by little pieces of brick wore down and broke away from the corners of the metal plate. There was no question about it in his head—the two large bolts holding the plate were coming loose.

He held the chain with both hands now, gave himself more slop, then yanked harder. With every particle of debris that made its way out from behind the metal plate he swore that the bolts were about to fly out at any minute. His arms became too tired and his palms too sweaty to keep going like this. He struggled to catch his breath. He needed a

break.

Just a little more, he thought.

Look closer, think about what you're doing

"Oh I'll give you a fucking adventure!" He stood back up. Just one more hard yank, he thought. "Just one more." He walked away from the wall, just far enough to keep the chain tight with his left leg was extended out in front. He swung the leg behind him until there was sufficient slack.

Down the stairs, however many floors there were, awaited his captor, supposedly, waiting for him to slip up and do something stupid, not to mention the hail of bullets he'd have to dodge to escape the place. He hoped his theory was correct about the elevator being there. Out the window in front of him was nothing but sky, the ground must be too far down, so jumping was out of the question. He suppressed all thoughts of futility and kicked his left leg outward as hard as he could, then immediately fell to the floor, expelling a cry of pain that reverberated through the entire building. He pulled the ankle cuff up his leg, then went to massage the area underneath, only to find a stinging warm sensation when he touched it. He felt around some more, pinching at some sort of tab that stuck to his skin. It wasn't until he tugged at the tab repeatedly and fingered around it that he realized that it was his own mashed-up flesh curled up at the tip of his ankle bone. The cry turned to a whimper as he hugged himself tightly.

You're not going to listen to me, are you, John?

I think we're done with him now

"I think we are too."

...I get it—I'm of no use to you anymore. It hurts. It really hurts.

You know what, fuck it—I'm out. Do whatever you want.

So this here's my goodbye:

"And in that accent I so love to hear:"

Too-dee-loo, motherfucker.

Harry resents the idea at first, but as the pain in his ankle subsides and he can finally begin to collect himself, the words: *not every monkey gets to fly...not everyone gets to be*

the hero of their own story, become easier to swallow. They seep deeper into his consciousness. They encapsulate his thoughts until there's nothing else he can think about

"Not everyone gets to be the hero of their story..." he repeated the words for what felt like an hour. He repeated them, in a tone that sounded like a gentle lullaby, allowing the words to put him to sleep. He said the words one last time as his beat down eyes finally shut to the sight of the creaky chair stationed in the middle of the room.

THE MEDIUM

Even to this day, the carpenter wasn't sure of the exact reason he signed off legal guardianship of his two-year-old son to his brother, Thomas, who was a small-time loan-shark at the time, and in need of larger real estate where he could expand his business. It may have been because every time he looked into his son's innocent little eyes he was reminded of his failings as a husband, a provider, or for any matter, a decent person. At other times, he promised himself that he just needed time to concentrate on his work, perfect his craft, finish his years-long project: the one-of-a-kind dining set which would give him the break his family needed, and that changing diapers would impede on that.

Years passed and his son was now in his first years of school. The dining set was nothing but a slab of wood painstakingly planed to half of its original thickness and a single prototype chair with squeaky joinery and mis-aligned legs that grew shorter with each miscalculated cut to correct them. The planer was finally retired when it forcefully met a concrete wall after a loose blade wedged itself into the tabletop and ruined the surface.

After the death of his wife, the other residents in his building tried to help out by throwing various handy-man

gigs his way to keep him going. Unclog a toiled here. Fix a gutter there. Catch a rat or two. Kill a spider. The pity was more prominent in some gigs; the cloud of shame over his head was constant.

For years the people living downstairs weren't sure how to approach him with the gifts they've been preparing for him since the passing of his wife. It always felt too soon. He was always in the wrong mood. The stars weren't aligned right. Any time they got together a new excuse came up that ultimately stopped them.

It was a few years too late, but they finally got around to it. The poet, the props girl, and the antiques collector gathered their gifts and came up to the carpenter's floor to present them. One by one they brought them in front of him.

"This chest..." the antique collector slid a rusty old chest across the floor, "...is where you can keep your feelings—know that they are safe with us."

"If you ever need a hand," the props girl handed the carpenter a black rubber foot, "this is all I had...you get the point—we're here for you." She deemed it quirky enough that she could get away with it.

"For you, my friend," the poet emerged with a piece of paper in hand, "I wrote a poem. Here goes:

*From a broken home to a broken job,
he thinks he works, but he's a slob.
An artist? Why pursue such a thing?
When hopelessness and pain is all it brings?
He lost his wife, his heart, his kid.
Avoiding the pain, behind his art he hid.
It's wondrous in the worst of ways.
Yet, we never saw him cry for days.
We never really saw him try,
except the paintings, those don't lie.
Slowly, we saw the layers peeling,
but he can't escape his worst fear—his feelings.
You think that you can fool yourself,
but we feel the pain that you have felt.
You're beautiful in every way,*

so take this brush, and paint away."

"You knew?" The carpenter finally spoke, his fists trembled.

"Of course we knew," the props girl spoke. She took a cautious step toward him, pulled a squirrel-fur brush out of her back pocket, and handed it to him.

"This building ain't exactly soundproof. You keep us up all night with your constant ups and downs in that elevator. Someone was bound to wake up and see what was happening." The antiques collector handed the carpenter a small paper bag with an assortment of bottles of acrylic paint in various colours. Reluctantly, the carpenter took it.

"Just one more," the poet went around the elevator shaft and came out with a blank canvas, "do it for you. Be real with yourself. We know you have it in you. We want to see it. Show us your masterpiece," he propped the canvas up against the brick wall.

"You people can't be serious." The carpenter said.

"Please."

"You need it."

"You have to."

"Last one?" The carpenter asked, staring down at the floor.

"Last one." They replied in unison.

"Fine." He reached into the bag and pulled out the first bottle that his hand came in contact with, a two ounce of blood red, and threw the rest of the bag off to the side. With an effortless twist he yanked the metal cap off and threw it at their feet. He jammed the paint brush into the bottle, whisking it around as he walked over to the canvas, then got down on one knee. "You people are unbelievable," the tip of the brush made its first contact. Before continuing, he looked over his shoulder at the group and insisted that they turn around.

"Yes."

"Of course."

"Whatever you need."

In short strokes and jagged lines the masterpiece was

quickly coming together. He finished it within minutes, but stared at his work for twice what it took to make it, ensuring it was, after all, the story he wanted to tell. He couldn't bring himself to cry, nor feel sorry for himself. All he could feel was a profound sense of anger and resentment, one that he hadn't felt ever in his entire life. He stepped away from the canvas. For a second he considered tossing it out the window, but then his neighbours would never leave him alone. He turned around and took a stand beside it. "OK. I'm done."

One by one they turned around, each face looked more astonished than the last.

On the canvas, the carpenter crudely wrote: *the greatest trick the artist ever pulled was convincing the world to look for depth and beauty where there was none.*

"Wonderful!" The props girl cried out.

"I'm in shock! This is *you*. This is *exactly* what you needed!" The antiques collector expressed joyously.

"The world needs to see this." The poet was awestruck. "We need to get you out there! This painting—*all* of your paintings!"

"NO!" The carpenter shouted, "you all need to get the hell out of my life, how can you people be this delusional? This doesn't mean anything. It's not supposed to mean anything. Nothing I've ever done or painted or said meant fuck all. God, you people! Can't you see what the hell I'm going through? You come in here with this nonsense, perverting my shit life, making it out to be some fucking tragic masterpiece. You think I'm here putting on a show? That I'm hiding something deep-down that the world is dying to see? You're all disgusting. Why do you do this? What do you get out of this?"

"We're only trying to help!" The poet interrupted.

"Help?" The carpenter stomped over to the poet, yanked the poem out of his hands, and shouted "you call *this* help? Reduce my life and everything that's gone wrong into a few lazy rhymes? How insulting! Who do you think you are? Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's supposed to help you understand," the poet replied.

"Understand what? What more is there to think about? My wife's dead and I'm a worthless piece of shit with no real skills or ambition. Everything I do is rubbish and the only thing that feels real are my delusions! How deep can that be? Why can't you just leave it alone. This is my life—there is no art to it."

"You need to let us in."

"No, I need you all to leave..."

"Son..." a slow, exasperated voice broke the silence as The Chairmaker emerged from the stairs, dragging behind him a twenty-punch sledgehammer. Presenting himself to The Writer wearing a sweat-stained shirt, worn-down sneakers, and grey sweatpants. The head of the sledgehammer stopped inches away from John's face, who was still crying and massaging his busted ankle. "...You ever look at a building, lets say, just for the sake of this example—a brick building, and think that the bricks are what hold it together?" He ran a finger down the wall John was tied to, picking out old mortar with his fingernail. "You'd be wrong, you see. The bricks are nothing but the facade—that's what they call it, the nice and pretty part of the building everybody admires."

He set the hammer onto its head, leaving it to balance itself as the wobble of the wooden handle mellowed out. The Chairmaker cracked his knuckles and continued to speak, "take a look at this wall in front of you—this brick you see—imagine you had actually managed to break the plate free from the wall, and imagine that this wall had *actually* been made of nothing but bricks, what do you think would happen?" He kicked at the wall beside the baseplate holding the chain. "The wall would collapse. Do you know how brittle this brick is? *If*, this wall had been nothing but bricks, sure, you would've probably broken free, not that it would get you far, but meanwhile you would've toppled a structurally integral part of the building. The wall would've come down, the roof, maybe, would've followed. But you didn't think about that, did you?"

The Writer kept to his fetal position, focusing on the pain to help drown out the monologue.

“The brick wall is not so much a wall as it is, simply, decorative...insulation, at best. You following this metaphor, Mr. Writer?” Seeing no reaction come from the man on the ground, The Chairmaker grabbed the hammer, brought it up above ground, and slammed it onto the concrete in front of The Writer’s head. The dull *ding* of the metal on concrete reverberated in his ears. “*This*,” referring to the hammer, announcing with a few more pounds against to the floor, “*this* is no Chief Blackfoot. *This* is the part where you take me seriously. For god’s sake—no more jokes, John. *This* is the part where the motherfucking wall comes down!” He wrapped his other hand further down the handle and brought the head of the hammer perpendicular to his waist. He swung back and released the power into the wall. Brown-orange bricks crumpled underneath the impact. Pieces crusted off and fell to the floor. Another hit. The pile underneath grew larger. John pulled his hands away from his ankle up to shield his face from the debris.

“Are you ready? You want to see what happens?” He swung several more times, opening a hole large enough to reveal the concrete structure behind the bricks. The pile of crushed bricks lined almost the entirety of the length of the wall. He worked his way down, breaking apart every brick around the baseplate holding the chain. “Do you want to see why you don’t construct buildings out of bricks? Can you get that into your stupid little head? Do you have any idea what you’re gotten yourself into? You are here with *me*! This is not a game!” He held out the hammer over The Writer’s head with one hand until the strength in his forearm couldn’t take it and he let it fall. The Writer caught it, only to have the weight in his hands slam into his face.

“Breaking down this wall, John,” The Chairmaker pulled the hammer off of John and rested it on the floor, “takes a lot of you—I gotta say. Breaking bones will be much easier.” He took a knee and wiped his sweaty forehead. His eyes were lifeless. The thighs of his sweatpants absorbed

most of the sweat on his hands, his t-shirt took the rest. The Chairmaker picked up the hammer again and positioned himself over The Writer.

“Are my intentions fully clear yet? Or are you still not getting the metaphor here? Am I not speaking in your language? You better be fucking understanding me, John, for your own sake. This is not me trying to scare you—I’m way past that. I am past livid. I’m past the fury which had driven me to do the things I did earlier. There’s a hunger inside me and it wants nothing more than to see fragments of your skull stuck to this here hammerhead. I am stronger than you. I am no brick wall. I am ready. What do you say, John?”

“So then what’s behind the concrete then?”

One by one, the white canvasses were transported out of the building and across the road, through a hole in the fence which he’d cut, behind the recently closed down sugar factory. Within a span of a few months the other artists were persuaded, with force, to leave their homes by his brother Thomas, who was now known simply as Uncle Tom. The carpenter’s son was now eight years old and confused as to why the carpenter looked at him funny when he came to visit, and as time went on, it made him progressively uneasy. Uncle Tom set up his office on the ground floor of what used to be a painter’s studio; his staff kept to the upstairs floors for the most part.

The carpenter found it difficult to sleep in the same space where his wife had committed suicide. On some especially sleepless nights, when he would hear the sound of a baby’s cries run through his head, he would open his eyes to the sight of the oven, his wife laying stomach down on the ground in front of it, her arms hanging from droopy shoulders, head in the oven. Eventually, the carpenter dragged his ragged mattress down the stairs, to the space where the poet used to live, and made that his permanent residence. He felt no remorse for the poet, the last of them to get evicted, who tried to take a stand when Uncle Tom and two of his men tried out their persuasion skills on him. He

was to remain sitting for the rest of his life.

Uncle Tom made a promise to the carpenter that his son wouldn't grow up to witness the sort of work which he was now involved in. Uncle Tom had him go to school, his wife made sure he did his homework. Friends weren't aplenty, but he got by, regardless. The carpenter, despite doing virtually nothing with his time aside from occasionally cleaning up around the headquarters, couldn't bring himself to visit his estranged son as often as he would've liked to. He had an uneasy feeling that Uncle Tom's wife didn't like him too much.

He wasn't wrong. And by the time his son had reached his early twenties Uncle Tom's business had grown to twice its size. He was short staffed, and Gerald wasn't doing too well in college.

The Writer rolled away just in time to miss a miscalculated swing of the hammer intended to only scare him; the pinkie and ring finger on his left hand did not share the same fate. The Chairmaker was reluctant to lift the hammer off the ground because he did not want to see what remained under that heavy chunk of cast steel. Looking away from it, The Writer didn't register at first why it was that he couldn't lift his hand off of the ground. When he finally looked, he realized that his typing speed will never be in the hundreds of words per minute again. His scream began as a shriek and ended with a deep groan.

The Chairmaker twisted the hammer away from the hand, slowly revealing the bloody mess underneath. It was stickier than he had expected. He felt compelled to apologize, as it was an accident, but ultimately stopped himself on the account that it may take away from the effect of the speech he gave earlier.

The Writer, keeping his maimed hand glued to the ground, rolled his body toward it to get a closer look. His other hand crept in to asses the damage. A pair of reluctant fingers crept toward the remains of those precious digits. All his fears, his thoughts, his dreams of the future

and dreads of the past, all the pain he endured up to this point felt anticlimactic to him in the words which came out of his mouth, “you motherfucker! Gerald’s dead!”

The hammer fell to the floor; the man, on his knees, followed. He refused to let The Writer’s words sink in. By the time they did, The Chairmaker’s face had gone red. His eyelids fought a tear from escaping. He grabbed his neck and massaged it, wrapping it around the back, then his throat, nearly strangulating himself.

“Hurts...doesn’t it?” The Writer said to his damaged hand.

“John,” the strength in The Chairmaker’s voice faded, “please tell me it’s not true.”

The Writer shook with rage. He built up the courage to pull his crippled hand closer in, praying that the busted fingers would still be attached to him. A flattened mess of skin and bone, but they remained on the hand when he brought it up to his face to inspect them closer. “Now you know how I feel.” He dangled them in front of his face.

“And how’s that, John?”

“Just pain...in general.”

“John, there are so many creative ways in which I want to end you right now. But I’m afraid I just don’t have the strength for creativity.” The Chairmaker fought the weight and weakness in his body keeping him from standing up.

“He’s not actually dead.”

“WHAT! Where is he then?” The Chairmaker primed the sledgehammer for another swing.

“He told me I was the bad guy—I thought I was just defending myself.”

“From what? What happened!” The Chairmaker frantically waved his arms around, unsure if he wanted to kick The Writer in the ribs to get the information he needed, or plead. “What did you do to him!?”

“It’s a funny thing: when people think you’re weak, it’s easy for them to forget that you can be a piece of shit. I was never the good guy in that situation. There *was* no good to be had or done in that situation. I just felt compelled to do a

bad thing—maybe I am the bad guy.”

“JOHN!” The Chairmaker lifted the hammer over The Writer’s head.

“Oh get over it—you’re not gonna do a thing. Realistically...” The Writer said, observing his mangled hand, “...I have nothing to be scared of.” He looked up, “this Gerald—not just a henchman, is he?”

“No, John,” he propped the sledgehammer against the destroyed brick wall, then his body “he isn’t. I just need you to tell me where he is. Please don’t make me ask again.”

“And then what?” The Writer pushed himself up with his good hand and sat up, crossing his legs, facing The Chairmaker. “What else have you got up your sleeve? What else can you do?” The Writer stretched his broken hand up to The Chairmaker and waved it back and forth. His apathetic eyes followed the motion of the two limp pieces of flesh dangling around.

“Oh I’ve got plenty left,” the words got The Chairmaker riled up, but he immediately subdued himself and retreated back to the wall, “you don’t want to know the things I can do to you...”

“You want to speak *my* language?” The Writer cradled the busted hand in his lap. A cocky grin emerged on his face, “how about this for a fucking metaphor: Gerald is a cat...a cat in a box!”

“What...”

The look on The Writer’s face grew sinister, “Gerald is a cat in a box...and...from where you and I are standing...” he fell in love with each word coming out of his mouth; each pause between them filled him with courage.

“What box, John!”

“Just listen, follow along. From where you and *I* are standing, wait...I missed a part.”

“Faster, John—please!”

“Right! There is a poison in the box, a special kind of poison, and from here, from this room, we don’t know if your dear Gerald is dying from it.”

“John!” The Chairmaker leaped at The Writer.

“Hey!” The Writer reached out his hand to stop him, “just a metaphor...How’s this for another one,” The Writer poked at his head, “the *pen*,” then nodded toward the hammer, “is mightier than the sword.” He laughed, “goddamn it I’m clever. I’ve got more, I can do this all fucking day!”

“...John.”

“Here’s what’s gonna happen: I’m going to take a shit. When I’m done—you will tell me everything.”

“What do you mean, everything?”

“...”

“John?”

“Bathroom. Where?”

FREE AND CLEAR

John took a shit.

A voice came from behind the bathroom door instructing The Writer to hurry, but he knew he could afford to take his time. He flushed, and was immediately overcome with that sense of relief he forgot he needed. The Writer watched his face in the mirror for that bit of self-reflection he felt was overdue. He tried to make sense of the alternating expressions on his face. Sorrow or guilt was not one of them. He opened the cabinet, and in it, using the power of imagination, materialized an imaginary bottle of pills. He opened it, dropped a few capsules fall into his hand and brought it up to his face. He looked himself in the eyes assuringly, then tossed the imaginary pills into the toilet. When the water went down again he chuckled to himself and ran his hand through his hair, fingering the contours of the gash from a few days ago. He waited until the imaginary pills had completely disappeared down the drain, then whispered to himself, “that’ll do.”

The Writer limped over to the door and stuck his face through the crack. An impatient face stared back at him. “I need a stick—something to help me get around, and my

notebook,” The Writer said, “let’s go outside.”

“John, it’s three in the morning.”

“Can’t rush art... wake me up at dawn then.”

“What about Gerald? Is he going to be alright?”

“Nothing to worry about...” The Writer disappeared from the crack, “...just a harmless metaphor.”

THE GRANDMOTHER - PART 2

Margaret has a cabinet full of liquor now, an extensive collection as a matter of fact. She cannot bring herself to drink a sip, yet, her frustration with daily life and all the struggles it brings takes her to the liquor store a few times a month. She occasionally opens a bottle and pours herself a drink but can never bring herself to bring the glass up to her mouth and have a sip. The look in Little Harold's eyes makes her want to take that drink, and ultimately what stops her from doing so.

Margaret's neighbourhood is completely aware of her situation. They remained quiet after the death of her husband, but that didn't stop the rumours from spreading through the airwaves. Ever since Little Harold got that scar on his hand a police officer would occasionally show up at their doorstep for a quick chat. Just a moment of their time. Enough to catch a glimpse of her child. To look into his eyes and see if Margaret is hiding something. The politeness in the policeman's diminishes with every new rumour his ears catch a hold of.

It seems that Margaret's neighbours have had several congregations now, discussing ideas about how they can protect Little Harold from the potential misdeeds of his

mother. It seems that whenever there's a deviation from her generally predictable behaviour: whether she comes home an hour late bringing Little Harold back home from school, or if his bedroom curtains close too early in the evening, the friendly neighbours would send someone to check up on the house. For Little Harold's sake, of course.

Fast forward to Little Harold's final few days in elementary school. Margaret is called into the counsellor's office once again. This time, Margaret is more confused than ever as she is sure she'd done absolutely nothing harmful to her little angel. Her boss isn't happy that she needs to take off from work early again, even if it is for just a half hour, in the middle of the day. But he allows it because he understands family values.

Margaret is in tears. Her crying son sits beside her, watching her. His eyes full of hate. Not a single peep leaves his mouth when he rolls up his sleeve to present to her a brand-new gash on his forearm.

Her boss is extremely disappointed to hear that Margaret's half hour appointment would last the entirety of her day. The school counsellor had arranged a mandatory impromptu meeting with an officer at the local police station.

Margaret waits for several hours before learning that her meeting will have to wait for another day. More important police matters had to be attended to.

That morning Margaret did not drive Little Harold to school. She had allowed him, for once, to have a sleepover with a few of his friends. She felt uncomfortable doing so, but understood the need for social interaction for boys his age, which Little Harold was so deprived of.

Little Harold was causing quite a bit of trouble at the sleepover. He yelled and he cried and talked about how parents are evil people who do nothing but lie and hurt their children. The mother of his friend, in charge of making sure the sleepover goes smoothly, eavesdropped for the entirety of the rant. She has had enough of Little Harold's

complaints and decided that it was best that Little Harold went back home.

The friend's mother was furious at Margaret, and couldn't stand the thought of having to see her face or hear a word, so, when her car pulled up to Little Harold's house, she instructed him to go straight to the front door and go home, no playing around in the middle of the night by himself. He promised he would do just that and she drove off.

Margaret is relieved to catch a break and decides to spend the night treating herself to something nice. She finally gets her chance to have that drink and call it an early night. In her deep sleep she cannot hear Little Harold knock on the front door. Little Harold takes the opportunity to finally sleep out in the backyard the way he always dreamed of.

The next morning Little Harold wakes up to find that his mother is not at home. Assuming that Little Harold's sleepover supervisor would take care of him his morning, she had left for work early—a chance to treat herself to a nice breakfast at a quiet cafe. Some time alone. Little Harold isn't worried. He is actually quite excited at the prospect of taking himself to school for the first time. His friends boast about it endlessly: all the rocks he could kick, all the squirrels he can chase, all the trees he could climb—complete freedom—just what a healthy growing boy needs.

On his way to school, Little Harold spots a neighbourhood cat and chases after it. Down a block, then across the road, where he gets struck by the newspaper boy on a bicycle on his morning route. Aside for a scrape across his forearm, which he can't wait to show off to his friends, Little Harold comes out unscathed. He feels like a little hero when he assures the newspaper boy that he'll be alright and won't require any medical assistance. The newspaper boy insists on helping him, but he also has a job to do before school starts, so he doesn't try too hard and goes on his way.

Several hours later Little Harold finds himself back in the school counsellor's office. He's trying to explain the details of the story of how he got that scrape. The intimidating look

on the counsellor's face causes him stutter, and ultimately, leaves her thinking that Little Harold is hiding something. She asks Little Harold if his mother had been telling him what excuse to give her this time. She tells him that he'll be safe if he tells her the truth. If his mother had been hurting him, she needs to know.

Yet, she doesn't hear what she expects to hear. The newspaper boy story is a lie, and she assures Little Harold that he doesn't *really* know what he's talking about. That his mother is making him tell these lies.

She tells Little Harold that she knows *exactly* how he got that scrape.

Little Harold begins to question himself on what is real.

Little Harold's father was on his way to visit the school counsellor the night he died. They had been sleeping together. She wanted his father all to herself.

Some might say that this school counsellor is a bit of a cunt.

When Margaret returns to work after her pleasant morning she's immediately called into her boss's office to hear of her immediate termination. She is let go based on reasons that she can't do her job properly any longer; she comes in late much too often, and her lack of attention had caused some costly errors.

Her boss also has a son, about Little Harold's age. But recently he has been hearing stories about how Margaret treats her poor son. In complete truth, her boss always thought that Margaret did fantastic work for his company.

When Margaret comes home she has a lengthy conversation with herself, and decides that nothing is going to stop her from giving Little Harold the best life a son can ask for. She will buy him everything he wishes for and he will be the happiest little kid there ever was.

She spends the next little while passing her resume around town. For weeks she has no luck. She applies to progressively lower paying jobs, further from her

neighbourhood.

Not what she was hoping for, but finally, the local supermarket calls her back for a position as a cashier.

Not more than a year passes when Margaret can no longer afford to live in the nice big house of hers. Especially not with all the fancy toys she buys for Little Harold to keep him happy. Especially now that Little Harold is in his first year of High School.

Margaret finds an affordable bachelor apartment in another district. She wishes for Little Harold to make friends at his new school but he's having trouble adjusting. His antisocial behaviour becomes worse with each week. Margaret doesn't know how to read the look on his face when she sees him at the end each day, she figures he's just annoyed with having to live in such close proximity to his mother in his developing years. *It will get easier*, she tells herself. She finds the words difficult to believe sometimes.

Little Harold comes home after his first week of tenth grade. Dejected, embarrassed, unable to face his mother or talk to her without breaking into tears or a fit of rage. He was bullied for being poor and having acne and wants Margaret to do something about it. But Little Harold won't give her any names, for his own protection, and Margaret has little to work with when she comes to school and presents her complaint to the school principal.

Several months pass, and the bullying isn't subsiding. Little Harold threatens to hurt himself if nothing is going to be done about this. He demands that his mother fixes it.

Margaret is scared and unsure of how to proceed. She decides the safest option is to have him go see a doctor. But psychiatrists are expensive and Margaret will need another job to support the payments.

She takes the night shift as a janitor at the local mall.

For almost a year Little Harold attends four to six sessions a month with his psychiatrist. He is assured that being

embarrassed is totally natural and that he shouldn't answer any questions until he feels comfortable doing so. The doctor asks Little Harold plenty of intrusive, yet seemingly inconsequential questions, about his life, his school, his relationship with an overbearing mother. Little Harold is unsure how to answer. He has a hard time deciding on what is real and what happened in his head. The doctor assures him that it's not uncommon for a boy his age to have a vivid imagination.

By the time Little Harold's high school years come to an end, the doctor finds he had done everything he can to help Little Harold, and that his afflictions are nothing out of the ordinary. He tells Little Harold that he should continue taking his medication, which he prescribed accordingly: a pill for when he feels a little too sad, and another for when he feels a little too happy. On the night when Little Harold gets his final diagnosis the doctor sits at a kitchen table along with his wife and daughter. He's elated, the tone of his voice is borderline boastful, when he talks about all the lives he's saving. He imagines his colleagues don't even come close to his numbers.

That night the doctor's wife gives him a kiss on the cheek and a blowjob and tells him how proud she is of his achievements.

All the money Margaret had earned for Little Harold is now being spent on all sorts of colorful pills that make Little Harold feel and think funny things sometimes.

Little Harold is twenty years old now. He has no ambitions and his only life goal is to spend as much time away as possible from his mother which he hates. He works a few low-paying jobs here and there, enough to cover food and some rent. He can't afford his medication and insists that his mother send him money for it.

Margaret is in her fifties, working her two jobs. The guilt of raising her son so poorly eats away at her daily. She doesn't know who to blame, Little Harold just looks so little to her.

* * *

Little Harold was twenty-six when his wife of four years divorced him last winter. She was finally fed up with how he treated his mother and his constant mood swings. Three years ago, when she thought there was still a chance things could work out, they looked for the next thing that could make him happy, to keep him from hurting himself, so they had a baby daughter.

He doesn't hear from them ever again.

Little Harold has a lot of time to himself to think and reflect. A voice begins to emerge in his head that seems to be able to make sense of all his feelings in a way which he didn't know he could express. He listens to it. Sometimes, even talks to it. He constantly thinks about a lake he promised his wife he would take her to one day. He gradually realizes that he's much more enamoured with the idea of missing his family than he was with the family itself, so he decides to start writing.

Margaret is close to retirement now and can no longer bear working two jobs. She quits the night job as a janitor and hopes for the best for her son's condition. Her pension isn't due for another couple of years. She can't afford to keep herself afloat while sending money to Little Harold to take care of himself. She feels guilty when she misses sending her granddaughter a present for Christmas, three years in a row now. The granddaughter whom she'd never even met. The granddaughter she feels obligated to love and care for.

Little Harold is getting restless knowing that his medication funds are running dry. One night, after years of not talking to his mother, he finally calls her, demanding money. Margaret tries to explain her situation, about how she was forced to quit one of her jobs. How she can't hold out much longer with the second one, but Little Harold won't listen. He has a hard time listening to people when they deny him something he wants. He finds it hard to care for somebody who's face he can't even remember at this point. Little Harold just wants his money.

Why can't Little Harold just have his fucking money?

The next day we find Old Margaret at that same supermarket where she used to work. Her cane shakes and her bones creak when she turns the corner to find a pile of broken salsa splattered across the floor in aisle five.

The bagboy drags the mop and the yellow *caution* sign past the aisles until he comes face to face with Margaret, creeping toward him from the other end. Her dread-filled face sends a worried chill down his spine. There's something uneasy about her pace, she's in too much of a hurry, but for what he doesn't have a clue. He watches her take the first step down the aisle and soon does the same.

The rubber tip of Old Margaret's cane digs harder into the tile floor with each determined step, looking as if she would collapse at any moment. She finds the strength to keep herself up and moving forward. When she notices the bagboy approach, the swings of her cane become longer; her steps more rapid to keep up. She loses concentration. She can't keep up with what she's doing *and* watch for the bagboy. Her vision is blurry. The sounds in her head become muted. Her breathing is rapid and irregular. Any minute now, the sweat between her hand and the handle of the cane is bound to make her slip up and hit the floor. A sharp pain shoots up from the heels, through her ankles, then wraps around her kneecaps as it continues up the sides of her thighs. Before she has a chance to look up and see how far she's come, she finds the pile of salsa is closer than she thought. The tip of her cane lands on a shard of glass by her feet.

She made it.

Old Margaret doesn't give herself a moment to reconsider this impulsive decision. She doesn't give herself time to regain her breath or her strength. She doesn't need a moment to look around, nor to hear what's going on around her. Not for this. Yet, a small part of her, a lame final glimpse of foolish hope compels her to look up and check on the bagboy, who isn't nearly as close as she expected him

to be. She knows that the bagboy can easily catch up to her. To help her. Does he know what she's about to do?

Should he? She thinks.

Her knees tighten to keep her weak body up when she tosses the cane off to the side. She turns away from the bagboy and the cash registers and the mall she'd practically lived in half her life. She turns her back to her son and her husband and the school counsellor and virtually anybody she'd ever met whom she could spread the blame onto for everything that's ever gone wrong in her life. She finally lets go and allows her body to fall backward into the pile of broken glass and salsa. The impact sends a welcome pain to the back of her head. From the wetness in her back she feels a faint shiver shoot through her bones. With her last few ounces of strength she digs around by her side and grabs a handful of glass. She brings the hand to her mouth and lets the shards fall deep down her throat.

With her last ounce of strength Old Margaret takes her last breath and whispers, for the entire world to hear, "fuck you, Harold."

MOTHERFUCKER, YOU COMPLETE ME

“Look...you see. I was only trying to be...I don’t know—everybody’s just upset about something.”

“Right...yeah...everyone’s *always* upset about something.”

“I didn’t mean to act the way I did. I was trying to be professional—that was it.”

“Uhuh.”

“If I hurt you, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah...”

“Look, you don’t have to tread lightly around me...”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you really sure?”

“Yes.”

“Well, asshole. For starters, you went a bit far. You realize that outside the venue of my client’s choosing I’m just another human being, no? Grabbing me by the neck like that—not cool. You think that just because I allow that pleasure to whoever hands me the money at the end of the session, I expect to be treated the same way at any other hour of the day? Are you a henchman...or driver...whatever you are *twenty-four-seven*? You gotta drop the act *sometime*, no?”

“Yeah...I—”

“But let *me* guess: you got some little jerk-off moment earlier today and now you’re feeling a bit emotional. You feel the need to talk it out?”

“What!?”

“Yeah, that’s it, isn’t it? Break a few bones, get that blood rushing through ya, waved your pistol around...you killed a motherfucker today, didn’t you?”

“No, not at all. Not one bit.”

“Come on, don’t lie. Why else would you act like this?”

“I didn’t. OK. I did probably make a guy bleed, *maybe*—but not in the way that you think. We just...talked.”

“Just talked?”

“Just talking. It felt pretty good actually.”

“Well, that’s not right?”

“I don’t know...I don’t think so.”

“Wow, some professional *you* are. Hah—whatever happened to that little slip of paper they made you carry around? The boss isn’t gonna be too happy if he finds out.”

“No shit.”

“But I guess they’ve got their own problems to deal with. I’m sure you’re fine.”

“I think I will be.”

“You know what...”

“Yes?”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Hey, you hungry? We should get something to eat.”

“Ummm.”

“Just a snack. It’s nothing.”

“But why?”

“I guess, I just feel like talking.”

“Thought you had plenty of that today already?”

“Maybe I can just listen then? I’m sure you’ve got an interesting story or two. How was your day, anyways?”

“You know, to be truly honest. And this might go against your first impression of my feelings towards this whole thing—I kind of liked it. There was progress. It felt

different.”

“Great. Good. So how about it then—tell me what went down?”

“Hmmm...can I say no?”

“I guess.”

“Hah, sure then. What the hell.”

“Great...good.”

“You didn’t kill a guy...”

“What? You know I’ve never actually...we—”

“And I didn’t have to eat cum for dinner. Yes I know you didn’t actually kill a guy. I don’t do *that* as often as you’d suspect, either. We can pretend that neither one of us did our jobs tonight—that’s something to celebrate.”

He came out of the sandwich shop to the sight of Christina sitting on the hood of his car. The flashes of neon lights danced across her face, her reluctant smile, her inviting eyes. In one hand he held a sandwich wrapped in dainty paper, held together with a thin burlap string. In the other hand was a black coffee. He cursed under his breath for not getting an insulating sleeve as the paper cup burned his fingertips.

“Where’s yours?” She playfully yanked the sandwich from his hand and unraveled the burlap string, tossing it onto the road.

“Not too hungry,” he wanted to make a joke about how his stomach was already full of butterflies, but no amount of playing the scenario out in his head led to a satisfying conclusion. He shuffled onto the hood of the car beside her and watched her delicate fingers unravel the paper wrapping.

“So,” she went in for a large bite. With a full mouth, she said, “what is this, then?” To her left, up above a flashy purple awning, she spotted a neon outline of a burlesque dancer kicking her leg out, then tucking it back in. From where she stood, the leg emerged and hid right behind his nose when she looked over. “What are we doing?”

He forced a large gulp of mouth-burning coffee down his

throat and coughed profusely. With teary eyes he looked over, revealing the neon lady to Christina in her full form, “I can’t really say,” he said, “I don’t know.” He turned to face her. She looked away.

Christina took another bite and watched the street light change from red to green in front of her, the plethora of neon lights taking life as the night fell, and the man to her left trying to catch a sneak peek through her peripherals. She chewed with her mouth open just to see his reaction. Nothing.

“So...” he exaggerated the pain from the burning coffee in his mouth so she would notice, perhaps give him some leeway for sounding so awkward when he asked, “...what’s it like?”

“What is?” She mumbled.

“You know—growing up. What was your childhood like?”

“Look. Do you know how many guys have asked me that question?”

“I’m just curious,” he hid behind his cup of coffee.

“Of course you are—they *all* are. Do you want to ask me something real or are you just trying to feel smart, seeing if any of your shallow assumptions prove to be true?”

“No. NO!”

“Come on! Hah—how fast can you get yourself out of that one?”

“Uh,” he stared at her, perplexed.

“I’m just messing with ya. Relax,” she laughed, “but seriously though, you can do better.”

“I umm,” he burned the roof of his mouth again, “my dad hit me, too. When I was a kid. Once or twice.” He turned away when Christina glanced over at him and saw the neon lady’s leg swing in and out from behind his nose.

“Oh, wow,” she scoffed.

“I can relate, you know...”

Oh, you can relate? I’m trying to give you a chance here, bud. You may as well have just blown it. You can relate,

pshhh. Wow. You and everybody else.

You can relate—let me tell you about relating, pal.

I once was a little twat. And just like every other little twat out there I had a best friend twat, a bestie, as some call them. Shit, we did everything together: ate, danced, played, laughed cried, talked about boys—pretty standard stuff, right? Once we hit puberty, our periods synchronized... probably...I don't remember, but it's pretty believable to say that they did, given how close we were. God, we could really relate to each other; it helped us love each other equally. We were inseparable. So silly. We were so stupid.

When she fell and scraped her knee, I showed her a gash on my forearm that I mysteriously got earlier the same day. We sat beside each other, not saying a word; just the fact that we felt each other's pain was enough to keep us going. To keep us close—that was all we needed. We hugged and we cried and we thought about how great it was that there was somebody, her and I, who understood each other. Isn't life just fucking grand? Can you imagine the unicorns and butterflies flying over our heads, blessing our world with all their beauty?

You can relate.

Once evening I was giving her a hard time about wearing a silly looking turtleneck sweater during summer. Usually, we'd be comfortable around each other, with the teasing and all, enough that yanking at each other's clothing was deemed an acceptable thing to do. No big deal, right? I thought that when I tugged at her sleeve and called her a dork that it was a perfectly normal thing to do. Usually she'd laugh along with me and tease me back about something trivial. Usually we'd fall into some sort of silly hysterical laughter and forget how this whole thing had started in the first place. Not that time. Not when my giggling immediately subsided when I saw bruising all around her scrawny little neck. Shit became real and I was at a loss for words. For the first time ever, since I can remember. I couldn't look at her, but I couldn't turn away, either. I could tell though, from the look on her face, that she

wanted me to know, but couldn't say a word. She began to cry and I was sure I was supposed to be saying something. But what the hell do I tell her? I was twelve and stupid.

Her glossy eyes stared so intently at me, waiting for me to speak. Just say anything. Please, make this poor girl feel better. Goddamn it, we have so much in common, so much to talk about all the time. Why now? Why are my lips sealed shut? Should I just brush it off? The longer she sits there in silence the easier it feels like I can get away without saying anything. But at the same time I know that's wrong! Should I make a joke about her stupid turtleneck sweater again to ease the tension?

I couldn't do a single thing.

But I'm sure you can relate.

Then I thought about a time from earlier in my years that I figured would totally make her feel better. It was a funny story and it surprised me that I've never shared it with anybody, let alone my bestest friend. It was New Year's Eve of '97, or somewhere around that time, and I absolutely despised everybody who showed up to my parents' party. It was one of those crowds that completely changed the character of the place you liked to call home.

Suddenly, I was watching my dad laugh manically at the jokes of his so-called peers, the same sorts of jokes that would make him cringe and maybe throw the remote across the room if he heard it on TV, followed by a long-winded rant about the lack of quality in today's programming.

For some odd reason, when the neighbour with the immaculately mowed grass next door told the same joke, I got to watch champagne squirt out of my dad's nose. That neighbour relished in the moment, thinking himself to be the king of comedy, and strutted away like some big-shot.

"What a phoney," I thought to myself. I hated myself a bit for resenting my father for laughing at that stupid joke. I couldn't stand to look him in the eyes and sneaked away upstairs to where my parents kept their treasured computer and extensive collection of books.

Maybe I'll look through my father's books to keep myself

busy. I loved looking at those scientific drawings of all the different parts of the human brain; sometimes I would even pretend to know what the hell it all even meant. When I felt extra mischievous, I'd look through the biology books and skip to the pages that had all those descriptive images of the human reproductive system. Maybe I'd log onto AOL and chat to random faceless strangers. Either way, my adventures were soon cut short.

When I got upstairs I found that the pig-faced neighbour's wife was sitting in that chair I liked to sit in, cradling a pig-faced baby in her fat pig arms. My mother stood over her and caressed the top of the baby's head. Her glossy eyes looked over at me, her mouth opened to a soothing smile and the words, "wouldn't you like to have a little brother of your own, sweetheart? He could be your friend."

Why? Hell no. What, you don't like how I turned out so you wanna try again. And besides, I have a friend! She's the best friend anyone could ask for. What? She can't come over because dad doesn't like her parents? That's not my problem, why are you making it my problem? I'll be friends with whomever I want to, damn it.

But I said none of those things. Instead, I backed myself out of that room and ran downstairs to the kitchen, perhaps sneak out a handful of cake to calm my fragile little nerves. While stuffing my face with cake I spotted an open bottle of champagne sitting on the kitchen counter. I scanned the area for adults. It was clear. I grabbed the neck of the bottle with my scrawny little hands and took a sip. Then a gulp. Then something persuaded me to start chugging. The taste was so sweet; the bite made it exciting. Before I knew it I was squirting champagne out of my nose with every diaphragm-breaking sneeze. The bottle fell to the floor and left a huge mess of sticky liquid and glass shards.

I freaked out and ran to my room to simply end the night. Tuck myself in. Forget tonight and everything that's happened. I ran past the suit jackets and the ugly sweaters when the firm grasp of my father's hand caught my shoulder and stopped me in my tracks. "Hey, kiddo," he turned me

toward the man standing in front of him, "have you met pig-face here? He lives next door and makes more money than me despite the fact that I make a living thinking I actually help others, but I don't let that get to me. He has a boy about your age who likes to shoot at squirrels with his BB gun when he thinks nobody is watching, you should really meet him..."

I struggled to get myself free, but soon gave up. My father and pig-face laughed it off, thinking I was playing with them. The laughing stopped when a mix of champagne and undigested cake ended up on pig-face's nice pants.

"You little brat!" I knew my father wanted to say something much meaner, I could see it in his face. I've never seen that look before in my life. He was always such a collected man. I don't know what got into him, maybe the fact that the pig-face who made more money than him was standing right there. Maybe he needed to put on a show when he grabbed me tighter by the shoulder. Then by my arm, all the way up into my room.

He sat me down on the edge of my bed and stood there shaking his head at me. I couldn't find the words to answer him when he asked me what the hell had gotten into me; whether or not I felt sick came much later into his interrogation. My answer didn't seem to move him. Before long I found him making his way back to the party.

But I'm not going to tell you that.

Her name was Becky, this friend of mine. She forced a smile when I told her the story, but it didn't seem to move too much else of her otherwise. She told me how glad she was that there was somebody around to make her smile and comfort her. She hugged me and I hugged her back. She slept over that night.

The next morning I woke up to find her missing. My parents told me that her dad had come by early in the morning to pick her up. I remember every word Becky said to me that night as she fell asleep. But they weren't the words she really wanted to tell me, and I didn't stop to think about why she was walking around all funny.

I'm about sixteen now and I haven't seen Becky in school for over a week. I can't get her on the phone, but sometimes her father would accidentally pick it up and I'd hear the grunt of his voice as he frantically searches around the receiver for the correct button to hang up.

One night I decide that I've had enough and bike over to her house at two in the morning. I stand by her bedroom window begging her to come out and tell me what's been going on. She tells me to go away but I'm being persistent. I finally persuade her to sneak out.

That night she tells me the whole truth: about her father, about what he does to her. A complete breakdown of how long a bruise on each body part takes to heal, what brand of concealer works best for her skin tone. She tells me about all the mean things he says to her when he forces his way inside of her. How futile it is to fight back. She seems almost convinced that the pain eventually fades. Almost boastful, in a way, when she describes how quickly she claims to move past it and keep going.

She's only sixteen, but that youthful vibrancy in her face is long gone.

What did I say? What do I say? What the hell does anybody say to that? It's gonna be OK? She's not that stupid and I know it's not going to help.

And me—how idiotic am I when I decide that the best way to make her feel better is to reciprocate the story back to her? I need a friend. She is my one and only and every second of this moment I can feel her fade away from me. I can't lose her. Without her I have nothing. Yes, the story with her father comes at a shock—but what about me?

I think about how I'm going to miss times like when we climbed over the school fence during recess to snatch candy from the corner store down the street. I'll miss those walks through the woods on the way back home with her where nobody would catch us sharing a cigarette together, and how freaked out we got when we had not a piece of gum between the two of us to conceal the stink and end up washing our heads in a murky stream to clean the smell off.

I suddenly missed that when I told her I had a headache and didn't want to go outside, she would tell me the same, only to show up at my house an hour later with a handful of her father's painkillers. She would take one with me, despite feeling fine. She would take it for me, and we would lie out in the middle of the field at night, our vision blurry, our heads stuffy. Our faces feeling the numb breeze of the cold autumn wind, feeling the chills shooting through our spines.

I missed the time she failed a test with me when I told her I couldn't find the time to study the night before.

She related, for my sake, I thought. And now it was my turn to do the same. To be a good friend, the best anybody could ask for.

That night outside her house I cried harder than I ever have as I told her about how my father abused me almost every night. How I bled from the same places she did, and how he made me watch as he burned my diary when he read what I wrote about him. The details I came up with on the spot were astonishing. I made up a story about how my mother knew all about it and did nothing. No, it got even worse, how she was a part of it all.

I cried, because I had to believe there was no hope for me. She believed me, because there was no hope for her.

We cried for hours. I felt like I was finally getting my old friend back. For weeks and weeks it was all we talked about, things seemed to get easier. We were one again. My story was as tragic, if not more so, than hers, but no matter how bad it got we had each other to relate to, we had each other's backs. And that seemed to be enough.

No matter how many times I tried to convince my mother that it was all a lie, she would never look at my father the same way when she found Becky's suicide note in my drawers. It talked about everything we ever talked about. She thanked me for being the best friend anybody could ask for and wished that things would turn out better for me and my situation. She admitted that she always did see me as the stronger of us two.

* * *

But I'm not gonna tell you any of that.

"Right," Christina snapped back to reality. She promptly chewed through the unfinished bits of sandwich in her mouth, swallowed, and said, "I guess I got slapped around once or twice. But who hasn't been, right?"

"Right."

She folded the paper wrapping over the remaining half of the sandwich and stuffed it into her purse. "You have a funny way of pulling at my pigtails, you know that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look...wait. What *is* your name, anyways?"

"It's John."

"Look, John, I'm not sure I feel much like talking tonight. I have some reading to catch up on—I'm a little rusty on some things. Maybe we should just stick to doing what we do. Call it a night?" The look she gave would only accept one sort of answer.

The words struggled to leave his coffee-burnt mouth, "ok."

Rule #6: Be Proud

SUNDAY

KIDS

Time wasn't making any sense to Gerald, he wasn't sure if a few minutes had passed, or a few hours, when he opened his eyes again to find a figure kneeling down in front of the door, fidgeting with something in his hands. A hand came up over the figure's head with something sharp and pointy, then flew down toward the floor, making contact with a hard clear plastic. One stab. Two stabs. The third stab got the blade deep enough to allow him to saw through the packaging. The eardrum-shattering squeaks were just barely loud enough to conceal the disgruntled noises coming from the man by the door.

He stopped midway. "Can opener!" The figure jumped up, "Hah-ha, a fucking can opener can do it," then sprinted past Gerald straight into the kitchen. A moment later he reappeared and jumped for the package before Gerald had a moment to blink. He brought the teeth of the can opener to the edge of the plastic packaging and turned the handle. It cut through the first edge like butter. The second one was just as satisfying, despite having already cut through it with the knife. Then the third. He could have left the forth where it was, but it just felt too good to stop.

The top of the plastic packaging was thrown off to the

side. A shiny new door knob emerged in the palm of his hand, he squeezed it and brought it up over his head. "Last one!" He shouted. "...Last one."

"You're supposed to break your neck, you know."

Skinny Russian kept his back turned while Gerald watched him work on the door. He paused momentarily to let the words sink in, then continued removing the bent striker plate from the door frame. An identical, brand-new striker plate emerged in his hand, he closely inspected it, then brought it up to its position to check the fitting.

"Hey! Are you listening?" Gerald spoke louder, "you're supposed to break your neck when you hang yourself—that's how it works. Even you're not dumb enough to not realize that. Why not jump out of the window? Throw yourself down some stairs. Drink methanol? Clearly you've put enough thought and effort into it. Had time to think and plan it out. Why resign yourself to suffering?"

Skinny Russian grabbed the three #2 screws out of the package and started each one in its hole while keeping the striker plate firmly in place. He scanned around the perimeter for the appropriate screwdriver. When he glanced over his shoulder his eyes accidentally caught a glimpse of Gerald's. He froze. "I don't know—maybe it was the way I was brought up," he stared at Gerald while his hand continued to feel around the floor for the screwdriver, "nothing ever felt earned, had there not been a struggle first. Every little success in life felt more important when there was first suffering behind it. Without suffering, everything felt unearned...hah!" he found the screwdriver and brought it up to his face. Finally an opportunity to break the gaze. He took it. His eyes followed the tip of the screwdriver. He turned away from Gerald and watched the Phillips-tip go into the head of the first screw. "Suffering felt like it gave everything and anything meaning."

"That's absurd!" Gerald cried out, "what simply being satisfied with good-old-fashioned hard work?"

"Hah!" Skinny Russian shouted, "the thing about hard

work is: it's never hard enough. Never has and never will be."

"At what point then do you start calling it suffering, or a struggle, whatever—it sounds like you're just interchanging the two words with one another when it seems convenient. Sounds like you don't know what you're talking about."

"Hmmm," Skinny Russian paused, "I haven't thought of that. Never been good with words, I guess. They just sound right and I leave it at that. Maybe when it just stops being worth it—the hard work I mean."

"It almost seems like you wanna brag about how much you suffer. So what then—give up this hard work you're putting into whatever you're doing. Call it suffering. Call it a day? *Hey, everybody,*" Gerald waved his hands around, "*I suffered—look at me!*"

"Shut up!"

"For such a supposed moron you sure over-think shit a bit too much, you know that? *Don't think outside your paygrade,* that's what I say. Hah! So what do you suppose comes after you're done suffering? What do you get out of it, aside from bragging rights, that is?"

"Suffering gives life meaning, at least that's what Mother Teresa taught, I think," the last Phillips-head screw tightened, he pulled at the lip of the striker plate to ensure its snugness then threw the screwdriver back onto the carpet, "my life had no meaning, so I thought that, maybe, if I were to suffer, my death might. I don't know..." he cradled the busted door knob, hanging on by a thread, in the palm of his hand. With a swift yank it came loose and fell to the floor, "it was a nice thought at the time."

"You a religious man?"

"No, but I think everybody gets a little religious sometimes."

"Shit, man. By all first-world standards, Mother Teresa was a cunt."

"Hey! You can't say that!"

"Yes I can, I'm Irish."

* * *

The door slammed shut. With a swift twist and yank of the doorknob it flew open again. Skinny Russian rested his head against the frame of the door, looking down at his hand, while repeating the motion over and over again. He listened for that satisfying *click* when the bolt slid perfectly into the baseplate. If there was anything he had gotten good at since his business venture, it was replacing doorknobs. After about a dozen more tests he slammed the door shut for good and twisted the locking knob into the closed position. He stepped back to admire his work. If there was any look of satisfaction in his face to begin with, it would've faded when he saw several hairline cracks running lengthwise all around the frame. Upon closer inspection, he noticed a separation between the frame and the wall so wide that he could see the finishing nails connecting the two together. He swung a foot and kicked the frame as hard as he could back into the wall. The gap closed; the hairline crack grew larger. "Shit!"

The time on the display of the blender read 09:56 and Gerald had given up trying to sleep at that point. His eyes aimlessly watched the frustrated Skinny Russian slam and kick the door repeatedly. For once he thought of the other side, and how much pain something as simple as a broken door can bring onto another person. A part of him wished that the crazy man had actually gone out to buy doorknobs instead of Vodka that first night. Another part wanted to tell him that he once saw a ten-pack of them at a large-chain hardware store. He couldn't tell him then; for some profound reason, he couldn't bring himself to tell him now, either. The time wasn't right. The time was *never* right.

"They're going to kill you, you know?" Gerald said to the door.

"Are you lying?"

"Yes. I don't know. You can't hide all *this*, can't you see that? They'll see it all. They'll shoot you right where you stand. They don't ask questions—you know that."

Skinny Russian fidgeted with the chain lock on the door while his bony fingertips caressed the hairline cracks. "Then

how do I get out of this?”

“You can still run.”

“And leave all *this*?” He spun around to present his hands to the entire apartment, catching Gerald in the line of fire.

“Yes, leave all that. Just give me a way to call somebody so I can get myself out of here. I think I’ve had enough.”

“All of it?”

“Yes, goddamn it. All of it. Find yourself another hobby.”

“This isn’t a hobby!” Skinny Russian shouted, “This is my life. I have nothing else. What the fuck am I going to do?”

“I don’t know man,” Gerald chuckled, “fucking...Google it!”

“Arrghh. No! Once you’re back on your feet you can talk to them! Tell them what I did!”

“I *could’ve* talked to them three days ago,” he blinked rapidly to check for any signs of improvement in his vision. Nothing. “But now...I’m fucking blind to add to it all.”

“I didn’t know you would live!”

“Ain’t that comforting! Right. Fine then! Stay. Leave me here and watch me rot while you delude yourself into thinking that any of your little projects amount to anything. Misery loves company—hah! You selfish prick! See if I give a shit. But if you’re gonna stay here and die, at least go out with a bit of dignity. Fight back! Act like a man for once!”

“Were you being a man...” Skinny Russian sprinted to the bedroom. He kicked up the mattress to reveal the double-barrelled shotgun, grabbed it, then yelled across the apartment at Gerald, “...when you got shot with your own gun?!”

“Hey, I’m not saying it always works out. But it’s nice to have some sort of ideals so that when everything goes to shit you can say you stuck to your guns. I don’t know what it means...but people have been saying that forever so it must mean something. Something to brag about...at least—hah!...” Gerald watched the blurry figure walk to the centre of the living room and plant itself on the floor, “...wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah...sure.” Skinny Russian said to the door knob.

Gerald looked in disbelief when he finally realized what it was that Skinny Russian was holding. Then, like out of nowhere, “intuition!” he exclaimed.

“What?” Skinny Russian looked over.

“Intuition—that’s the word you want to use...when you were talking about your feelings...”

“Right,” he turned back to the door, “you better fucking hope they knock.”

A THOUSAND CANVASSES

“So, that’s it then?”

“That’s my story.”

“Oh. Not the themes I was going for.”

...

The two men sat side by side on a rusty iron bench. The hundred yard stroll from the old man’s living space was the furthest a sprained ankle allowed one to walk before collapsing. The Writer relished in the comfort of being able to sit upright for the first time in four days, although it took him some fidgeting find his seating. His gaze was held to a spot across the road where a hole in the barbed-wire fence led to a set of old railroad tracks, behind which stood a massive brick structure that once was a sugar factory. He was genuinely curious about the paintings the old man told him about; he wanted to see for himself if they really were as pointless and ridiculous as the old man had made them sound, or, maybe, just maybe, he’d find some sort of meaning in them and begin to doubt everything he’d ever known about art. Either way, now was not a time to take that trip.

“What?” The Chairmaker asked, “was that not

sufficient?”

“No, don’t get me wrong. I think it’s a decent story—but why couldn’t you just tell Gerald that you were his dad say, thirty-something years ago?”

“I meant to, John.” He turned away in embarrassment. “You don’t know what it’s like. I was waiting for the perfect time. I needed to be the perfect person. So I waited and waited until I could become somebody worthy. Now I can.”

“How’s that?”

“Are you kidding me? This is perfect!” His voice retreated when he realized there was a bit too much enthusiasm there for what came next, “I mean—what a better way to prove myself to be a decent father than to get Gerald out of whatever pickle he got himself into this time?”

The Writer scoffed, “a bit opportunistic, don’t you think?”

“At this point, John, I’m running out of options. In hindsight, if I really think hard about it, there have been a hundred such opportunities—I done messed them all up. I can’t mess up this one. Can you understand that?”

“I think it’s futile,” The Writer’s voice cracked, he sunk lower into the bench.

“Come on, John. You can’t be *that* cold—have you got a family?”

He stared blankly at the worn-down road several feet ahead of him, from either end, in his peripherals, it looked like it could lead absolutely anywhere, “I have a lake,” he answered.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It *means*,” he glanced to the man on his right. His lower jaw trembled, “it’s too fucking late.”

“John! How about you let me decide that!” The Chairmaker shouted.

“What am I left with from all of this?”

“I gave you everything you asked for!” The Chairmaker jumped out of his seat and stood over The Writer, shooting a finger at his face.

“No-no—you didn’t tell me *everything*. A guy like *you*? You must’ve done something really bad. Come on, tell me

everything. Give me something better. Give me something really sick. Hah, yeah—you're a liar—you killed your wife, didn't you?"

"John," The Chairmaker's body shrivelled up, "no, *no*."

"Yeah you're probably some sort of sick freak. I can tell from your face. You raped Gerald and now you want his forgiveness. Of course—that makes so much more sense. I mean you raped me—that couldn't have been your first time!"

"John! Enough! If you want to go look for something that isn't there go behind that goddamn sugar factory!" The Chairmaker put his hand over his eyes and paced between the bench and the curb. The Writer watched the cars pass by the hole in the fence. "John!"

"And what then? You think they're going to listen. You think they're going to come at you with welcome arms and hug you and tell you that everything is forgiven? Do you think he'll *understand*; do you think he can even has the capacity to care enough to even try? It takes time to build that! You can't show up out of nowhere. Why do you think you deserve his attention? It's over and done with! Everything is ruined—get over it. How can you be so oblivious?"

"I'm not!"

"It's too late, you should just get over yourself and die."

"It's not—I can still fix it—give me a chance to fix it! Just a chance, John. Please. Whatever it is that he may have done to *you*—let me make it right! I beg you—just let me see him!"

"What *he* did to me?"

"Yes."

"What he did..." The Writer watched the sunlight-drenched decaying body of an old man pace back and forth. From the looks of his posture, The Writer wondered how the hell in the world this man could lift a sledgehammer, let alone have the strength and endurance to put on a show like he did earlier. He watched cars fly past him, thinking what it would be like to watch this man stumble and fall into the

road and watch the first car take his life. Whether he deserved it was something he felt deeply indecisive about. He looked down to find his hand squeezing his notebook, “what he did to me...” then threw the notebook at the old man. The Chairmaker attempted to catch it as it flew over his head and onto the road. He spun around and lunged for it, only to fall to his knees onto the curb a foot away from the passing cars.

“What are you going to do...when you see him? What are you going to say?”

The Chairmaker rolled over and looked up at the morning sky. He felt the chill of the fall breeze send shakes through his bones. His hip felt a tingling sensation on its side that expanded through to his groin. An embarrassed smile formed in the corner of his mouth. He turned to The Writer. “Well, actually. There’s a poem I’ve been working on. It’s a little rough—”

“Oh Jesus.”

“Thought I’d read it to him.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” The Chairmaker chuckled, “and I agree—I think it’s stupid, but I can’t help it. I *had* to write it. Can’t you say you’ve ever felt the same way? What the hell made you want to be a writer in the first place? Help me out here, John.”

“Ughhh.”

“John?” The Chairmaker said to the clear blue sky.

“What.”

“Can I read it to you? See what you thi—”

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh.”

“Do me one last thing, before you go.”

“So you’re—”

“Yes.” The Writer interrupted. “Grab that notebook over there.”

“Torturing old men like this—have you no shame?” The Chairmaker rolled over toward the road and pulled himself back up, one knee at a time, and crawled to the edge of the

curb. When the road was clear of cars, he stretched out and yanked the notebook off of the concrete, then retreated back to safety. "There, what now."

"Take your shoe off."

"John..."

"Just trust me—you don't need to understand—it's something for me. Last thing, I promise. It'll be worth it."

"Fine, John," he sighed. With the notebook at his side, The Chairmaker sat up on the curb and pulled his foot in. He grunted while untying the laces. The shoe came off and he glanced over at The Writer for his next set of instructions. "Had I not meddled with your kind in the past," the tone in his voice was strangely upbeat, "I would've found this to be much stranger than I do now." A sound left his mouth—something between a snort and a laugh.

"OK now," The Writer took the leg of the chair he'd been using as a cane and pointed it at the notebook. "Now, I want you to put the notebook into the shoe."

"You what now?"

The Writer pointed his walking stick at the shoe, "the shoe, come on. We're close now."

"How far in?" The Chairmaker rolled up the notebook and stuffed it way deep into the sneaker, he struggled to get it past the top of the ankle, "it's too big."

"That'll do," The Writer cracked a smile. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He nodded up to the clear sky and whispered to himself, "perfection." He revelled in his precious moment, not caring what the confused man sitting no the sidewalk thought of him. "Now read it," The Writer said.

"Come on, John. I don't have time for this."

"You'll want to read it, trust me."

"John, you wouldn't listen to my poem, and somehow you expect me to read your damn diary? Now how is that at all fair, tell me?" The Chairmaker pleaded, waving the shoe at the man on the bench.

"You're ruining the momentum, just read the damn thing already."

"Goddamn it, boy," The Chairmaker tipped the shoe over and snatched up the notebook when it fell out, he opened it to the first page.

"Nice," The Writer muttered to himself.

"Here goes," he read, "*John can't take a shit...come on, I read this already,*" he looked up at The Writer, "is this a joke?" he brought the notebook closer to his face, "*...the vast amount of painkillers he'd consumed over the...* goddamn it! What am I looking for?"

"OK, you don't have to read the whole thing."

"Oh thank God," The Chairmaker flipped through a bunch of pages and came across a portion that had nothing but jagged blue circles and torn paper shreds dangling off, he flashed the pages to The Writer, hoping for some clarification.

"Further back," The Writer rolled his eyes.

"Fine. OK. *Nice suit, I guess. Suits all seem to look the same to me. Waves gun around. What are the open carry laws in this state? Says cool shit. Proud of every word. Narcissist—no, too topical. What's the popular mental disorder these days? Introspective...sort of. Says some more cool-sounding shit hoping it means something. Not shallow, but not an ocean of emotion, either. Hah—ocean of emotion. So stupid. Why do I bother writing this shit down? I should pretend like I'm still writing while actually figuring out how I'm gonna get out of this. Oh, I'm actually writing all of this down, no need to fake it then I guess. He doesn't suspect a thing so far...*" The Chairmaker looked up at The Writer, "John...is this..."

"Skip ahead. If you want."

"Ok...*Blender. Hell of a nice blender. Boarded-up windows. It stinks in here. John thought this might be some junkie's hideout, but he gave it the benefit of doubt hoping his story wouldn't start off with a random first encounter so generic. Is this noir? Why is this sounding like noir in my head? John needs to think up funnier shit. Nobody will read a noir story. This kitchen—maybe belongs some sort of mad scientist. No, bad spelling. Can't be. Scientists for sure know*

how to spell. How dumb do you have to be to misspell the word alcohol? Did he actually give me a real gun? Is it loaded? ...John,” The Chairmaker made a connection, but he couldn’t pinpoint exactly where it led to.

“Next page,” The Write felt his knees shake in anticipation of hearing the next passage.

“Soviet. Small prison, very few guards around to keep everyone in check. Every few months they’d send an inmate with a shopping list into the small town nearby—The Russian?” The Chairmaker stood up. “The fucking Russian...what the hell was *he* doing there?” he grabbed whatever strands of hair remained on his head and pulled at them with his free hand. Once again, he read through the page to make sure he wasn’t reading into The Writer’s scribbles wrong. With his face glued to the page, he asked, “The Russian? John.”

“The Russian.”

“Is that where—“

“Yes.”

“Is he—“

“Probably.”

“Goddamn it. I have to go.” The Chairmaker picked the shoe off the ground and slipped it on, nearly toppling in the process.

“Wait.” The Writer said.

“Wait?”

“Wait.”

“What! Why, John?”

“Tell him it was my idea—with the rescuing and the poem and what not.”

“Now why in the hell would I do that? WAIT! What in the hell do you mean, rescuing? What happened?!”

“I can’t tell you.”

“WHY! John.”

“Just do it...as a thank you?”

“Arrghhh!”

“Is that a yes?”

* * *

The Chairmaker was well on his way when something compelled him to turn around to get a final look at The Writer, only to find him staring right back. In a way, he felt apologetic and thankful. For a moment he even considered asking The Writer if he would need a lift somewhere before he realized how absurd that all sounded and simply said to him, “fuck you, John,” before turning back and continuing on his way.

“Fly, monkey,” The Writer said.

PILLOW TALK

Thursday had called in the night before insisting she come this Sunday as early as possible. That he was willing to pay a premium over the current premium, and on top of that, a bonus for her, given that it would be the final session. Christina didn't put up much of a fight when she got the call at one in the morning. Perhaps a little sour, at most. She said that she would arrive on her own time, and, if she needed to, would sleep in as much as she felt necessary.

She stayed up thinking about her client until four in the morning; she stepped out of her apartment building at ten. Her make-up was minimal, enough to indicate an effort. A loose-fitting sweater hung from her shoulders that stretched down to the tops of her knees. Her jeans were plain but clean. Christina wondered what ridiculous, yet amusing, outfit Thursday would have her wear this time. Her slip-on shoes didn't make that familiar *click* and *clack* down the cobblestone walkway when she approached her usual mode of transportation.

She was met with a breakfast sandwich and a coffee; John was met, for once, with a smile. The coffee sat waiting in the door's cup holder while she finished off the sandwich down her mouth in just a few bites. Somewhere between

them, John heard a *thank you*. He glanced over at her in amazement and sarcastically shook his head. A light chuckle. A gleam in his eyes. John scanned around her body in a way that she knew what he was saying.

“Hey,” she said in-between chews, “when your clients pay you for your personality,” she swallowed before delivering the punchline, “you can afford a few pounds.”

“Sure,” John said. He smiled and shook his head as he turned around and buckled himself in. “Whatever you say.”

Christina’s late-night appearances on the webcam shows became more sparse with each new adventure or vacation she embarked on. Her fans were complaining and her blackmailer was getting more restless. The money he was pulling in from her shows was a larger sum than he could’ve expected, and it was slowly dwindling. He insisted, in order for her to make up for lost time, that she start doing the sorts of shows that cost \$14.99 a minute. She refused immediately. He attempted to bargain, but she would have none of it. He then threatened her with not only releasing her name and address to the public, but also that long-forgotten blog she’d written about her past clients. She stood her ground. Years had passed since she’d last worked as a psychiatrist, her clients would have no recollection of their sessions, she thought. Her license was not something she thought she’d ever need again, losing it was no big deal.

Christina decided she was done with that life, but, when she gave her final word of refusal, she quickly learned that it was not yet done with her. Not only did her blackmailer leak all the information possible to the internet, he offered credit to his customers in exchange for their help in getting the word out there. Her wrongdoings would be out there for every man to see. No matter if they were fans of Christina’s shows or not, not one man who hid on the other side of the computer was fond of what Christina had done. Free credit or not, supposedly. She had a hard time tracking it, but the word spread like wildfire.

No more than a few weeks passed when two of her old-

time clients had discovered this information for themselves. The two men were higher-ups at one of the larger casinos in town; they were not pleased to see that their secret affair had been exposed to the public. The fact that their names were left out of the documents didn't help to ease their fears. If *they* could figure out that it was about them, then, for the same irrational reasons as always, everyone else would, too.

Christina didn't suspect a thing when they pulled up in front of her apartment building one night as she was coming out and threw her into the trunk.

The two lovers had an elaborate plan to take her way out into the desert where they would first beat her senselessly, then interrogate her about the person leaking the information, then end her life, presumably in a way that would not ruin their nice suits, before digging a deep hole where they would dispose of the body.

The plan was cut short when they were called in for a meeting. The sort of meeting that a casino higher-up would receive at two in the morning. The sort of meeting one can't miss. They were only ten minutes out of town before the car turned around. On the way back, on the edge of the city, sat an abandoned sugar factory. That would suffice, they thought.

When you find yourself stuck in hell, an unknown twenty-first century author once wrote, the quickest way out is a direct line through the thick of it all.

Christina watched, through a crack in the bedroom door, something that would've resembled a private show for \$14.99 a minute. But perhaps, on a different sort of website than where she performed. She was optimistic, yet repulsed at the same time. Her gag reflex asked her to leave immediately; her curiosity kept her feet planted and her eyes fixated on the subject. It didn't take long for her to forget almost everything she'd conjured up the previous night, let alone wonder how she would work any of her material into this session's dialogue. *Just roll with it*, she repeated in her head. No amount of thinking could've prepared her for this

moment, anyway. *The customer always gets what he wants.*

Christina got premium front row seats. From her state of shock and disbelief she found her mind begin to wander, in a state of hyper-focus, from one intense detail to the next. She listened to the harsh squeaking of the man's skin against the latex flesh. Her eyes followed a thick bead of sweat roll down his back, through the ass crack, then drop down off of his hairy taint with each thrust, falling into a dark wet puddle onto the sheets beneath him. His rhythm had put her in a trance and she was unable to move or speak or even think.

"Are you watching?" Although muffled, she heard the words. She forgot to reply. He called again, still facing away from her, "hey! You better be watching! I'm paying big money here." His own talking interrupted his flow. He grunted in a grumpy, old man sort of way. It took him a solid minute of trying out various speeds before he found his rhythm again and resumed. "HEY!"

"Yes..." she snapped out of it, "yeah I hear you. Her hand reluctantly pushed the door open a little further. She squeezed her entire head inside. "Did you want to...talk... about something?"

"NO!" he said through his teeth. A deep breath, "not yet!" Thursday readjusted himself and grabbed the blow-up doll by the shoulders so tight that his hands made fists through the latex shell. The bottle of lubricant on the bed was getting depleted. He pulled out and applied a fresh squirt when it began to burn, then resumed.

Christina sneaked the rest of her body inside the bedroom and leaned up against the door frame. *No turning back now*, she thought as she crossed her arms and awaited the grand finale.

The doll stared blankly at his face when the air was squeezed out of her neck and shoulders. The thrusts became harder. He looked away to hide the disgusted look on his face. The grunts became more sporadic. The veins in his forearms bulged. Skin flush. His ass cheeks tensed up. The bones in his ankles cracked when his feet contorted in every

which direction.

He put a hand over the doll's head and grunted in victory as he ejaculated into its plastic hole.

On especially sleepless nights, the man, who according to some, was a painter, and others a carpenter, would pull the rusted chest up to the decaying windows on the top floor and watch the sugar factory, behind which lay a stash of dozens of old paintings. He couldn't figure out what they meant, but had hoped that maybe years of being exposed to the elements would bring something out in them: a streak, a smudge, even a tear in the fabric could mean something, surely. As hopeless as he was, the thought of the paintings even making it as far out as the front door left him with an odd sense of completion. Progress. As if an act that minute was a stepping stone for something he wasn't willing to admit he was capable of. He pondered all he could; he hadn't visited them since the last once left the building.

It was on one of these sleepless nights that he witnessed a disturbance approach his sacred spot behind the sugar factory: a luxury car going around the corners a little too fast. He watched and watched, hoping it was perhaps some drunk rich kids going for a joyride, but minutes passed and he hadn't seen the car exit from the other side. They must've spotted the paintings, he thought, and made haste to their location.

Down the industrial-sized elevator. Across the road. Through the hole in the fence. Armed with nothing but his fists and a fully loaded pistol he finally came around the corner and began yelling at the two men to get away from the paintings, before realizing that they were extracting Christina from the trunk of their car. He shouted in an attempt to scare them away but they didn't see the gun and wouldn't listen. He eviscerated two kneecaps, one per person, and instructed them to drive off and leave her behind.

That night, the man took Christina up to the fourth floor of the decrepit building where he worked and lived. He

made her tea, comforted her, and asked her about who she was and what the fuck she'd done to get herself into whatever it was that she was in.

He listened. The more he heard the more he saw an opportunity in the situation at hand. He saw that she had nowhere to go, so he offered her protection if she were to work for him. He saw an opportunity to expand the family business, and perhaps, finally garner some respect from his older brother, Tom. There was only one condition: she were to stick to one driver, Gerald, and just simply talk to him once in a while. Figure out whatever there was to figure out about this man whom she'd never met. *It's his mother, you see.* She were to simply figure out what this Gerald was all about. What made him tick. What he thought of her new boss. She were to not ask as to why.

Christina was reluctant, but with nowhere to go, and all her secrets exposed, accepted this new position. Stranger men have asked her for stranger things, she figured.

Not a long time passed before her new boss was getting restless with the lack of new information regarding Gerald. He pushed her. And the more he information he demanded the more suspicious she became. It didn't take Christina long before she figured out his motivations.

But Gerald was a closed book. Nothing of her old skills and knowledge seemed to help her sort this out. She lost confidence in her abilities with every wall he put up for her to break through.

Over the years, Christina learned that there were two types of men when it came to post-coital communication. The first type would be more willing to take conversation to a more intimate level. The second would close up completely, usually due to their unsatisfactory performance. Christina hated herself for taking it that far. She hated herself even more upon learning that Gerald was of the latter variety.

"You weren't supposed to see that." Thursday lay face-up in a puddle of his own sweat on the stained sheets. The blow-

up doll lay on the floor by the bed. Talking through his teeth, he said, “you weren’t even supposed to be here...”

“Wait...” Christina said, “me or *her*?”

“You know damn well who! Quit messing around now—it’s time to get into character!” He shouted.

“Look,” she took a careful step toward the bed, “maybe this is one of those times where we should just talk. It seems like there’s a lot to talk about.” Another step forward, “so you cheated on your wife, alright, let’s figure out why you did that. We’ll start off slow. Who was *she*? Your secretary? Your barista? Tell me.”

“You know damn well who she is!” His eyes filled with rage, “I said get into character! If you want to help me then do what the fuck I tell you to!”

“But that’s not how this works!”

“Christina, goddamnit!”

“Look...” she walked over to the side of the bed. “Fine,” she sighed, “if you think that’s gonna do it—let’s have it your way. OK, I’m your wife—what’s next?”

Thursday closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his belly. Fingers locked. He took a deep breath. More calmly now, he spoke again, “what did you say, when you first saw *us*?”

She took a minute to think. A million questions ran through her head. Her mind raced. A million questions with a million different scenarios branching out from each one and she had to pick just one. The interesting. The obvious. The unlikely with the biggest payoff, if it were true. Just one—that’s all she got. *Back to the basics*, she thought, no fancy shit. The simplest question would do for now, “why?”

“Wrong question!”

“Shit,” she said under her breath, “how could you do this?!”

“NO!”

“You son of a bitch, what do you think you’re doing!?” She cried.

“Wrong. Fucking. Question!”

“Grab your shit and—“

“NO!” Thursday jumped out of bed, stormed over to Christina and pointed a finger at her face, “you know what she said, goddamn it!”

“I don—“

“Yes you do!”

“You need to—“

“You say: WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO TO OUR DAUGHTER!”

“How could you...” Christina’s voice sunk.

“...She said.”

“How can you live with yourself?” She backed out of the bedroom. He followed, slowly. “You sick...fuck.”

“Yes, baby,” Thursday’s head wobbled wildly. His eyes avoided her convicting gaze. “Yes, I am sick,” he slapped his forehead several times, “I’ve been sick a long time now. I don’t know what I was doing. I’m fucked up.” Thursday stopped and looked up to find Christina standing in the middle of the living room with that look on her face he didn’t want to see, “I’m *still* fucking up.” He closed in.

“You vile scumbag piece of shit!” Christina smacked him across the head when he got in her proximity. “How could you do this to her!”

“Baby,” he grabbed her by the wrists, “please.”

“Don’t call me that! Don’t call me your baby!” she thrashed around, struggling to break free from his grip.

“Please don’t leave, baby. Don’t leave!” He squeezed her wrists tighter.

“Don’t you fucking look at me!” She broke one hand free and hit him across the head again, “don’t you dare fucking look at me! Oh, I’m gonna leave. You can bet your sorry ass that I’m gonna leave!”

“Please! Just don’t tell anybody about this.” Thursday began to sob uncontrollably. He fell to his knees in front of Christina and dug his face into her stomach. She tried to push him off, but he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in. “Please don’t. I’ll leave—I promise. I’ll never come back. Just forget about all of this—forget about me! Just don’t say a word!” He looked up from the wet stain he

left on her sweater, "Please, promise me!"

"OH!" She fought harder to get herself loose, "I'm not gonna go easy on you, fucker! People will know. I'LL MAKE SURE THE ENTIRE WORLD KNOWS!" She kned him in the chest, he fell by her feet.

"No! You can't!" Snot and tears ran down his face, "you can't do this—it'll ruin me, baby!"

"They'll know," Christina made way for the door. She was stopped in her tracks when Thursday grabbed her by the ankle and anchored his body weight to her, "let me the fuck go!"

"...Please."

"You're gonna pay for this!" when she couldn't kick him away, she tried to drag him down the floor along with her.

"Don't do this to me!"

"I have to!"

"NO." He got her other ankle, stopping Christina in her tracks. The sobbing subsided. "No one will ever know," his grip tightened.

"Let me the fuck go!"

"No, you see...she didn't say a word."

"Huh? I'm leaving!" Christina couldn't shake him off.

"In fact, she never even walked out that door," Thursday yanked at her ankles. Before Christina realized what was happening she was laying face down on the hardwood floor with a taste of blood in her mouth. The fall made her head heavy and dizzy. "I begged her..." a voice came from behind. She saw the trail of blood coming out of her nose as she got dragged away from the front door.

"Please..." Christina said into the puddle of blood on the kitchen tile.

"But no—you just wouldn't listen. I can see it in your eyes: your mind's made up." Christina tucked her hands underneath her belly and tried to push herself up; a foot on the back of her neck swiftly pushed her back down. "So I got you down on the ground, just like this." She heard heavy clunking of metal come from the kitchen drawer, then a hand grabbed her by the shoulder and flipped her over on

her back.

Any thoughts of fighting back subsided when she looked straight into the barrel of his revolver. Blood bubbled out of her nostrils and ran down the side of her face. He sat down on top of her, pushed the barrel into her neck, and moved his face in toward hers. “And then you said...”

The bubbles blew more rapidly.

He moved in closer; his face against hers now. The barrel dug into her temple. “Then she said!?” he shouted into her face.

“*She says...*” Christina shut her eyes. “*She says...*” her fighting hands went limp. She took a deep breath. The bubbling stopped. She said, “what would you do differently this time?”

His head slammed into hers. A stream of blood trickled from his temple onto her face. With the deafening ringing in her ears Christina couldn’t even hear the gun fall onto the tile floor right beside her head. His naked body felt heavier now and her weakened hands dug into his belly and pushed up. Pushing harder and harder until eventually the dead weight rolled off to the side.

Christina gradually got to her feet. Tried to regain herself. A finger in one ear, then the other—the ringing wouldn’t stop. She couldn’t hear herself breathe. Her vision was blurry. Leaning on whatever objects were along the path, she finally got herself to the bathroom where she ran her face and head underneath cold water in the sink. Through the ringing in her ears, the water sounded like a rapid river thrashing far off somewhere in the distance. She hit herself on the side of the head, hoping to ease the noise, but all she heard was a dull thud.

She fumbled and stumbled straight for the front door. The blood-soaked sweater came off and she used a clean portion to dry her face and hair before finally leaving.

Her rapid heartbeat couldn’t stand waiting for the elevator, so she took the stairs. Twenty-seven floors, all the way

down.

Down the service hallway.

Through the fire exits.

She came out onto the underground parkade and ran for the rectangular square of light leading her to the outside.

She couldn't hear her own thoughts as she kept on running, as fast as she could, all the way home.

SAME OLD POEMS

From a broken home to a broken job. They were right—I'm but a stupid, selfish, foolish slob. These familiar places, this upcoming night, someone I thought I knew will soon be in my sight. But when he is, what words to say? Maybe it's worth it just to spend a day? Maybe it's worth it just to spend some time with this person I claim to be a son of mine...

*My son, yes Gerald, you're my son!
Can't you see that I'm the broken one?
I've waited thirty-seven years,
Is it selfish that I expect some tears?
Will I be worthy for you to love me back?
With you I'll have my life on track.
With me you'll feel full and complete.
Us two: a team that can't be beat.
Son, didn't you know that I was scared?
So hopelessly lost, so unprepared?
Unprepared to talk about the things that hurt me...
But did they you? It never crossed me.
I hope it's not too late to apologize
About my faults and countless lies.
Is it too late to change a thing?*

Why'd it take so long to feel this sting?

All I want to do is—

What am I doing? This is garbage. You hopeless old fuck.

A poem?

A goddamn poem?

Is it even worth a try?

It's best you turn back around, rethink your whole life again, grab a bottle find a corner, curl up naked and just die! You pathetic, worthless, stupid man with a pathetic, worthless stupid plan who thinks these words will prove a damn you plan and plan and plan—they can! He'll understand! Like hell he will. It'll take some time! Just take a pill. Better yet, grab the whole bottle and wallow in sorrow as you swallow. Just crawl back to the hole you came from and write out to your hearts content, just know these words won't leave your mouth—he'll love me!—you can head down south and maybe start your life anew, forget the things you've put you through. Forget your life. You know what? Forget his, too. It's best for everyone involved. You'll make new stories to be told. It'll be as if he never happened. What if he asks? You never happened. As you walk up, can you admit: you never loved him? Yes, I did! I've pondered many restless nights! No, all you've done is write some rhymes and thought about righting some wrongs for which you don't think you're at fault but life dealt you some shitty hand, like you're just a victim of circumstance...

I'm going through with it.

No, you're not. Your poem's shit, have you forgot?

I'll think some other things to say!

Like what—how about: what a nice day? Yesterday the sky was grey. I'm feeling great—hip-hip, hooray? This weather's looking mighty fine, I've been waiting for the sun to shine. Speaking of sons, boy, I'm your dad, but I forgot to tell you and that's bad. Oh my God, silly me, how about we catch up, have some tea? Your mum? Ah right, 'twas no big deal. An oven made out of her a meal. Then I ran off, well, emotionally. I kept you near—it tortured me. But I hope

*you're happy with yourself. A fulfilling life—or is it hell?
How would I know—I'm an old fart. Oh, and by the way,
want to see my art?*

...

SONS WITHOUT FATHERS

*I thought I said all there was to say,
but with every step along the way
I'm finding more and more to say.
I feel like I can go all day!
I feel inspired! So inspired!
And even though my legs are tired
my thoughts are racing; I feel wired.
There's a fire burning deep inside me!
See what you do? You make me sing!
These words, these thoughts,
what gifts you bring.
I want to give the same to you,
just say to me: I love you, too!
I'll say it every day and hour,
I'll say it when you're not around.
I'll say it because I feel empowered,
I'll dream it when I'm in the ground.
Just let me hear you say it once!
Look at me—forgive me, son.
Look at this face: it's just like yours,
and your poor mother's... God bless her...
This rough draft work*

*This rough draft life
My rough draft ways which killed my wife
This rough draft me amounts to shit.
This rough draft life—be done with it!
I'll make it right. I'll make it right!
I thought I've lived the longest nights,
But having you out of my sight
Makes me so tense, this chest so tight.
If you feel lost, just look to me,
I'll guide you, I can be your light!
You help me breathe; I'll help you see,
As long as you belong to me.
As long as you're my baby boy
I'll run and jump and shout with joy.
And start for us this brand new chapter
From here on out it's our happily ever—*

“You bullsheet me,” Skinny Russian’s father would call out to indicate his displeasure with any mildly annoying occurrences in his daily life. He would say the words to the car salesman when he couldn’t get a good bargain. He would say them the policeman that pulled him over for speeding when he was in a rush. When the rent was increased. When the landlord kicked him out for causing disturbances in the apartment complex. When the pay check was lower than expected or when another money grabbing scheme didn’t pan out well. He said it to the school counsellor when his time was being wasted by having to hear about how his son was performing poorly in school. He called it out repeatedly when he was stuck in traffic.

“You bullsheet me!” His father shouted before pulling the trigger on that double-barrelled shotgun which tore the top half of his own head off.

Splinters of the door frame and finishing nails flew across the room. The bronze strike plate rolled on its edges across the carpet. Rose inserts and screw posts, stems, spindles, and

all the remaining inner hardware from the busted doorknob followed. The dangling doorknob finally hit to the floor when the door swung around and slammed into the wall behind it.

“You bullshit me!” Skinny Russian shouted as he pulled the trigger. The heavy grain of the twelve-gauge shot tore through the remains of the open door to his left, the wall and frame to the right, and everything in between, where an old man stood, now with a wide hole in his stomach, falling face-first onto the carpet decorated in the remains of the doorknob and a pool of fresh blood.

The shotgun hit the floor. Skinny Russian crawled at full speed on his knees toward the body. Without thinking twice he grabbed it by the arm and pulled it further into the apartment, just far enough to clear the doorway so that he could shut whatever remained of the door. He sat hunched over the body for a few tense moments before his curiosity finally got the best of him and he rolled it over. It was not a face he recognized. The sweatpants and ragged shirt on the man’s body was not the same look he’d learned to fear over the last few months. He ignored Gerald’s screaming at the back of his head from the couch. It was interrupting the stream of thoughts running through Skinny Russian’s head that were trying to justify killing a man he didn’t know. *The broken doorknob*, that’s enough, he thought. *He’s had enough! It was him or me*, he added, doing his best to ignore the fact that in the man’s hand he couldn’t find a gun, only a notebook.

“Hey! Are you listening!? Who the fuck was that?” Gerald shouted.

“I...”

“What?!” Gerald kicked around on the couch, trying to get his body to sit up, “one of us? A neighbour?”

“Why couldn’t you just knock...” Skinny Russian said to the corpse. He stood up and paced in front of the bloody mess, nervously away tugging away at his clothes and chewing on his fingertips. “It could’ve been so easy—a few knocks and none of this would’ve...”

“Hey. HEY! Now’s not the time for another nervous breakdown,” Gerald’s body fought his attempt to sit upright.

Skinny Russian’s eyes jumped around wildly. His feet wouldn’t stop moving, even when he stood in place. He ran to the door, stepping over the body into the mess of wood splinters the brass pieces, in order to inspect it. He hadn’t even noticed that his bare feet were standing a patch blood-soaked carpet in front of the door. The slide lock remained intact and his trembling fingers managed to engage it. He put his ear up to the door to listen for movement but couldn’t hear anything over the sound of dogs barking.

“Who is he?!” Gerald shouted. He blinked repeatedly in an attempt to clear his vision to see it better for himself. It was of no avail.

Skinny Russian ignored the shouting. He fingered around the rough edges of the hole where the doorknob used to be. His lower jaw tensed and loosened. Feet made into fists, in and out. The other hand felt around the remains of the frame. He wondered if there was any meat left on it to even attempt to install a new striker plate. He wondered if he would have to learn how to use a nail gun. *How long does it take to completely replace a door frame? What tools would he need? Is there framing involved? How much is a new door? Is it a one-man job? Who’s the dead guy? Do he invest in a stronger door? Only bad guys kick down doors. Is it time to run?* He slammed his forehead into the door. *Don’t look behind you.* He kicked it again and again and again until the sound of dogs barking was drowned out by his incessant noisemaking. *Does he let him rot here on the couch or would he prefer the one round left in the second chamber?* He looked down at the shotgun. *Does who prefer that second round?* “Can you buy door knobs in bulk?” He said to the door.

“NO!” Gerald rolled himself off of the couch and crawled toward the body, ignoring the pain telling him to do otherwise. “We are not doing this again!” Every inch travelled was met with a cry of pain. Every lunge forward caused a shortness of breath. “We’re gonna figure this out!”

he stopped and looked up to find Skinny Russian standing in the same spot, then kept going. The body lay only five feet away from him but it was not enough to get a clear picture.

Skinny Russian shoved his hand inside the hole where the doorknob used to be, grabbed the thin outer layer of wood, and yanked back as hard as he could, tearing off a chunk of the door. "He could've fucking knocked!" He tore off another piece and chucked it across the apartment. "It's not that hard!" he repeatedly punched the door until his fist finally went through to the other side. "It's not my fault!" He spun around to find Gerald crawling toward him. "What the fuck are you doing?!" He shouted at Gerald, "stop moving, you stupid piece of shit or I'm going to fucking kill you!"

"Well, are you gonna tell me who in the hell you just tore apart with that shotgun?"

"STOP MOVING! We're not done yet, you're going to ruin everything!"

"Then tell me something, for fuck's sake!" Gerald could barely make out the patches of grey hair on top of the old man's head and what looked like sweatpants.

"Fine!" Skinny Russian shouted. Without thinking twice about the fact that it was a dead person, he crouched down beside the body and began to inspect it. "He's old," the dead, lifeless eyes stared up at him. The man's face didn't tell him much. Skinny Russian scanned the bigger picture. "Old sneakers," he looked further up, "grey sweatpants... ragged t-shirt—wood splinters, or something." He got frustrated and looked back at the face, "I don't know—he's old—what the fuck do you want me to say!"

"Yes, I got that!" Gerald stood still on his hands and knees. "Look further, what does he have on him, wallet, keys...anything?"

Skinny Russian rummaged through the pants pocket closest to him, out came a set of car keys. He tossed them at Gerald.

"Good, that's something," Gerald fingered around the edge of the key, it didn't inspire any ideas. Next, he pinched

the key fob between the thumb and the index and brought it up to his face in an attempt to get a clearer look at the chrome emblem embedded into the plastic. He moved it back and forth in front of his face several times but the picture wouldn't get any clearer. It was just as much a shiny chrome blur a foot away as it was an inch. He swore under his breath, and was about to give up on it, when his fingertip grazed the top of the emblem and something came to him. He found the edge of the chrome and followed its rounded corners. Once the circle was complete, the finger found the line going inside the circle, then the next one, diverging from the centre, until he could make out a cross dividing the outer shape into four sections. His finger ran around the perimeter once again to double check something. His suspicion was right, it was a rectangle with rounded corners, split into four—the same shape he would find on his own car key fob.

"No wallet," Skinny Russian continued to look for other clues on the dead body, ignoring Gerald's incoming revelation. The rest of the pockets came out empty. Skinny Russian leaned back on his hands and watched Gerald try to figure out what this key fob could mean, as he wasn't saying anything. His eyes danced around the dead body, trying to avoid looking into the exposed meaty centre whenever it appeared in his peripherals. "There's something!" Skinny Russian reached over to the man's hand. In it, he saw a notebook rolled up into a tube. The man's dead hand was stiff to let the notebook go. Skinny Russian apologized to it as if it was still living to make prying the notebook out of the hands less uncomfortable.

"You find something?" Gerald looked asked.

He finally broke the notebook free, the imitation-leather-enclosed tube unrolled itself into a flat rectangle in the palm of his hand. He didn't need to open it and look inside to realize what it was.

"You gonna say something? What is it?"

"Your friend's notebook."

"Can you make more sense please?"

“I recognize it. From when he was writing down my—”

“John!?”

“Yeah.”

“Give me it!” Gerald lunged toward the approximate direction of Skinny Russian’s hands, reaching for the black blur in the centre of his chest. “That cocksucker!”

“Yeah...”

“What the fuck was he—,” the texture of the emblem on the key fob completed the sentence fumbling around inside his head. He gripped the notebook in one hand and searched around the floor for the key fob. Once he found it, he clicked the familiar button in the familiar spot and, expectedly so, not too far off in the distance, it made that familiar beep he wanted to hear. “I know where John is,” he said to the blurry shape of the skinny man. “Let’s go. You’re driving. We’re going to end this nonsense.”

“But I wasn’t finished...”

THE ELUSIVE FOURTH MONKEY

The spot was unmistakable. He reminisced about the first time he laid eyes on that decrepit building just a few months ago, filled with a sense of excitement. The feeling of new beginnings. A bright future. A purpose that finally gave his life meaning. The first time he was sure of something, or so he thought. In hindsight, now pulling up to a fleet of familiar-looking sedans, he realized that it wasn't really the first time he felt such excitement, and that he simply had an easily excitable personality that blocks out any sense of reason when a bright new idea fills his head. No amount of fantasizing about fancy blenders or mountain-fulls of doorknobs could wipe the dread off of his face when he pulled onto the gravel road and joined the rest of the black sedans.

Gerald reached for the door handle, but stopped when he got distracted by his feet slipping around on the carpeted floor mat. He let his hand down and dug his feet at the sides of the mat, trying to catch a corner, flipping it over onto the prickly rubber side. He footed around until it was completely flattened out and then ran his shoes against the surface for several moments, enjoying the popping sounds it made. It brought a strange sense of comfort to him. Skinny

Russian was in no hurry, so he let Gerald have his thing, as long as it would take.

With all this kicking around, Gerald felt the barrel of his pistol, which was tucked into his belt, dig into the side of his leg. He promptly pulled it out and went back for the door handle. With a gentle nudge of the shoulder the door swung open. He got one leg out of the car all by itself; the other required the help of his hand. He brought the pistol out into the light, and as closely as his vision would permit, inspected every bit of it. He felt around every sharp corner and smooth surface. Every cold inch of the exposed barrel. Every bit of warmth underneath the hand that clutched it so tightly. He pulled the action back just far enough to feel for the round primed and loaded into the chamber. With the action exposed, he rotated the pistol in his hand until he could spot a glimmer of light bouncing off of the brass shell inside. *Just making sure*, he thought. *It had to be right.*

"Are you ready?" Skinny Russian asked the windshield.

"And what the hell are you in such a hurry for!" Gerald shouted, "twenty minutes ago you didn't want to go. Now you're in such a fucking rush huh? Thought you were supposed to stop me." He released the action, with a cold, metallic thump in snapped back into place, "maybe you're not such a good guy after all. Fine!" Gerald tried to pull himself out of the car, "Fine! Let's go!"

"Ok. Let's go."

"Help me up, asshole. Let's finish this. Come on."

"Fine." Skinny Russian jumped out of the car. He banged on the roof, then on the trunk, then on the side of the car, all the way until he got to Gerald. He yanked Gerald by the arm, threw it up over his shoulder, and stood him up, "I guess we're doing this."

They only had a few steps to climb before getting up to the main entrance. The walk to the industrial loading elevator was only a few paces further, and Skinny Russian got the both of them there without breaking a sweat. He removed Gerald's arm from around his shoulders and shoved his limp

body into the corner of the elevator, where a metal railing took most of his weight. Skinny Russian reached up for the first gate, a rusted diamond-patterned grate that was in serious need of oil around the rails, and slammed it down in front of him. Through the gate he spotted a familiar-looking door across the hallway and instantly regretted slamming the door down with such force. He reached up again and gently brought down the inner wooden gate until he heard that loud clank that told him it was safe to operate the elevator. His hands, still clutching to the gate, trembled with a shake that soon reverberated through the rest of his body. When he finally broke free, he looked to Gerald for further instructions.

“Start with the top floor, it’s the last place I would think to look. Somehow it makes sense right now.”

“Top floor,” Skinny Russian repeated under his breath, he reached over to the button panel and hit his palm against the corresponding button.

The elevator jolted violently on its start, causing Gerald’s ass to slip off of the railing and down onto the cold metal floor. Skinny Russian took his time acknowledging it despite Gerald’s demands to recognize his displeasure with the fall. Skinny Russian turned back to face the grates, watching the three floors crawl past him before stopping at the top. He ignored Gerald’s cries of pain and threats of getting shot as he grabbed the wooden gate and pulled it up. The metal gate followed. Skinny Russian stood at the edge of the elevator, revealing in full clarity a woodworking workshop that looked as if it hadn’t been tended to in decades.

“Hey, asshole!” Gerald shouted from the floor. “Get me out of here. Help me up!”

“You can go now,” Skinny Russian said under his breath, just loud enough for Gerald to hear.

“Don’t fucking back out on me now!” Gerald turned his body to the side and stuck an elbow into the ground, “I thought we were in this together!”

“In what, exactly?” Skinny Russian said to the scene in front of him.

“Arrrghhhh!” Gerald grunted, planted his other elbow into the metal floor and began to crawl past Skinny Russian, “you know what,” he closed in, “get fucked. So much for finishing what you started.” Gerald couldn’t find the strength to look up when he said, “I should’ve known better. Hey!” he stopped, “you want me to put in a good word for you, huh?” he stopped and waited for a reaction, “you want me to clear you up? Huh? You still need *me*, you know?” but he got nothing. Before Gerald knew it he had cleared the elevator and his elbows were banging into the cold concrete floor. Before he could get his final say both elevator gates had shut behind him and the elevator was on its way down.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered as he crawled along the brick-covered elevator shaft, pistol in hand. “John!” he shouted as he made his way around the corner. “John, you cocksucker! Do you hear me?” Gerald scratched at his eyes, trying to see better, but couldn’t spot anything in front of him aside from a few blurry bright squares of the windows up ahead. When he paused to listen, all he heard was the flutter of old newspaper being thrashed around by the wind.

He crawled closer to the windows, completely ignoring the warm feeling in his stomach spreading through his clothes, all the way down to the knees. His vision worsened. His head felt heavy and stuffy. His finger rested atop the trigger as it trudged further on without a target in sight.

He was flat down on his stomach when finally he made it around the final corner. Aside from what looked like broken furniture the room appeared empty. He didn’t know what to make of it. An exasperated sigh was his only response. His exhausted eyelids fought a futile fight before falling shut. His elbows gave way. Shoulders collapsed. The weight of his head became too much to bear, so he used the remaining strength left in him to let it down gently. With his cheek pressed against the concrete, little bits of drool seeped out from the corner of his mouth.

“Hmmm,” with his last breath, a faint growl emanated from his partially sealed lips, “thought I’d have more to say.”

* * *

Through both elevator gates Skinny Russian spotted the two familiar men in matching suits waiting for him when he landed on the ground floor. The door behind them was propped open. Behind it, a figure sat behind the desk in a smoke-filled office.

"It's you!" The voice from the room said, in a tone that once sounded so inviting, but now it seemed, in a way, menacing. "I wasn't expecting you. Shall we have a chat?"

Skinny Russian stood frozen in the elevator, he leaped back in fear when one of the men grabbed the metal gate and slid it upward. The second man opened the wooden gate and indicated for Skinny Russian to make way into the office. He took short, reluctant steps forward, avoiding any eye contact with the two scary men at his sides. Once past them, he stopped at the doorway, making out every detail of the office, ensuring it was exactly how he'd remembered it. It was, all but the look on the man's face from behind the desk. "Hi Mr....Uncle Tom."

"And what brings *you* here?"

"I..."

"What are you doing over there? Come on in," the man tapped his fingers against the wooden desk in a manner that was meant to be inviting. "Have a seat."

"I think...I'm good here."

"No I think you should sit down."

"I'm..." Skinny Russian made fists of his hands, "I'm going to stand!" He could hear one of the men approach from behind, perhaps hoping to persuade him to change his mind about standing. "I know where your henchman is!" He shouted when a hand forcefully grabbed the top of his shoulder.

"You what? How?"

"I know what happened to him!" The hand on his shoulder eased up.

"Well. That is great news!"

"I made him better. I helped him!"

"What was wrong with him?"

"I saved him and I healed him and I fixed him and I brought him back to you!"

"Gerald, that troublemaker." The man chuckled.

"He could've died, but I fixed him. I made him better. You wouldn't think I could. But I could! *I* did it all by myself!"

"Well, congratulations. Where is he?"

"And you know what? I'm going to get you your money! I know what to do!"

"Well of course you are. I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm getting you your money, and you and all your people can finally leave me alone."

"Alright then. Where is Gerald?"

"And you won't break my doorknobs. And you won't punch and kick me," Skinny Russian glanced back at the man behind him, shaking the hand off of his shoulder, "and I saved Gerald and I proved myself to you and I can do anything!"

"Yes, good for you."

"He's upstairs...and *you people* won't fuck with me any longer. And I mean it! I'm not just a ball of yarn!"

"Yes, of course you're not."

"Do you people hear me?" Skinny Russian turned to the two men behind him, "I'm not a fucking ball of yarn!" Back to the man in the office, "do you hear me? Huh?"

"Oh yes, we hear you."

Skinny Russian backed out of the doorway. Pointing a finger at the man in the office on his way out, "not a ball of yarn..." down through the hallway, past the two men.

Once more, as he approached the exit, he stared them down, "not yours," he pointed to one, then the other, "and not *yours*." He was at the door when he shouted, "bad people—radishes! *All of you. Rediski!* Then made a break for it, "*shut up!*"

THE RELUCTANT OPPORTUNIST

“John?”

“Yes. What?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I catch you at a bad time or did you simply forget how to talk to your fucking boss?”

“I was just in the...what can I do?”

“Do you know why I’m calling?”

“No, can we please—”

“What are you in such a rush for? What are you doing?”

“I’m just over here—”

“What’s all that shuffling about, where are you?”

“I’m at the client’s house.”

“What! What the hell happened? Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“You know you’re not supposed to leave your car unless something goes wrong, guys like you scare clients away. Tell me right now what the hell happened!”

“Uhh, I just needed to—”

“Is the client alright? Where the hell is Christina?”

“She’s in the bathroom cleaning up. Everything’s fine she wanted me to bring her purse up. We’re all done. The money’s fine. She just needed her purse and she forgot it and asked me to bring it up because she needed her phone

—”

“So that she could call you to bring her purse up?”

“...”

“Answer me!”

“No! I meant that she—”

“This grave you’re digging for yourself is getting deeper. Now quit lying and tell me what the hell is going on, I don’t have time for your nonsense!”

“It’s fine, look, Christina made a mess and she didn’t want to tell you because she knew you’d get upset and she asked that I come help clean up she was doing something in the kitchen for the client and a bunch of shit got spilled and broken and the client’s fine he’s asleep we’ll be out of here in no time, I promise!”

“...”

“I’m not lying!”

“...”

“I promise! Look, once she’s out of the bathroom I’ll get her on the phone and—”

“How’d Saturday go?”

“Saturday was fine, she had a long day, all the money was there. Everything’s in order.”

“I’m talking about the other thing. Henry called you, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he asked me to—”

“So did you?”

“Yes! I was there, what is this about?”

“Oh no big deal, while you were there you didn’t happen to spot a Gerald lying around with a bullet hole in his stomach, did you? Perhaps a large pool of blood somewhere on the floor? A foul smell? Cries of pain—anything? Hear anything? I mean I can imagine how that would be an easy thing to overlook—”

“I—”

“*I mean*, you *did* say you were there, doing your job. You wouldn’t have...for some odd reason...*forgotten* to do what you were supposed to do, did you? No pressure, just a simple question.”

"Is he..."

"Dead? Yes. And I dread the moment Henry returns and I have to break the news to him. The Russian brought him over. The Russian *also* brought along an attitude with him. I'm going to ask you again—were you there?"

"Yes! Maybe he hid him somewhere...or..."

"Or *maybe* you're lying to me again?"

"I was there! He had a shotgun and everything? Did you see his face? *I* did that!"

"A shotgun, huh? Didn't think he had the balls. Duly noted. How about you skip over there and finish him off real quick? I think that venture has run its course."

"What...I can't..."

"The first one's the toughest. You'll get over it."

"I have to help Christina with—"

"I tell you what to do, are you forgetting?"

"*But she needs me!*"

"I'm sure she can clean the mess up all on her own. Go. Now. You're irritating me."

"No."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that. Off you go, I want to hear those tires screech in less than sixty seconds. Keep me on the line—I'll wait here."

"I'm not going to do it. I'm done."

"I assure you that this is a bad time to be doing this. Go and do your goddamn job, we'll talk about your attitude afterwards."

"I'm being serious, I'm done with you. This was a mistake. I didn't want this life."

"You're having an emotional episode, it'll pass. Do some jumping jacks—get your blood pumping. Do whatever you have to do just make it quick and don't waste any more of my time. If you think you can walk away like this, then I have some bad news for you, son."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Did you really need to say that aloud? *Of course* I'm threatening you. What the hell do you think we're running here—a fucking ice cream stand? Of course there will be

consequences. I don't know what they are just yet but I'm sure you get the general idea of it—pain.”

“I don't think your attorney will be too happy to hear you talk to me like that.”

“Gonna hide behind your daddy's back then, huh?”

“You know what? At this point I don't give a shit what you think of me. It's over. There's something more important I have to do.”

“...”

“Do you hear me? *This is it.*”

“Ughhh, to think—all that time I wasted trying to make a man out of you. GO—be a whatever the fuck it is that you want to be. You're an embarrassment, you know that? I am very disappointed. Very, *very* disappointed. Your entire family is, too, and don't let them convince you otherwise no matter what they say. Just bring the car back, otherwise I'll have your legs broken. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“*You two!*”

“What?”

“Wasn't talking to you—*someone's* gotta do some work around here. I wish you the worst life, John.”

“Goodbye, Uncle Tom.”

She compared the sound in her head to that of a moment in a war film when a grenade went off a few feet away from the hero, she'd use the term *shellshocked*, but her education had taught her better. The ringing in her ears played at a constant tone for close to an hour now with no signs of relief. Her mind was off somewhere far away as her hands worked tirelessly to grab at whatever ledge or wall was nearest to help with keeping her balance.

She surprised herself with how efficiently she could get the keys into the lock and get herself into the apartment. Muscle memory, she thought. She'd remember herself coming home in a state much more intoxicated than in which she found herself at the moment. Like those other times, she barged in through the front door and stumbled on

through her living room like a zombie before flopping down into her bed. A moment of rest, finally, she breathed into her pillow to calm herself then sat up on the bed.

She pinched her nose, shut her eyes and mouth, and blew as hard as she could to clear her head. Right symptoms, wrong solutions. The pressure inside her head made her feel as if she'd been swimming a hundred feet below sea level and needed decompression. The blowing brought no relief. She squinted her face into a point and slapped her ears simultaneously but it proved just as worthless.

She couldn't hear her own thoughts, let alone the knocking coming from her front door, when she slipped off the side of the bed onto her knees and reached underneath for a black duffel bag.

Sneakers, jeans, t-shirts and hoodies were the first items to make their way into the bag. She reached deeper into the closet to grab armfuls of dresses and skirts and blouses and tossed them down onto the floor, revealing behind them a stash of books that haven't seen the light of day for many years now.

Several stacks of books at a time were thrown onto the bed. The first were the biology textbooks from her college days. The same sort of books she'd sneak away from her father's study when she felt extra mischievous and wanted to get a deeper look at all the funny pictures of the human reproductive system. Every function of every organ, every vein and artery, every soft patch of skin that a regular person wouldn't even think had a name to it, let alone such a specific function that ensures life goes on. Books that detailed the entirety of human life starting from the embryo, to the effects of old age, and everything in between, all the way up to the inevitable departure; the complete comprehensive encyclopedia detailing the circle of life.

But none of that made it into the bag.

The books that delved into the specifics of how the human mind works written by the *mmhmms* and the *tell-me-mores*, with their itchy trigger fingers on the prescription pads and the luxury overpriced chairs, which she never got

to own herself. The total—

“—*lack of judgementers* and the *complete understanders*. The *take-a-chancers* and the *it-gets-betters*. Ughhh,” she threw another stack onto the bed, her limp torso followed, “the *it’s-never-too-laters* and every motherfucker who could ever think they could help anybody. What right do they have!

“Fuck what you all think!” she grabbed a handful of the books and threw them over her head back into the closet, “fuck your tweed jackets and fuck your beards and fuck what you think anything means! Fuck your needlessly complex analogies, fuck your circle-jerk arguments and fuck your long-winded oxymorons! It wasn’t supposed to be this complicated! Fuck your imitators and fuck anyone aspiring to be like you! You were supposed to make it easier—look at where it got me! Fuck me for listening and fuck me for trying and fuck me for the times I actually gave a single measly fuck! I take it all back! You were fucked to begin with and I left you just as fucked! I fucked you when I listened and I fucked you when I fucked you and no one is better off from it. I’m done—I take it all back! Fuck these dresses and these heels and this fucking make-up and this fucking fuckity-fuck everything!”

She stormed out of the bedroom, and caught by surprise by her dazed state of mind, collapsed onto the floor beside the couch. With one lazy swing of the arm at a time, she pulled herself onto the cushions and lay face-up to the ceiling.

The knocking on her front door ceased. The handle turned. The door cracked open just far enough for the hallway to hear what was going on inside.

“Is it OK with you, if I just...” her body fidgeted, sinking deeper into the couch cushions, “...just lay here a bit. Can I talk? *Will you listen?*” She shut her eyes and crossed her arms. “Or don’t. As far as I know this is nothing more than a chemical imbalance in my brain. A momentary lapse of reason. Yet...”

“We lost, I think. Whatever it was I thought I was fighting

for. Or against. I don't know. What am I talking about...we lost, I only say *we* because it feels easier to swallow when spreading the blame. Whatever ideal I hung onto, I lost that, too, and what sickens me even more is that I don't feel like a loser for doing so...what the hell am I saying. There's a relief. What am I talking about? Why is this so hard?"

A bald head peeked through the crack in the door to find her laying on the couch, still unaware of his presence. He crept in further, enough to get his fancy suit through the opening, then softly shut the door behind him. He ran his hand over his bald head and readjusted his tie. He squared up his shoulders and straightened out his back. A look emerged on his face, the sort of look he'd been practicing in the mirror for many mornings now. Inside his head he began to recite his final rule:

Rule #7: A Man Takes What He Wants

He walked to the couch with a confident stride.

"I...goddamn it, get your thoughts together. If anything, this noise inside your head should make it easier to say, whatever it is you want to say, without hearing how fucking stupid it all sounds. How stupid they all sounded, and how I listened. OH! How I listened. Yeah...I lost. I lost because I don't know what to do. I lost because I'm saying it all now and I don't know where it's going and it's killing me. I'm lost because I feel so goddamn helpless to do or say anything important or worthwhile. I can't even find the strength to be cynical about it. I can't find humour in it. I can't feel happy for any good to come from it in the future. I've become bored with it all. I'm numb. I'm so fucking numb to it all. I don't want to be numb anymore. I just want...I lost because I'm starting to think that maybe I'm not so worthless after all. I lost because I'd convinced myself that I had nothing important to say and I can't fight that thought any longer. I'm *won't* fight it any longer. It's not worth it. It's not worth it!"

Rule #7: A Man Takes What He Believes to be Rightfully His

"...I lost."

Fuck.

She didn't see when he finally knelt down beside her, watching every tear that trickled down her bruised cheeks. She was startled for half a moment when her eyes opened up to find him massaging her hand, before finding a comfort in his presence, which she couldn't find the strength to fight. Before she could get another word out her mouth shut itself and her cheeks went flush from embarrassment. His grip was gentle. The words inside his head became jumbled. Her eyes were more inviting than ever, and for a reason he couldn't comprehend, made him uneasy.

~~*Rule #7: A Man...*~~

"Christina..." John squeezed her hand, "is there anything you want to talk about?"

WHEN THE SUN SETS IN THE EAST

The mid-afternoon sun shining directly above his head provided no specific illumination whatsoever to the scenery. The two-lane road in front of the bench where he sat became even less remarkable than how it looked earlier that morning. Every passing car was no more than a boring blur of dull colours when it passed in front of his eyes. The noise of the tires rolling on the pavement and engine roaring was no different from one to the next, coming and going to the metronome of the broken chair leg he tapped against the corner of the bench. A hundred beats per minute, perhaps, but he wasn't counting.

The Writer had completely lost track of time, but couldn't care less to know whether he'd spend a few minutes or a few hours sitting on that same bench where the old man had left him. More often than not his wandering eyes would catch the hole in the fence leading to the abandoned sugar factory across the road, focusing his lethargic thoughts to explore the idea of finding something of interest. It wasn't so much a fear of discouragement in what he would find that ultimately stopped him from taking that step further as it was a feeling of exacerbation if it were to be the contrary. People are a too much work, he thought. Some ideas aren't

worth exploring. The interesting inevitably turns to the disappointing when pursued too deeply for too long.

He only realized how long he had been staring at that hole in the fence when traffic became backed up in front of him and several cars had blocked his view of it. One car in particular had caught his attention. It was an old Volkswagen Bug which he'd seen around town parked on busy streets where it would garner the attention from tourists and unimaginative street photographers. Every inch of its body was littered with sea shells of all shapes and sizes from beaches found on every continent touching every ocean. Among them were miniature ceramic Buddhas in various sizes. Lord Shivas and Lord Brahmas, Jesuses and Marys were displayed on the hood and roof. Several monkeys making various hand gestures. A lion showing its fierce teeth. An owl with its eyes spread wide open. Bears, badgers, beavers. Camels and cats and cows. Alligators and dolphins. Sharks and turtles. Bats, eagles, frogs, snakes, grasshoppers and scorpions and spiders and anything that could ever mean anything filled every possible gap between everything else. At the very top and centre of the roof sat a little fountain that would light up with every colour of the rainbow. A loud and obnoxious marimba horn went off signalling to a homeless man blocking traffic with his cart to get a move on.

An overzealous biker, thinking himself too important to adhere to the rules of traffic, swerved between the two lanes at full speed and crashed into the homeless man's cart full of garbage, flying head first into the windshield of an oncoming car. The homeless man reacted a moment too late but was finally appropriately startled, and in his confused state yanked back at the cart in full force, toppling it over and pulling himself down with it.

The horns blared from both directions and with each moment The Writer began to find it increasingly difficult to be indifferent to the scene happening in front of his eyes. He became even more upset when he realized that the homeless man, who was clearly drunk out of his mind, was trudging

toward the bench where he sat. The sole of the man's boot fell off when it caught the edge of the curb. The man didn't realize this until he sat down beside The Writer and looked down to inspect his worn-down body for damages.

"Oh man," the homeless man scratched at the heel through the new hole in his boot, "oh lord—what an ordeal!" The same hand then went up to clear the snot dripping down from his crater-filled nose. "That guy literally came out of nowhere. *What the hell just happened?* Oh man. *Oh jeez.*"

The Writer looked away in disgust, only to find the driver of the Volkswagen yelling at the concussed cyclist to clear the cart off the road so that he could get by.

"Hey, man," the homeless man leaned in toward The Writer, "are you gonna use them shoes of yours?"

"What?" The Writer snapped to him.

"The shoes, are you going anywhere? I got places to be, man. I need me some shoes to get me going."

"Yes, what the hell. Of course I need my shoes. Who the hell are you?" The Writer couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Me, man..." The homeless man shrugged, the idea of somebody asking for his name seemed absurd. Giving it would only instil a sense of hope that somebody actually cared. A feeling he knew too well by now to be one that was fleeting. He scanned the environment ahead of him and finally came up with an answer, "I'm just a goddang hippopotamus," then cracked a raspy laugh. His grin revealed a surprisingly healthy looking set of teeth.

"Of course you are..." The Writer replied, sarcastically.

"Damn straight."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Who gives a shit?" The homeless man said. When he actually gave it some thought, he deduced that his answer was nothing but a throwaway joke. But, something inside told him that there was more to it. A meaning he couldn't yet put into words. A meaning that, perhaps, was never intended to be there in the first place, but the simple act of thinking

about it made him consider otherwise. He couldn't bring himself to explore what it meant, let alone let somebody else have a crack at it. The idea, for some profound reason, terrified him. Whether he would ever make sense of it, the meaning was for him and nobody else, and he would keep it to himself for the rest of his life. "Who gives a shit!" He shouted, defensively, and erupted into a fit of contagious laughter, which seemed to infect only himself. He laughed until he couldn't breathe, repeating the words over and over again until the set of ill-fitting dentures popped out of his mouth. He was so hysterical he didn't even notice, "who gives a shit! Ha!"

His eyes were closed. He clutched his belly as he kept laughing. It wasn't until the laughter died down that the homeless man finally opened his eyes to see that The Writer had taken to the street, limping away, using the broken-off chair leg to keep himself upright. "Hey!" The man yelled through the black hole in his face, "where the hell you going?"

Step by step, limp by limp he carried on. In a voice that was drowned out by all the yelling and honking around him, on a clear mid-afternoon autumn day, when the sunlight blanketed him from above, "I'm going to Africa," Little Harold answered, "where there are waterfalls."

I think it's time for a rewrite

EPILOGUE: A FOOL'S AMBITION

Here I am again, thinking I did everything right. A solid plan. A focused mind. A clear path towards my goals and ambitions. So caught up in everything, so sure I wasn't making a mistake, that I never even stopped to check my process. But the problem was right there the entire time, as was the solution, staring me right in the face while I sat on this bar stool in front of my kitchen counter so many times before—a printed out sheet of instructions, taped to the kitchen cabinet in front of me, which, at the time I had no time to go through. Double-checking myself, I figured, is only necessary when something feels a little off. It's hard to tell when something's just a *little* off when the simple act of pursuing your dreams can get your head so full that you never stop and question what you're doing. I skimmed through the details, and this is where it got me.

Let me get it right this time, last chance. What's this list of ingredients again:

Used cooking oil

Garbage

Check.

Methyl Alcohol

Poison

Check.

And the lye

Catalyst

Simple. Check.

I can fix it. I can still make it right. *Titration!* That's the step I thought I could skip. A little bit of this works *just right* with a little bit of that. Balance—who knew it could be such a sensitive thing. But no, there I went—too much of *this* and not enough of *that* and there goes another fuel filter. Add more of *this* to make up for the lack of *that* because it *looked* a little off and I spend the rest of the day cleaning this nasty mix off of my fancy blender when the mess overflowed again. How many times do I have to fuck this up before realizing that my intuition is not one to be trusted?

At least not with chemistry, that is.

Balance. It was all about balance.

This mess. All of this goddamn mess. The kitchen and the bathroom. The living room. The couch. My poor door. It can wait. It can wait I just need to get this mix right one last time and then I will do everything in my power to get myself together. I made a promise to prove myself. It wasn't until I got home that I realized once you prove yourself to anybody, you'll find yourself stuck in a perpetual cycle of proving yourself under watchful eyes, because now you're that person, and you can't stop because you'll let everyone around you down. Sometimes it's better to just not do a damn thing for anybody because it's way easier to manage letting yourself down than others. I was fine being alone. I was fine being a failure and a disappointment while living in my own little bubble. My perfect, seemingly impenetrable bubble.

But now, now I have to pour this methanol into this beaker *just right*. The liquid needs to line up with this fine red line *precisely*. The blender needs to be squeaky clean. Hell, just for shits and giggles, just for the sake of feeling crazy, why not see how fresh cooking oil will work out? I've got a bottle or two lying around somewhere. It's worth a try. Who knows what kind of shit oil I've been using this entire

time. Hell, maybe I wasn't even doing anything wrong to begin with. The oil, it was just shit oil! I got it—I can make this right. New oil. New start. I can—

Oh.

So this is...

This is just who I am. Isn't it? I'm *that* kind of person.

I want to be better.

Who cares? How are you gonna sell it? Who the hell is gonna buy it? *The process*—you need to keep your mind on the process.

I can be better than this!

Don't think about that. It's the oil! The oil! Use the fresh oil, goddamn it, and forget these thoughts.

How long until somebody notices the smell in your doorway?

Why can't I be better than this! Is it too fucking much to ask to just not be this person!

It won't matter soon! Not when you have your mix *just* right!

The last drop of methanol falls into blender when my door flies open and these two guys storm in and I don't think they're here to ask me about my plan to fix everything when they see the dead body at their feet. Two matching suits. Two matching pistols raised up at me. This black one and this white one. This Ying and this Yang. This balance I've been yearning for my entire existence. One's no bad as the other is good. Just a bunch of guys with a bunch of guns, doing their jobs.

They followed me home.

Of course they followed me home. And judging by the looks on their faces they aren't even surprised to find me here. Even they're smart enough to know I'm too fucking stupid to have just run. Too lost to pursue other means of living. Too scared to even come up with anything to say right now that would stop them from coming closer or changing their minds about what they're about to do to me.

I want to live. Do I tell them? I want to live!

Or maybe I don't. Could simply be another impulsive

thought with no follow through.

Do I want to live? I have so many questions right now.

It's happening. It's really happening. I realize I'm still holding the beaker in my hand and place it back down on the counter. Nice and slow. No sudden movements now. Anything to prolong my worthless life a few precious moments. Those trigger fingers are primed and ready and I eat my words before a single productive thought enters my brain.

I'm at a loss. I know that even if I could swallow this rock in my throat, my words would not be enough. I can't get a comprehensive thought together inside my own head when I'm by myself, let alone staring down two barrels only fifteen feet away from me. Words are useless, but maybe, just maybe if I look sad enough they might reconsider.

I try to think of something painful. This girl I was desperately in love with back in high school. She would cut herself, and there was something so beautiful about this pain she kept inside. She would tell me nothing about it or her life and it kept me hooked. Her beautiful, mysterious pain kept me latched onto her all the way until that day when she got bored with cutting herself and got dreadlocks instead. I was lost. I didn't know what to do with myself. I completely shut her out. We never spoke a word to each other since.

Not a single tear. Shit. I look at the two men to see if the pain on my face had registered with them. It didn't and now I feel a sting in the side of my leg. The first blow surprises me and my hand jerks and snags the beaker off of the counter, sending it crashing to the kitchen floor below me. I don't even register the second blow until chunks of particleboard from the cabinets fly past my face.

You only get the shit end of the stick if somebody hands it to you the wrong way. Is that how the saying goes? No, it can't be. How the fuck does that saying go? Maybe I can Google it? Maybe it doesn't matter. At a certain point you begin to realize that—

My left arm goes limp and drops to the side. So preoccupied with my thoughts that I forget to feel the pain

from it.

When I was little I was messing around with new English words I learned and wrote a shitty poem. My mother read it and told me I could be a writer. When I climbed a tree to save a stranded kitty my neighbour said I'd make a great firefighter. Won an argument with my brother and had dreams of becoming a lawyer. A puppy liked me and they said I'd make a great father someday.

I was *promised* I would become somebody. What the hell happened?

The blender bursts into a million pieces right in front my face.

Maybe I could've been a doctor.

I didn't realize I'd have so much time to think. Time has almost completely stopped. A billion thoughts per second—I feel like I'm thinking faster than the speed of light. Is this the time? Dare I ask myself that ultimate question? I'm sure they all do. Is there a point? What is the meaning? What is the right question to ask, anyways?

The impact to the side of my face sends my head into a spin and I watch fragments of my jaw and teeth paint the kitchen cabinet. It's coming closer now and the last bit of my unimportant thoughts struggle to be put into words.

Can you buy doorknobs in bulk?

Is it normal to not feel embarrassed for once about the nonsense that manifests in your head?

Maybe that's just the thing. To find your own question that you can never answer. The question to which you don't *actually* want to hear the answer to. I think I found mine. I think that the idea of this ultimate answer being out there somewhere should be enough to drive you further, where it's just over the horizon. For as long as I can remember I've been chasing that horizon, and in hindsight, now, it doesn't feel like a single bit of it was a waste of time. When there's no question to pursue, it's hard to forget how utterly meaningless all of this is.

No question sounds stupid when you're dying. It seems to me, though, that I've been asking the same one for a while

now.

Can you buy doorknobs in bulk? I could've asked anybody. I could've found an expert on doorknobs just like I found an expert on blenders to teach me everything there was to know about them.

But I didn't.

I could've Googled it.

But I didn't.

I could've... I could've...

Maybe. And this is sounding crazy to me. But maybe that's it. Maybe this all I needed. I think I'm ok now. There's a pressure in my temple but I'm not afraid anymore. I can feel it shredding the skin. Thousands of revolutions per minute as it digs further, burrowing deeper into my skull.

Just a bunch of guys with a bunch of guns, doing their jobs. Who am I to stop them?

I wonder what *their* questions are?

What am *I* to them but a ball of yarn, gently tumbling down a hill, unraveling as I go? Soon enough there'll be nothing left but a trail of what used to be. A path to nowhere. They'll move on. I would think that nothing had changed. I think it's safe to say if things had been any different, in reality, they wouldn't be. It's getting caught up in the details that convinces you to believe otherwise. Everything I've ever done had been nothing more than a distraction from this here moment.

Yeah, I think I'm alright now. I can manage. This is an easy way to be. This is the ultimate lack of joy. This is the complete absence of sadness. I feel a void inside me that can never be filled, but in a manageable sort of way, as the want or need to fill it with anything completely escapes me. This is nihilism at its purest.

I'm ready. Here it comes now. Let this screen fade to black.

Dying—what a way to go.