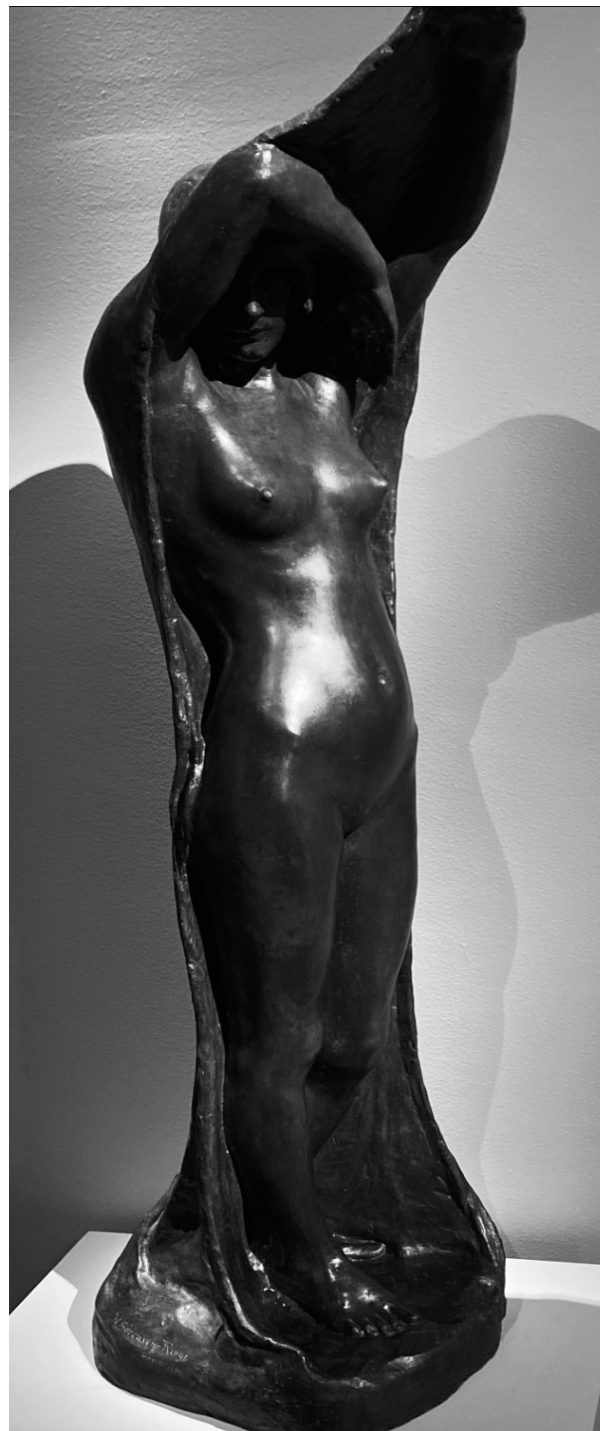


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a voiceHOUSE experience

**PROLOGUE: BOUND BY TIME AND SPACE
(Eyes)**



Once morning breaks and the curtains of smog lift slightly- once the outermost layers of ice thaw off the networks of sewage pipes- once the (W)ard's signal alarms blast through the tenement building's gossamer walls- after these things occur, a young girl will venture to the landfills, the trash heaps of the intermediate zone, hand in hand with her brother and sister accompanied by the splutters of other tiny footsteps. There they will pluck through hills of microchips, processors, fabricated plastic- leftover detritus of the Anthropocene. Their skin will crack. Their blood will coagulate into scabs. Blisters will form. Scrupulously the girl will examine piece after piece of debris amidst gangs of other children. Fights will break out over large prizes. Heads will hang. The warmth of the day will dissipate, and darkness will return to signal them back to the tenement buildings and makeshift shelters from which they emerged.

But the sun had not risen. The pipes remained covered in brown ice. There was still time. There was sleep. There were dreams- until there aren't any.

A young child with a tulip nose and exaggerated dimples wakes before daybreak, extirpated from her slumbers by *musca domestica*- a common house fly- trekking gingerly across the edges of a dusty Plexiglas window. A bristly, segmented body silhouetted by grime, a landscape backdrop of fabricated material sere'd by both the internal and external environment. A faint red-light bleeds through polycarbon layers, timidly, in and out of focus, a blur, fainter, then stronger. Within the girl's frame of reference, the frame of the window- a scene which could only be described as an abstract, post-modern tempest, a noxious oil spill of colors. Shades of black, grey, brown. This opaque alien figure tip toes across the pane- one end to the other. The girl watches. She yawns. It is not ordinary for her to be awake at this hour, however she does not attempt to explain her unusual wakefulness by employing metaphor or symbol- she does not import meaning, she does not interpret omens. She watches the fly. She is awake.

The youngest of three children. Cold, stiff, tired, rigid- words that should never describe a girl her age- she leans forward and clutches her knees together, locking her elbows across her legs, crouched at the end of a stack of cardboard and blankets- a 'bed' in name only. A semantic deception. A formless form. Both of the girl's siblings, a brother and sister, are asleep next to her. Each night they clot together under layers of makeshift bedding, huddled for warmth. To soften the blow from the chill the girl zips up her coat to her chin. Gelid air nearly chokes her- each breath is visible, gaseous. The housefly continues to amble.

Instead of laying her head back down, her impulse carries her outward- she slides from under the frayed blankets and with a great deal of care, steps left foot right foot in beleaguered socks, right foot left foot in a silent promenade closer and closer to the window. She stops to examine the creature. Rats and lice and flies- flies and lice and rats. A seven-year-old who had never encountered a rabbit or a squirrel or a blue jay, let alone a tiger or an elephant at the zoo. She hadn't even seen their exotic pictures in books. Seven years old- more than half of her life, after the Knockout- her world, her memories, her story- everything she knew was dictated from the blurry world beyond the Plexiglas. Her father had disavowed his fatherly responsibilities shortly after she was born- she had never been introduced, never been given the opportunity to love him. Or to be loved in return. She didn't know it but at the current moment he was indentured to the mechanism, trapped between the periodicity of Work(S)tation(s) and Ter(mina)ls. One of her siblings coughs- the girl's shoulders contract. Tension. Hardness. Their mother at work, wouldn't be home for several hours- alert, strained.

A first thought- a pitiful thought- a thought about the fly moseying before her, about its life on the dirty Plexiglas window, how small and how pitiful it was. But she made no comparison as to how the fly's pitiful world might have mirrored her own- mean and nasty and grappling with each day to survive. They were no different, yet they were not united by common cause. They were not comrades. They were not friends. There was no vision of a future, no striving towards a goal- there was only dirt, fog, confusion, and suffering. Indiscriminate. She was a little girl who stopped asking 'why,' never to receive an answer or explanation- only tears, only locked doors, only hunger and furtive glances from strangers. She stopped asking quickly.

The girl ventures further now, only an arm's length to the window. Behind the dancing fly, below on the streets, an eerie silence festers between the tenement buildings. An awful emptiness crowding the already cramped streets. Two curfew patrolmen hover about, stationed sentinels at their post, a pair of crows at the base of an apple tree. Protecting their turf. One intersection of many in the city- carefully monitored and controlled- mandates that had been sanctified once order was restored, once **ACTG** (*Administration of Counterterrorism and Governance*) took over. Closed-Circuit cameras were hung on posts where defunct traffic lights one signaled droves of commuters with pride- now, replaced by a singular and pointed red dots to remind anyone in range of view of the device's functionality. The crows saunter. A baton in one hand, a vapor cartridge in the other.

None of the nearby building windows are illuminated. The only lights nearby are emitted from their local *Convenience*, spewing enticements of COCA COLA, CREDIT EXCHANGE, LIQUOR. No buses run, no trains, no taxicabs or cars- no vagrants or indigents- only the patrolmen. Everyone who wasn't 'on the line'- typically women who were single parents and the elderly- were piled into overnight holding tanks disguised as apartment complexes. Youngsters without caretakers were detained in high-rise camps dubbed *Adolescent Well-Being Centers* which put any Dickensian orphanage to shame. Faces caked in mud, bruised limbs, rotting teeth- flies and rats and lice. Graveyards disappeared, eulogies and potluck dining rooms and white lilies- inconveniences done away with. Useless punctilios. Bodies incinerated in the name of efficiency. Bodies hauled off from work encampments, bodies secretly caravan'd from government buildings and police stations. Bodies evaporated, sublimated. A world of smoke but no warmth. A cold, murky place damp enough to foster putrefaction but too dead for the festering to go on for long. A place with no past. No present. No future.

A sound- the girl faintly senses it, unconscious- across the hall- a one bedroom studio guarded by a rusted door chain- a former surgeon weeps in a splayed wicker chair, quietly invoking ghosts of departed family members, echoes from a faraway past- now an indentured worker, a garbage collector- scared and helpless and drinking homemade wine whispering imprecations against himself- too craven to end his own life, cursed into life. And overhead the buzz of electricity creeps between the cracked plaster walls- cords and wires and generators running at odd intervals between daytime and night.

From a receding distance- across the river, dozens of blocks downtown- **ACTG** apartments are cocooned by thermostats and heating zones. A separate world where pianos played, twelve-course meals were served. The city's buildings improved across both architectural and material considerations along a conspicuous spectrum which pulled centrally from the north, south, and west into to a most distinguished lakefront and *People's Pier*, where of course no ordinary citizenry was allowed. According to official rank and title, from the outside in, a caste system within the bureaucracy was reflected across the skyline. But the little girl could not see that far out her window- the shadows of the adjacent building and the pulsing neon light comprised the entirety of her vantage. A listless house fly.

She wasn't the type of seven-year-old to ask the humble fly "Will you be my friend?" She wasn't the type to make up imaginary fairy tales about the fly- an evil witch, an exiled prince, a potion, true love's first kiss- no sort of fantastic dimension had been cultivated inside of her psyche. She had seen bodies wheeled off the street, collection teams haphazardly stuffing them into bags then into vans. She had huddled nearby while a sibling died from an unknown illness. She had watched her mother drudge through doorways after twenty-hour shifts, night after night- a young woman growing old- broken down and exhausted. The girl could recognize that the men in black suits and red ties on the *Community Information Units*- specially renamed television sets placed in windows and set up for display in the assembly areas- had created the world. She knew from grumbling voices around her that those men were of a particularly bad breed. Liars. Thieves. The girl heard the words of people who watched those men- she saw faces filled with yellow teeth, covered in disheveled hair, sores and bruises and scars- she trusted them, the broken down, the poor. She was one of them- she knew that. She knew she was a captive, a prisoner- paralyzed. They were all trapped. But nobody knew how to get out. She knew she had no control- nobody had any

control. She didn't know anything of the softness of life, the levity, beauty or joy or imagination- carefree sunshine flower petal simplicity- she didn't know any of that, because she hadn't experienced it. She hadn't been to school to read about it in books, hadn't played in playgrounds, enjoyed vacations to the beach, opened a Christmas present, poured feed into the shiny tin bowl of a new puppy. The world of five years prior might as well have been five thousand- Medieval, ancient, impossibly far away. She only knew what she had seen.

After a day of filtering through debris with her adroit fingers, collecting gold and aluminum and silver components that might hopefully fill her pocket with a half-credit from a pawnbroker- on her way home past one of the @onvien@enters pointed back to a motherless apartment hasty to make curfew- the girl would notice a headline on the officially sanctioned newspaper, *The Sun Times*: a report of more terrorist attacks in the boundary lands, the Interzone areas, NO END IN SIGHT. In a few days surgical grade face masks would be passed out at local **ACTG** offices, lines would form- a fear of biological agents would be recirculated- it had been almost a year since an attack of this nature had been "reported." Nuclear, then chemical, then biological, then incendiary- ominous threats circuitous, circular, cycled and recycled. AROUND THE CORNER, DANGER LURKS. Neighbors would be cautioned about maintaining the **ACTG** line, about reporting odd behaviors, any malfeasance, any potential terrorist activity. Old women afraid of being caught out of compliance would fess up and turn in their husbands of thirty years for petty infractions. Any unlicensed technology was to be immediately requisitioned over to the authorities. Any unlicensed compounds that were not **ACTG** Approved would be confiscated while the users or distributors or manufacturers were arrested and sent for lifetime detainment within a Work(S)tation(s). No letter could be written, no message could be sent, no instrument could be operated without proper paperwork and licensure. No service could be attended, no information could be stored or distributed, no unapproved media was disseminated.

Water trickled through the rusted tenement plumbing on Wednesdays- the inhabitants lined up with buckets, towels and rags to take advantage of their allotment. The faucets and sinks ran for thirty minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the evening for use in cooking- every other day. Delays were caused by "massive testing efforts to ensure the integrity and purity of the water against terrorist contaminants." In reality there was only one station operational to satisfy a population of over seventy million people. Seventy million down from ninety million, five years previous when the initial fortifications and walls were erected- walls that crept higher, walls comprised of junked cars. Disease and starvation played their part, but most of those twenty million who comprised the deficit were anonymously thrown into Work(S)tation(s) as sacrificial lambs to provide electric power for the new grid. The girl had never heard of the Aztec rites to ensure the sun god Huitzilopochtli returned, day after day- the spilled blood on the pyramid steps- but if she would have, she may have drawn a parallel between that ancient Mesoamerican world and her own.

Most of the survivors hovel'd in small apartments, with few amenities, waiting. People were too scared to talk. People were too scared to resist. They accepted their lot. There were no more artists or poets to be seen or heard- most were killed in the beginning phases, the "consolidation." The last prophetic words written and read for an audience were concise, and went like this:

So they'll grind your bones

To bits

To bake their bread

No one cares

When you're alone

Those blessed fathers and mothers who didn't end up entombed in the Work(S)tation(s) or enslaved to the Ter(mina)ls or erased as tragedies of the street found employment as **ATGC** (*Alliance for the Totality*)

of *Government Compliance*) lackeys. A municipal workforce organized into various regimental units- divisions for Commerce, Health and Safety, Education, Food Production and Nutrition, Sterility, Nationalization, Communication, Transportation, Labor Advancement and Opportunity, Recruitment- they dotted the periphery of the **ATGC** designated districts like minarets. A comfortable bureaucracy- the hallmark of any civilized society. Hapless and countless others ended up with grueling, low-paying shifts in less distinct manufacturing grid buildings where they processed and packaged and delivered protein rations, and Coca Cola. Many were left to man sanitation units. Some worked on construction crews. Credits had replaced currency. Dollars could scarcely be found- instead plastic bar cards were issued and uploaded or charged, depending on which end of the transaction you were on.

All of the storefronts and mobile vending units required **ATGC** documentation- paperwork and seals, bribes and inspections- there were no more small business, artisan vendors, pizza shops or boutiques or record stores. There were no markets- no fresh vegetables, no livestock, no imports or exports. 'Dust' was produced at a commercial scale, said to contain more amino acids than cornmeal and wheat flour combined. Optimized by **ATGC** scientists. Mass distributed as a nutritional miracle.

Hospitals were by reservation only- often the sick and dying were left to die sick and alone- if they were found on the streets, they were carted away by one of the Sanitation Units- another body for the incinerators.

What appeared was that which was approved, and that which was approved was deemed 'good' by **ATGC**. In only five years the Midwestern metropolis had undergone a complete transformation into a postmodern megalopolis- to the point where even notions of being 'Midwestern' no longer applied. Instead, a monolith- a bastion of safety- a soulless urban agglomeration. Gone were the days of 18th century Philadelphia, with shopkeepers displaying niceties arranged in packed storefront windows; gone were the Rockefeller New York's swollen with moxy and industry which permeated into every pore of every hustler and bustler who took part in the parade of happy foot traffic down Broadway, down Lexington; gone were the blossoming movie star Los Angeles' and romantic hilltop San Francisco's, gone were the boatyards and docks all brine-stained and hauling in the day's fresh catch, cannery smoke stacks looming above pre-dawn marketplaces; gone was the land of opportunity; gone were the nexuses of abundance.

America had been consolidated.

America had been repurposed.

America had been made safe.

Veiled in a protective shield, her citizens were distributed rations of **ATGC** sanctioned initiatives, fortified by trough slop, obliged to trade in personal liberty for collective security. Underneath, she neared her death and languished as a post-holocaust ghetto. America had become the fusion of church and state, of corporation and state, of individual and state- of state, and nothing besides. Deceit, lies, death. But the little girl has no sense of history. She has no sense of story. She hadn't read Hamilton's *Federalist Papers*, she hadn't learned the Pledge of Allegiance, she never memorized the capitols in alphabetical order with her mother reading off 3x5 notecards before lights off- Albany, Annapolis, Atlanta- she hadn't run her fingers along the highway veins of a map.

Americans, after centuries cast under the spell of a pseudo-Christian myth, finally completed their hero's journey and lay slain in the tomb of a Redeemed nation. Darkness. Bombarded by state-controlled information, their inherent liberties and general tolerances for one another attenuated by the nationalistic and bigoted ideologies of their invisible overseers. All forms of religion had been outlawed- the *Safety from Foreign Incursion Acts*- mosques and synagogues were burned down, Catholic Sisters of the Little Flower imprisoned, identity politik activists kidnapped, icons and monuments and statues demolished. Independent thinkers, open dialogue, protection of free speech and the press- banned. Dismissed as trifles. 'Terrorists' weeded out in the name of 'protecting' society's framework. Minority groups were targeted first. Leaders of marginalized communities- removed. A systematic wipe-out

occurred. Anyone with a questionable background was dragged into an interrogation cell, never to return. Erased. Evangelical dreams birthed long ago by paranoid well-to-doers had been adopted by savage technocrats, denuded of body (but not blood), and thus matured into a comprehensive fascist program. America had become a saved land, a chosen land home to a chosen people- chosen by the state, chosen by rich white men. Exegesis became an exercise in **ATGC** propaganda. Commandments transformed into maxims about public safety and the identification of spies. Sacraments were replaced with radio announcements and a state-run television program. Bibles were torn asunder and the pieces digitally pastiche'd into justifications for genocide and injustice. The Abrahamic Lord of the desert dawned new colors, but He kept His wrath of yore.

The state had become its own church, cloaked in enlightenment traditions, self-proclaimed as the apotheosis of rationalism and science and reason. Materialism wiped out any of the 21st century's remaining theological concepts and proceeded to infuse itself with political agenda. Touted as the source of holy truth, **CAGT** (*The Citizenry and American Guarantors of Truth*) scientists rewrote the central dogmas- Darwin's mechanisms had brought the American people as the chosen inheritors of the Earth, endowed with genetic predispositions for greatness. What fortunate concatenations of nucleotides! We had only to hold on for a little while longer and ride out the storm. Global warming had been a hoax, the planet had never been in better shape. New technologies were coming soon, new configurations of man and men that would elevate the American people towards "complete freedom and safety"- futures where security was never upset, when the terrorists had been destroyed, with the sanctity of our democratic union protected for good. We were chosen.

That's what everybody knew, because that's what the **CAGT** taught. For a girl who should have been enrolled in primary school, the prospects of education looked like this: schools posing as learning centers but in dysreality operated as a mixture of propaganda inundation and officer preparation. Public education was afforded to children of **CAGT** members and certain classes of municipal workers who were groomed to follow in their parents' footsteps. These elite were granted access to sterile buildings. Youngsters wore uniforms in quiet, neat rows of desks and paid close attention to video footage of terrorist attacks, from September 11th at Freedom City One to scenes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, retold with hundreds of textbooks' worth of blatant lies. History class. America had been under attack since the modern era began. We were survivors- and the only way to keep surviving was to follow orders, to do what you're told- and if you see anyone else misbehaving, you were to report them immediately. And of that lot a handful were "selected" by a panel of geneticists and IQ experts who administered the *Annual Education Survey* to move closer downtown and join the children of **CAGT** officials. Stronger, heartier children were sent through military and field training programs- feebler kids who were keen to report on their peers and obey the rules were driven into specialized political lanes.

All the rest were deemed unfit, left to fend for themselves- expendable detritus. The little girl. Her siblings. Many other children- many, many other children.

This is the way things had become.

This is the way things had been set into motion.

After their handheld devices were rendered defunct, most people didn't know what to do with themselves. They had lost the ability to act freely, to make an unstilted, unfiltered decision. Their world of networked Skinner boxes, their LIKES and TAGS which guided their every thought, had been disconnected. Levers stopped working. Sugar cubes stopped appearing. They were crippled. An entire generation of technically savvy wunderkinds were upended. And once electricity and power were restored, and some modern conveniences were retooled- these wunderkinds became easy prey for the promises of **CAGT** security and privilege. "Come with us and we'll help you get things back to the way they used to be." Malleable, silly-putty minds hungry for direction who fell into line without any questions or concerns or original thought. Lies were eaten. Forfeitures were signed off. Who wouldn't want to return to the good old days? An entire generation of fragile, post-modern know-it-all's presented itself as one

enormous target for the **CAGT**'s recruiting efforts. And so a fleet of officers and diplomats emerged: bolstered by fear, relieved by hatred, affirmed by bigotry, sharpened by greed, committed to the cause, secretly hoping for their YouTubes and Twitters and SnapChats to be restored. An apparatus had been created, a healthy vibrant majority had been formed. A faceless hegemony. Up the chain, up the ladder- the *Emergency State Board* ruled supreme. The President of the United States had formally transferred his power. The Senate dissolved. The House dismissed. The courts replaced with tribunals. Naturally, peering from the outside-in, those impoverished and disenfranchised fought to cross the threshold, to enter the protective sphere. A fight for survival, animal and cut-throat. Some, by virtue of snitching, were accepted into the fringes of **CAGT** society. But most lost the fight, and for those downtrodden, those outcast, those not chosen- they were left to die. A waiting game. Some day sociologists and anthropologists toiling over primary sources will draw their conclusions. They'll review the literature and assert:

The United States of America, prior to collapse, achieved unprecedented growth and technological advance within the last half of the 20th century and into the 21st, with significant advances and progress across domains in communication, healthcare, and economics. However, while the apex of industrialization and globalization was achieved, the wealth generated by systems of production during this period fell primarily into the hands of a few individuals. Such narrow margins of generated wealth distribution were not novel relative to other historical periods (1), but to the extent as seen during this period specifically, they were unprecedented. For the purposes of this review, these individuals who emerged as the primary benefactors amongst the economic manipulations are to be assigned the moniker 'technocrats.'

Our discussion of technocrats must necessarily contain an in-depth analysis of the 'quotidian citizen' during this period. This citizen resided in a first-world county, was of legal voting age, and occupied one of many positions across a socioeconomic field from middle class to lower-middle class (1). While prosperity for the technocrats grew exponentially, the citizenry did not experience significant i.e. tangible improvements to their living conditions or across intra-/ inter-personal dimensions from the late 20th century and onward (2). Although there were improvements in healthcare and access to technology improved, any advances were indeed anything but commensurate relative to the gains seen by the technocrats.

One critical element, and the focus of this research, pertains to the social compromises forced upon the quotidian citizen. At the heart of these compromises is the idea of the 'global village.' Membership into the global village was more or less thrust upon the demotic citizen during this period (3), a membership which required adherents to compromise integrated social systems and structures which had supported various ethnic and national groups of citizens for millennia (4). Marketed as a boon, the appearance of the global village was in fact marked by the loss of reality-based, tangible communities which had been a hallmark of conventional human social development. Structures once familiar, e.g. the 'church' or the 'neighborhood', no longer possessed the capacity to maintain stabilizing factors (5) which had proven at least moderately effective at maintaining the fabric of various human collectives. Regional dialects began to disappear. Communities were subsumed into the 'meta.' Identity politics i.e. the individual ethos began to override any sense of community ethos. It is pertinent to note that contemporary scholars who reference the global village acknowledge that such a term

cannot be used without admitting a deep sense of irony, and paradox. The global village brought with it the seeds of destruction to the very notion of the 'village' itself (3), an essential structure of any human systems observed historically up until that point.

From a social perspective, the early 21st century, which was comprised of a mono-uniform global community, was uniquely at risk. And this uniqueness was born directly as a result of the disintegration of local collectives (5). Our research aims to understand the unforeseen risks which were incurred by adopting such a system, and why those risks proved to be catastrophic.

A critical and unique byproduct of the global village involved the radical mechanisms in which technology itself became integrated into social development. No period of history had seen such an infusion of technology into 'normal' human life. The quotidian citizen owned a computer, a cell phone; he/she/they had consistent and constant wireless internet access. Subsequently, that infusion, or saturation, of technology began to directly impact brain functioning (6). In parallel, as technology began to shape the biology and neurology of the quotidian citizen at an unprecedented rate, the global village continued to expand. Individuals left home in search of educational and economic opportunity. Sons and daughters stopped moving back to their neighborhoods of origin to raise their families (7). Embedded in this new 'norm' was indeed a sense of separation, and such separation brought with it a surplus of associated anxieties (8). Though technology, to some extent, eased that separation anxiety. People could still 'connect.' Social media, video calls- the quotidian citizen was afforded the chance to be close to his/her/their family without being physically nearby.

However, once the infrastructure collapsed during the global technological crisis i.e. Knockout, not only were those compensatory mechanisms severed, but because of a dependence on technology and a neural reconfiguration oriented towards that technology (6), the quotidian citizen found himself/herself "lonely, terrified, incomplete." (7) The quotidian citizen, had in fact forgotten those essential tools and elements of his/her/their humanity, having been dependent on technology for so long. The men and women of the American twenty-first century had forgotten how to converse. They had forgotten how to organically exist and contribute and develop community. From McCaffery, "We had forgotten how to shoot pool at roadside bars, how to talk to our aunts and uncles at Easter dinner, how to make friends after school on the blacktop, how to tell jokes and laugh and experience a life unmediated by handheld cellphones or Google or email." (7) And so bereft of essential social skills- skills which cellphones and social media (argued at length in subsequent sections of this study to be considered 'primary drivers') had usurped and made unnecessary- the quotidian citizen became uniquely and unalterably compromised, and uniquely and unalterably 'dissocialized' (9).

Thus the governing body, the **CAGT** (*Administration of Counterterrorism and Governance*) was born, at the hands of the technocrats. The **CAGT** served to 'naturally' fill a void by playing a range of archetypal roles of protector (family, state, society, church) simultaneously (10). The Knockout allowed for those hidden players i.e. technocrats to emerge from the economic echelons to take advantage of a unique set of circumstances. An elite upper caste who already controlled access to resources, financing, and military

power, through the confusion of the Knockout, seized total social and political control, and did so unchallenged in a virtual *fait accompli*.

Dense tomes will one day be published expounding various theories about the world the little girl is growing up in. Terms will be coined, surveys will be conducted- long, drawn out arguments will be formulated about *Homo Urbanis*, about an industrial society's collective unconscious and their obsession with the apocalyptic, about the detriments of modern technology, about the predictability of a despotic regime coming to power. Future archaeological excavations will reveal terrifying artifacts of the little girl's age. Perhaps a poet's secret diary might be uncovered, bound in Plasti-Wrap and duct tape, sealed in a coffee can, rubber bands and torn shirtsleeves:

In the bowels of the city cowered away between tattered blankets, between frozen bedsheets, between ears, I hear the whisper of inner monologues. They crawl and creep, anguished, these secret voices under the protection of midnight. They scamper. Longing for partnership, for acknowledgement, for a connection- they weep restless. Ushered from the mouths of victims, maybe, who now pay the karmic debt of previous generations, who inherit doomed worlds, who tonight claim membership to a tribe haunted by its past. Whimpering, trapped within the machinations, swept up in forces beyond normal measure. I hear them. A poor, unlucky swarm. Absorbed by the historical process, paying the price- their tortured, anonymous memoirs.

("Hi Moon!" Looking up from a tricycle on a suburban sidewalk, his feathery strawberry blonde hair, striking blue eyes, my blue-eyed boy of two years old, chin turned up gawking skyward at a dusky full moon in a purple sky, acknowledging the beauty, his kinship with the elements. I can see him. I can hear him. His soft, innocent voice, excited but tentative. He turned around to see me laugh, smiling. I had been blown away by the cosmic perfection of that moment- for all the difficult times in my life- how could I not laugh? How could that perfect little boy do anything but bring me joy? There was no hatred in his heart. He had no plans to destroy anything or anyone. He was perfect. His pudgy arms fastened to the handlebars. We both waved at our friend, "Hi moon!" A summer night, the two of us- I could have died right there in a perfect state of satisfaction. I wish I would have.)

Regrets, pity... pity transformed by vision into sympathy... listen closely...

(We were successful, but we were humble too- you know? My husband and I went to college, we got professional degrees, we paid off our loans, we saved up, we married and had our first child, we bought a house, we were promoted, we made more money, we moved into a new house- we did everything we were supposed to do. We made the grade. We didn't hurt anybody. We didn't cheat, didn't steal. We did it our own way, and we did it together. So to sit there and think this is what we deserve- I take offense. I have to. I didn't deserve it, we didn't deserve it. My husband is dead. My mother and father are dead. We didn't do anything wrong. How did it come about this way, how did this happen?)

Dark is the color. None is the number. Sin vida...

(When I used to put my hand on your head and kiss your cheek, tell you I loved you- I cherished it, I cherish it- I knew then that one day you might push me away, but I promised you I would always be there. Each night I would pray like that- I would think about my commitment to you- tucking you in for bed, my daughter, my sweet one, the best part of me, an untainted and innocent part of me, the only part left that I wanted. They could have taken everything else. Closing the door, returning to the rest of who I

was and what I carried- I could have stayed in those moments forever. Your soft cheeks, your smell- Johnson & Johnson shampoo after a bath- your bedtime picture books shelved away, stuffed animals positioned neatly next to you- my daughter- your irises glowing deep like indigo stones in the morning dusk smiling up to me from your bassinet, then ethereal and cloudy skyblue in the brightness of the afternoon like gossamer screens beyond which lay the answer to all secrets, changing tone and texture and depth across varying spectrums of light, alive- you trusted me implicitly, you loved me unconditionally. My God. She was a shining mirror to my best aspects, she allowed me to acknowledge the good in myself- if that makes any sense. And it breaks my heart- I let her die, I let all this terror enter into her life. I couldn't control any of it, but- I feel responsible- she was in so much pain. Her last days- she didn't deserve any of it. She was a beautiful girl. She- she had no blood on her hands.)

Vivez sans temps mort...

(I remember it like it was yesterday. I'd open the door and find you in bed, smiling. I would go over to you, kneel down, and we- you and me, father and son- we would rub our foreheads together, the thickest part of our skulls, in tender good mornings. We would do this for a long time- both of us stubborn, both of us tough- you would giggle, and I'd shake my head goofy before kissing your cheek. I figured one day we would battle in earnest, as all fathers and sons do, but for now our war was a game, for now and forever, really. We understood each other in those moments- intertwined and unfolding- rooted in love. Then we'd head down the stairs together, you in my arms. I would cherish your warmth before setting you into your highchair booster seat. I might fix you a pile of Saturday morning pancakes, pour extra syrup or dole out extra apple butter, and sit next to you with my cup of coffee, feeling like I'd actually done something with my life. That is one of many blessings you freely granted me- I no longer had to worry about what I was doing here, what's my purpose, what's the meaning of my existence. All my existential luggage was thrown into the furnace, consumed by the flames to produce more steam produce more power and energy so that I might keep pace with you. The big questions disappeared. You chew your food. I sip my coffee. You grew up too fast- before I knew it you were three years old. I remember it so well. I would look into your eyes and would be comforted knowing you were my final resting place- inside of you, behind those beautiful brown eyes- memories in your head- and a few in your heart, I hoped. I hoped for the best. But now my burial grounds are destroyed. I will die the worst kind of death, without any hope to live on in you.)

Inured by death, desperate for touch, for stroking cheek in tender lamplight, I wish I could reach out to them. Hold them. Signal to them from lanterns atop a lighthouse, a flash burnt in the night like momentary cries like shadows torn asunder, a rocky coast- but soon I will be extinguished. We flutter, alone. Silent, and alone. We are all that is left, this dwindling faith in true love, these lucky few who once knew joy, who once transcended the sin of our own flesh, who remember a better world... losing... lost... each night, fewer and fewer, further between... more blackness... an impossible dawn, not even a pocket of sunlight to reveal broken columns... dark... only spider violence, proof in the devil, sleeplessness... can you hear their voices?

Do you have any faith?

But for now the little girl is tired. She wrestles with a notion to return to the bed with her siblings. But she lingers, watching the fly meander its way across the pane. Then her gaze turns to the outlined figures of her brother and sister, the jaunty collection of cardboard and blankets positioned above a pile of wood

everything stacked on a dusty linoleum floor- and she sees safety. She sees her family. She loves them. She sees a cozy bed. She sees warmth at the end of the day. Even though the pantry and freezer box are empty, there are no books, no toys, no prospects for fun- she identifies this place as home, a home she is happy to have. Two piles of clothing are neatly arranged on a makeshift table of bricks and particle board, above the floor (to thwart rats from chewing through them)- one for mommy, the other for the kids. The little girl sees her favorite shirt, her favorite coat, a towel, her mommy's sweater- home. The girl's eyes vaguely wander along the shadows, the cracked walls, the door with three locks- not that there was anything of material value to protect- but she feels safe. Mommy would be back soon. Her brother would always protect her. Everything will be okay.

She is focused on one of the brass chains, then a flicker- a beam of light reflects and dances and catches her eye- her attention is drawn back to the window. It wasn't the sun, the dawn. A blue light.

The flash rekindles a memory- a woman with broad shoulders capable of bearing hundred-pound satchels of grain on each of her flanks, cheeks of mahogany cracked like the veins of a tobacco leaf, thin lips below a pair of mystic, swirling brown orbs, grey hair splashing like it had been washed in moonbeam buckets- a word, "abuela," a whisper, a smile, a silver pendant hanging from her neck above a full bosom- warmth, comfort. Abuela. A different time, a different life- the girl didn't have the concepts to place herself in time, but she began to innately feel a sense of loss, a sense of promises unfulfilled, a past with a future, a future very unlike today. An odd feeling- an unfamiliar feeling. Her mental voice, the secret heartvoice inside herself usually quiet and reserved and calculating, it whispers, "Who could that be?"

The blue light flashes again, erratic. Maybe a flashlight in somebody's hands? The little girl presses her nose to the Plexiglas. The fly departs. She looks out- a rooftop, the adjacent building. Her vision is accustomed to the dark by this point, and through the polluted haze she distinguishes a group of figures, movement- there are people on that roof. There is life. In spite of the frigid air blowing through the cracks, in spite of the curfew laws, the police units, in spite of her mother's tears- there was abuela. There is a light.

Something is happening. She can see it. She watches carefully, quiet.

Ready.

PART ONE: A FARMER'S DAUGHTER
or
**Fallen Skywoman- Aerial graces retold in acrobatic
asynchronous stereo vision**



"The usual?"

"The usual."

Mickey Gallagher handed over a crinkled five-dollar bill. After the paper hit the particle-board counter Tom Paynter pulled a medium-sized container of balls up from his feet. In a deft swing, the middle-aged man replaced her bill for the yellow plastic bucket. He folded Mickey's payment and deposited it into his back pocket. While he did that Tom added several balls from off another bucket on top of Mickey's. He did it out of habit- he had watched his father perform the same gesture for years, a savvy businessman dedicated to maintaining faithful customers who returned for more buckets, more balls, with more money- but Tom was neither a savvy businessman nor extremely personable nor concerned about Mickey's count of balls. Most of what he did, whether at work running the driving range or off the clock running himself into the ground, was out of habit. He did it unconsciously. He didn't know any other way. Mickey watched his chewed fingernails as his unctuous fingers pinched onto the dimpled white balls, one by one. And when the pile reached a critical mass, balancing between manageable and unsustainable for the walk from the 'Pro Shop' to the mats, Mickey clasped the plastic handle and gently lifted her ammunition towards her. That balance point also correlated to Mickey's satisfaction, so she smiled, feeling that she had been afforded her money's worth. Whether Tom's intentions behind the additional swings were good or bad- it didn't matter. "Appreciate it, Tom."

"Yep."

Down the row of turf mats, slow, careful- Mickey's upright bag was already in position, a lob wedge and a white glove laid out on a frayed rug- the last stand, furthest down the line. Furthest from Tom Paynter and his girlfriend Cheryl Rice, furthest from the road, the parking lot, the other patrons- as far away as she could reach.

But it wasn't what you think- Mickey didn't mind Tom retreating to the picnic table behind the trailer to join his girlfriend Cheryl to gossip over whether or not Mickey was a lesbian after she had walked away from the 'Pro Shop' window counter. It was alright. They were both high. Mickey didn't mind the dead July heat, the humidity. She didn't mind the odd farmer shanking away at his 3-iron. She didn't hate any of them. She didn't hate the fact she was back home after college, almost two years now- a little longer since her mother had died. She didn't mind cooking for her father. She didn't mind pulling a blanket up onto him while the old man snored on the sofa- a television bluelit obscene and glaring, dead drunk. She didn't mind the fact that her old classmates considered her a know-it-all, and probably a lesbian. She didn't mind small town Americana. She didn't resent the backdrop of her current situation. She really didn't.

Mickey delicately emptied the **LARGE BSUHEL- \$7.00** into a warped plastic tray connected to the worn mat- a menagerie of eroded golf balls, a variety of brands decorated with a variety of symptoms- scuffed and waterlogged and chipped asymmetrical. After putting on her glove, a quick stretch of each shoulder, each triceps- toe touches, rotating twists- Mickey put her mind out onto the field. Last stall on the range- it gave her a choice view of the horizon- unencumbered by distractions. Soy fields, corn fields- out past the dirt, out past Tom Paynter's spoiled land converted to a golf center, converted for sport by a desperate farmer who needed to find a way to pay the bills and whose religion prevented him from cooking illegal narcotics. Ironic, now, considering his son: the drug-addicted, careless inheritor of the parcel.

But Mickey didn't invest her thoughts into any of that. She didn't care about Tom Paynter or his father, their imperfections, their biases or her biases. Mickey smiled. She enjoyed tallgrass prairie afternoons. She enjoyed the singularity of golf. The solitude- it helped her focus. The swing- it helped connect to her body, connect her mind to her body to the earth to the sky to the ball to the club, connected. Her yoga, in a way. Mickey enjoyed that feeling. The union. The distillation.

She also enjoyed cigarettes- but mostly in private. Mickey lit up a Camel Turkish with a match-strike and inhaled, delighted instantaneous as the Virginia tobacco kissed her tongue. With her mouth closed she exhaled deeply, a dragon's breath from her nostrils- forcing out the last molecules of smoke. Hell, she

might be a lesbian, she thought- she had experimented a few times in college. Most of the men in her life were too dull or too machismo. When she let another woman touch her, it felt pretty good. Buzzed. Dark. Strange, sure- but it felt good. She didn't mind that either though. Who cared? It's not like her father was going to bring it up at the dinner table. The Gallagher's never talked about sex. Herb Gallagher probably still figured his daughter's insights about procreation involved a stork. Just as good. It was easier that way. Fathers and daughters, storks and television dinners- Mickey didn't mind it one bit. She had no aspirations to tell her old man that after a few times rubbing her clitoris on video chat with a random guy stroking his cock, it just wasn't doing it for her. She wasn't going to share that recently she had conceded to abstinence. These conversations weren't going to happen. And it was much easier for both daughter and father that they didn't.

Late evening, July.

The prairie.

Mickey smoked her cigarette- relaxing, stretching.

She tightened the Velcro strap on her glove, flipped the butt-end filter into a patch of dirt between weathered strips of grass, and initiated a series of practice swings with a rust-caked lob wedge. Always start with your highest iron. High to low. Get the feel, get a sense of your swing, the ball, the target- then move on. "Get the feel before you add the power." Herb Gallagher taught her that.

Tom Paynter and his girlfriend fought against the inevitable- they had finished deciding Mickey's sexual orientation and were nearing a terminus- the emptying of a baggie once chalk full of chemical rocks- methamphetamine. Trucker speed. Tweak. Ice. Tina. Glass. Crystal. Experiencing the symptoms (appetite cessation, vasoconstriction, increased blood pressure and body temperature, memory loss, deterioration of concentration) together in a busted shed behind the trailer which functioned as the 'Pro Shop' of the business- bills for balls- the pair fidgeted in synchronization. Tom's father had bequeathed his only son the driving range in a makeshift last will and testament. The abandoned field, the desolate strip of land- one of the few parcels in the county that the banks weren't interested in controlling- as well as a tractor, a ball retriever attachment, and six hundred dollars cash: these represented the only liquid assets Roger Paynter left behind in the world. Tom Paynter sold the tractor but kept the range, the 'Pro Shop' trailer, a gravel parking lot in dire need of attention, and the aforementioned shack. Who needed a tractor? At night, full of speed and vim and vigor, often doused in sweat, Tom would collect whatever balls had been sprayed across the field with a rake. Because the land was mostly dead, he didn't have to worry over maintenance, lawn mowing, upkeep. It was a simple existence.

Cheryl was six years older than Tom, had lost two children- one dead on arrival, most likely due to alcohol and cocaine consumption during pregnancy, and the other repossessed by the state of Indiana. She wore heavy blue eyeshadow, poignant red lipstick, and enjoyed sucking on Tom's penis while she was high. Tom enjoyed his penis being sucked while he was high, so their situation blossomed in mutual benefit- she had been holed up with him for nearly a decade. Their food bills were minimal. He pimped her on the side when money was tight. Cheryl didn't mind- Tom never hit her, supplied the drugs, and always made sure the fridge was full of cheap beer. It worked.

But Mickey paid them no mind. No mind. That was the key to solid contact, a perfect swing- no mind. To hold each of the physical cues at once- firm stance, loose grip, square hips, full extension, torquing shoulder turn, foot pivot- but then abandon every instruction the moment of swinging. No mind. Deep breath. A lob wedge, twenty yards, aimed at a rusty steel garbage can serving time as a yardage mark- not bad. Four or five feet to the left. No mind.

Ten, twenty balls later- a breather. Mickey turned her attention away from the mat, over to the field. She took stock of the gravel parking lot. Her beat-up Chevrolet Cavalier, 1997, emerald green. Full of character. In need of some love. Then her thoughts moved to Tom Paynter. An orphan. Lost his mom young, his dad five or six years ago- probably only in his mid-20's at the time. That's young. That's too bad.

Mickey thoughts shifted- becoming an orphan- it wasn't an overly complex simulation. She knew Herb Gallagher wasn't long for this world. His gaze would one day close upon the things of time- probably sooner than later. She had a prescient sense for tragedy. Not that a shaman's insight was required to make the argument- her mother had kept Herb's drinking in check for years, and now, well, now the man was alone. Guilt ridden, Herb blamed himself for Gayle Gallagher's death. He might have been right to do it. When Mickey was brutally honest with herself, which she usually was, it was clear Herb was probably right to blame himself- it was an unfortunate fact that her mother probably died because of how cheap her father had been about going to see a doctor. Herb refused to let Gayle go in for treatment until it was too late- the headaches, the vision issues, months and months complaining about being lightheaded, ill, losing weight- Mickey was at school when it happened. Gayle Gallagher fell victim to a massive stroke and died shortly after, on the ride to the hospital in an ambulance. Three weeks after holiday break. It took Mickey six hours to reach home- on her own, with her thoughts. Remembering that car ride- remembering the silence, unable to listen to the radio- a Styrofoam cup of gas station coffee in the holder, minding the speed limit. There was no need to push the Chevy. It was already over.

Her eyes on the car.

Her mind on the drive.

A flood of images, feelings: brass knobs on mom's bed frame that sparkled like a sunlit wheat field of morning dew... I would tumble under the covers with her, I could smell her perfume in the room... in the kitchen her onions on the cast iron drowning in butter... those first nights there were still pieces of her lingering about. Benign ghosts. Whisps. But they faded- memories reflecting off the surface of those knobs onto my heart- I keep returning back into her bedroom, in my dreams. It was such a fascinating place for me, as a child- to be under her sheets... her body laid out on a medical bed, an unfamiliar bed under white sheets that she had never washed- the detergent... remember how scared you were, to walk through the door after checking in with the nurse at the desk? Those bright hallways, fluorescent... Dad was crying outside the room... my brother, that cold look on his face... the smell of decay... drying... I pulled her hand out, kissed it, and set it back under the sheets. I couldn't look any further. I didn't want to climb in. I wanted to leave Harrison County Hospital and never come back... no more sheets to sign-in, no more elevators, no more validated parking tickets... I smiled once that night, after the hospital, back at home- laying in her bed cherishing her perfume... those palatial brass knobs I used to mistake as gold, fit for a queen.

Mickey's eyes remained fixed on the car.

After the funeral Mickey used to ramble to herself in the bathroom after a long, hot shower. She would look at her reflection in mirror, a towel on her head, and deliver monologue performances, a soliloquy with dynamics like, "My mother died three months before graduation. I had been selected to be the commencement speaker for the School of Engineering. And I gave that speech, because I had to. But I didn't give the speech in honor of my mother. I didn't do it for my father, I didn't even do it for myself. I did it because of Stephan Blatz. Stephan Blatz who unceremoniously finished a close second in the running for valedictorian. We had identical GPA's. Our course loads were equally preposterous. He was a chemical engineering-biology double major, I was computer engineering-humanities. He was smart, arrogant, and his family was rich. I was smart, humble, and dirt poor. Stephan Blatz was aware of my situation- I know on good account that he approached the Dean of the College of Science and offered his services in case I needed to step down from my duties on account of 'emotional stress.' Stephan went behind my back and questioned my ability to deliver a cogent and appropriate speech after my mother's passing. His father called the Provost. His mother sat on the Admissions Council. But I had a mole- the secretary to the Chairman of Undergraduate Studies was a confidant, and the mother of one of my close friends, Alysa Thorndale. During my first of many dinners at the Thorndale house I learned that both Mrs. Thorndale and myself grew up in similarly shitty towns several hours outside of Indianapolis and Chicago. We both hated the elitist mentality which permeated campus. So when Stephan Blatz made his bid to usurp my right to deliver the commencement speech for the School of Engineering, I doubled down on my

commitment. I visited the Dean and made it clear, on no uncertain terms, that I would be present for the ceremony, and that I would be well-equipped to transmit the perfunctory address. Mrs. Thorndale vouched on my behalf, and privately threatened several school officials that she would be forced to alert the local press if my opportunity was forfeited. There are Stephan Blatz's around every corner. Plenty of bastards are born every day, and even more are raised into bastards either by chance or design. You can't let the Stephan Blatz's of the world win out by virtue of the fact their daddy makes donations to the 'right' politician's campaign. You can't let the Stephan Blatz's of the world give commencement speeches so they can thank aforementioned politicians. To hell the Stephan Blatz's of the world, and their politicians, and their fathers. I delivered a damn good speech that commencement Saturday, and I shook Stephan Blatz's hand afterwards in the reception area. I congratulated him on his impressive, but not quite sufficient efforts. That's how it ended. And I knew then what I know now- you can go only as far as your courage will take you."

But Mickey had stopped making audience(less) speeches. She stopped viewing her life like she was a secret fangirl peering between closed blinds. She quit those dramatic expositions, alone in her bedroom well after midnight, partially drunk, another performance like, "I'm a smart kid who hung out with blue-collar type kids. I still am. I played golf in high school, I smoked pot after senior prom, I made it with a few boys a couple of times in college, and girls- and I never felt abnormal or isolated from my peers. I came home after graduation and found some of the people who I had gone to high school with, and they hadn't changed at all. Maybe children, marriage- but the same approach, the same mindset to living in the country. The same fears, assurances. I liked that about them, even if they didn't care too much for me anymore. Sure, I had a job offer from General Electric, but I hadn't taken it yet. After my mother died, I didn't become overly concerned about my career path. I had worked hard for four years; I wanted respite. She was a simple woman who loved me in a simple way. We didn't agree about everything, we didn't get along all the time, but she loved me and I loved her. I don't think about her unless I am alone, and drunk- so it rarely happens. I don't enjoy being drunk, and I loathe crying in public. Must have something to do with my upbringing, who knows."

It had been two years.

She had changed.

Mickey's attention shifted back to her mat. She pulled a 7-iron from out of her upright bag. She spit on a towel, then worked her hands and the fibers over the clubface.

Self-reference. Frame of reference. Frame of mind. No mind. No thinking. Nothing. Even the thought of nothing is a thought so it is no-thought at all not even the thinking thought of not-thinking but rather the pause before a thought extended and silent and eternal alone in the cave breathing deep barely connected to the physical plane tethered only by essential biologic functions unconscious and themselves not-thinking either.

She had changed.

She had learned to sit amidst the voice in her mind, to observe it but not to engage it. She stopped feeding it new material. Quiet yourself. Be still. "Slow everything down, Mickster."

A swing.

A hook, then another.

She stood up straight, flexed her arms then relaxed. Mickey never cursed after a bad shot. What was the point? She visited the driving range to enjoy the sunlight over the high grass and corn, the heat and sweat collecting under the brim of her ball-cap, her brown mousy hair tied up and tangled- she was here to unwind. To lose the audience. To lose herself.

Soon she would be an orphan. Dad would follow mom into the ground- death by heartbreak, a natural death. A romantic death. Well, it was tragic too. There was a tragedy to it, and to death in general- so final, so unconquerable. But so was life. Tragedy was everywhere in Harrison County. Now that Mom was gone his thirst for the bottle returned, a voracious appetite, as if he had to account for all the lost time. It

was tragic, it was romantic-but what could Mickey do? For her own reasons, she never chastised her father on account of his drinking. She knew his guilt caused him pain. She knew that the booze acted like a buoy, if only temporary. A life-preserver that was slowly killing him. Tragic irony. But it allowed him a reprieve. Even as he established a devastating habit of pouring quarts of whiskey into his stomach empty and before breakfast. Even when he pissed himself on the couch. Even as he cried in her arms. What could she do? She urged him to eat. She made sure her cooking was delicious. She cleaned the cushions. She offered her shoulder. He was a grown man. He made his own decisions, right? Or so we like to think- more than likely the decisions were made for him, had been made for him and her so again, what was the point? It was natural. Dad blamed himself and he wanted to go- what would be the use of trying to convince him otherwise? He was probably right. Or maybe not. Maybe nothing could have stopped the Gayle from collapsing that morning. Anyways- what her father did, his penance in a way- it made enough sense to Mickey. It certainly made perfect sense to him- that's why he was doing it.

Mickey remembered Gayle Gallagher's funeral- by the end of it Mickey had swallowed her fill of sadness. Her relief might have been a result of the absurd mechanizations- walking down the aisle, following the casket, ordering flowers, neighbors donating frozen meals- the rituals- the program of activities brought with them a sense of levity. She remembered laughing after a phone call with a credit card company to terminate her mother's account- the account representative, "I really am sorry for your loss. Is there anything else I can do for you while we're on the call, any other accounts I can check or promotions I can offer?" The silliness of life. The futility. It counterbalances the tragedy. We leave behind our accounts, our wardrobe, our tchotchkes in the living room cabinet- it helped, to see everything that way. To put the ultimate next to the trivial. Mickey felt better. She couldn't reason why she needed to be so dour anymore. There was so little at stake.

She had made peace about her mother, she had made peace about her father- she would stay with him. She would perform her own penance, in a way. She found peace with her brother's anger- his nebulous, horizonless anger directed towards everything- but what else could she do? Keep being sad?

Relatives would come by the house- neighbors, Uncle Tim and Aunt Kathy, some cousins, Grandpa Ken- they checked up on her for a while. They would drop off food. They would supply Herb with another quart of brown liquor. But the gestures slowly desisted. Things normalized.

Some of them would make comments about her mother, like, "She died so young, how terrible." Mickey remembered when Grandma Eileen passed away, at 82, somebody said, "She lived a good, full life." Mickey wondered- do you think Grandma Eileen felt that way, breathing her last breath, staring off into the abyss? Closing her gaze on the things of time- do you think Grandma Eileen felt ready to go? Do you think she shrugged her shoulders, 'Well, my ticket's expired, so that's it. It was a good run. Did everything I ever wanted to do. Don't even know what I'd do with another day.' Mickey severely doubted it. 'Well kids, I'm 82, and I'll tell you what, I'm ready for a nice bout of lung cancer and a slow, painful death.' No way.

But now, watching her father- everybody lives, everybody dies. There wasn't anything unnatural about it. It wasn't a big deal. It was how she learned to accept her mother's end. And strangely enough it would all be easier with Dad. He was so besot by anguish, so hurt- it might be for the better. Maybe becoming an orphan would be the best thing that could happen to her. Maybe it would be the best thing that could happen to him? Maybe if the last person she loved walked away from the world, she would stop thinking about it so much? Maybe becoming inured to death would be a sort of liberation, a key for her to really start living her own life?

Her own life.

A pause. A deep breath.

Back to the mat. She addressed a new ball. A new opportunity. She let herself go. She let her father, her mother- she let them go.

Straighter. A bit of left to right action at the end- a good sign.

Another ball on the mat.

No mind.

Total control.

Control- a funny idea, a funny word- what was there to control? The rain, the crops, the tax rate? Farmland dreams, and disaster. Mickey learned early on what fell within her scope. That's why she enjoyed golf. It was practice. Controlling all she could control- her mind. Silence. Focus. Tempo. Grip. Stance. Aim. Contact. She had listened to enough men and women complain about the President, about the Governor, about the interest rates, about the drought and the freeze, the seed and the dirt- tying one outcome to one cause, back again- "If only this was different, if only this changed." None of those thought patterns made sense to Mickey. She never demanded anything out of life, she never put any requirements or expectations from her surroundings. She never thought to. A simple request maybe, like, "God, let me get an A on this spelling test" or "I hope I get accepted for this scholarship," but never a demand. It was the wrong approach. You start with what you can control. "Keep your head down."

Mickey's father brought her golfing for the first time nearly twenty years ago- to this same driving range when it belonged to Mr. Paynter. A set of rusty irons sawed-off halfway down their steel shafts, refitted with duct-tape grips. Perfectly sized. Mickey took one swing and fell in love with the game. Everything about it. She loved how far her Daddy could whack the ball. She loved the sound of a well struck five-wood. She loved the look in her father's eyes after that sound. She chased that sound, and that look, all through her high school years.

She also loved listening to her father's folksy explanations. When Herb Gallagher would inch up close to his daughter and demonstrate a proper stance or wrist turn technique- oh boy, it was as if he was opening up a velvet curtain to shed light across a dark room. Those golden explanations were so tenuous, they lasted only for only a sacred moment, a special moment they shared when he would conquer the shadows and expose Mickey to one of the mysteries of the universe. Her father, by his own plan or by accident or by divine prevenient grace- he left an impression on his daughter those Saturday afternoons at old man Paynter's golf range- an impression that would inform the rest of Mickey's life. And for the better. She looked back fondly on those days. She carried his whispers near to her heart. She hated to watch him kill himself, but he had to do what he had to do. Control what you can control.

Herb's voice- "The wind is always a factor, and it can shift, so you had best pay attention to it. If she's blowing ten miles an hour to the east, aim five yards to the left of the pin. It's always there- but sometimes it's hard to see. Even the pros forget about it until it's too late." Herb Gallagher referred to any aspect of nature with a feminine pronoun: the storm, a girl; the sky, a woman; the earth, a mother. "She's whipping up a frenzy, ain't she? Come on, we better scram." He smiled when he said that to his daughter. Mickey remembered it. She remembered the earth, the moody skies, the wind- five yards for every ten miles per hour- club up if it was blowing straight at you- club down if it was at your back. She carried his lessons in a treasure chest locked in her heart.

She couldn't remember PhD professors or their discourses on electron orbitals, linearization, heat of vaporization. Spanish pronouns. Medieval European literature. Those lessons were gone- as if they never happened. Recorded only as test scores, as numbers. Posted, then erased. It had been two years since her last class. Two years since she thought about grades, about her ranking. It all seemed silly. Erudition, knowledge- they held no charms for her anymore. Like the speeches in the bathroom mirror- it was childish, impractical. The aggregation of smarts- really? None of it mattered. She declined the job at General Electric. She anchored herself at home, tutored basic math (Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry) online, remotely for a school in Tanzania. Minimum wage. She never met any of her students- she graded papers, assigned practice assignments, sent messages, detailed lessons via PowerPoint slides- but they never spoke directly. It only took up five or six hours a day. She watched old movies like *The Quiet Man* and *Vertigo* and *Casablanca*. She hit golf balls. She cooked good food for her father. She didn't mind it.

To club up- use a lower numbered iron. To club down- use a higher number. One of those counterintuitive golf things. Paradoxical. Her father had explained it very simply so she could understand. She was five or six.

All mind, no control.

No mind, all control.

Mickey pulled the driver out of her bag with reverence. She removed a head cover- a tattered sock repurposed for a new life- and spit on the metallic face. Shiny. Like the bed posts. She fixated on a pattern of grooves in the steel and picked out several fragments of AstroTurf with an unpainted nail. Dipping her shoulder, grounding the club- tired swings. She dried the sleek face off with her t-shirt, just above her bellybutton. A few practice swings. A plastic tee. A new ball. A deep breath. "Don't swing tired and let that shoulder dip- finish strong."

Mickey swung in rhythm. Each of the balls, one after another, travelled a distance which belied her size. Short, wiry- barely five feet three inches- but long in the right places, firm. An eagle's feather and dreamcatcher tattooed onto her wrist, flexing in dark blue ink the dark blue blood of her veins popping, then relaxing. Her back toe pivoted, heel up- precision over speed, form over power. Consistent, inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, back swing, contact, exhale- head down, disciplined. "If you keep your head still and hit the ball square, you'll never have to look up to see where it goes." Her memories contained a wise, young, exuberant version of her father that had been lost to time, to pain and suffering, to a bottle- but she kept that version of him sacred and preserved here on the driving range, a Tuesday evening in July. Daylight nearly exhausted, dusk approaching.

Sometimes she would imagine their faces...

She stepped away from the mat and lit another cigarette. An older farmer, Nick Daniels, pulled up in his truck. Mickey didn't have to look up- she could tell by the choke of his muffler, by the reek of diesel exhaust. Instead her vision turned inward, Mickey pictured her students- their smiles, their enthusiasm. It would be nice to have her own classroom- to watch them smile after sorting out a complicated quadratic. But this was the best she could do. What she had was good enough. It worked out alright.

After another half hour or so- clubbing up, clubbing down- aiming at different trash cans, alternating patches of dirt- finishing with the lob wedge, full circle - after more sweat, cigarette smoke, general satisfaction- Mickey cleaned each of her clubs individually with her dirt-stained towel and walked back to her car. From PARK to DRIVE, twenty minutes, grid-style country roads- home. She pulled up, surprised to see her brother's grey pick-up parked on the lawn.

Whispering to herself, step by step up the weed infested brick pathway, "Let's see what we have here."

"Hi Mickey."

The door shut behind her. "Nick." She tipped her ballcap towards her sibling, "How's things? How's Alyssa, the little guy?"

"Oh they're fine, just fine. Yourself?"

"Same old. Back from the driving range. About to log on for work in a little. Might grab a bite- you staying for dinner?"

"No, I'm alright." Nick cracked his index, then his middle knuckle. He cocked his head, then in a deliberately sarcastic tone, "You still teachin' algebra to Cambodians over the internet?"

"Something like that. You here to see Dad?"

"Maybe." She could tell her brother had been drinking. His demeanor made it immediately apparent- hostile, underhanded- his cockeyed head, his outstretched fingers on the arm of the worn flowerprint couch- the volume muted on the television set- choleric. "How are the little gook bastards?"

Nick played with obvious tactics- he was trying to work her up. A puerile approach.

"I'm really not interested Nick. Where's Dad?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know? You're the one who lives here, remember? Or you too busy hiding behind your friggin' computer screen."

“What’s your problem?”

“My problem?” Nick shut off the baseball game. “My problem is that my sister, my little sister, the smartest damn person I ever met in my life, the only damn person I ever figured would make it out of this shit-ass town, is wastin’ her time at home taking care of an old man who’d be better off if he dropped friggin’ dead. That’s my problem.”

Mickey held back a grin, “Sounds a lot like my problem.”

Bellicose, almost snarling- “Well, then maybe your problem is my problem, how about that?”

“Or maybe your problem is just your problem. Just because you hate it here, because you have some irrational resentment against me being here- that doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Yes it does!” Nick brought his hand into a fist, slammed it down on his own thigh, then sighed, “You’re wrong. You’re smart, but you’re dead wrong. It does. And let me tell you why. It’s got everything to do with me. Because I’m responsible for you. And I told you to leave. I did everything I could to get you to leave. But here you are. You’re stayin’ put, using the old man as an excuse. It’s pathetic! It’s- and it’s friggin’ insulting, frankly.”

“Are you going to yell at me every time you come around here? Am I having deja-vu? We’ve done this how many times? And nothing changes.”

“Well ain’t that it? That’s the nail on the head right there- nothing changes. You keep hidin’ out in this rattrap with a drunk old bum. It ain’t friggin’ good for you. So you can kiss my ass if you don’t like what I have to say.” Nick stood up from the couch- wrinkled jeans, sweat-stained underarms- a stubby nose, a lantern jaw like his father- aquamarine eyes, glistening, too blue for a boy who never once swam in an ocean- “You need to get, Mickey.”

“I’m not leaving him, Nick.”

He stepped closer. Mickey smelled the vodka. “He ain’t your problem. He doesn’t need anyone to look after him. He don’t care anyhow. He’s quit. Ain’t a friggin’ thing we can do about it. And you damn well know it.”

“Maybe there isn’t- but mom wouldn’t have-”

“Don’t you mention her name. Don’t you dare! She wanted you out of this place- she was so- you don’t even know how excited she was, when you got your scholarship. I used to be so damn jealous of you- of how happy you made her.” Nick set his arms akimbo. “Goddamnit Mickey. You don’t have a friggin’ clue. Don’t say a thing about what she wanted. I know what she wanted. She wanted you to finish college and leave. She wanted you to book it out of the county. She wanted you to be a doctor or some shit, to go out into the world and make somethin’ of your life, to be happy.”

Mickey shook her head in frustration, “I was never going to be a doctor, Nick. I’m a programmer.”

“Whatever you were studying, she wanted you to use it-”

Interrupting him, “Well I’m sorry what I’m doing isn’t good enough for you. But at the end of the day, I don’t owe you, or her, an explanation for my life.”

Snorting through his nostrils, “You ain’t sorry. Scared, maybe- but not sorry.”

“What do you want, Nick? Are you done yelling at me?”

“It don’t matter how much I yell because you don’t listen! You don’t friggin’ like hearin’ it, so you shut down.”

Mickey chuckled. “I wish you could live my life for me, because you seem to know plenty about it. Makes me wonder though- how good are you at living your own?”

A rare, brutal reply replete with honesty and regret- Nick exclaimed, “I wish I could! I wish you could take what I fell into for a day, and I could seize your opportunity! If I had half of your smarts- friggin’ A- I wouldn’t be stuck here!”

Mickey had heard it all before. She wasn’t afraid of her brother, the buzzed pugilist- the boy who knocked the girl up, the girl whose parents demanded a wedding, a wedding in which Mickey glided down a lonely aisle in an August backyard playing flower girl- the terror, those unsmiling faces over her freckled

shoulders- "I'm sorry you hate your life so much Nick, I'm sorry you hate this place so much. Honest to God, I really am."

Disarmed for a moment, nowhere to go, "I came by here to tell you we're movin'. Alyssa's takin' a job in St. Louis. I'll find work once we get there- we're goin' quick. We decided last night."

Mickey laughed. "Are you kidding me? What the hell are you so angry about then?"

"I'm angry because- I'm angry that you'll still be here."

"I don't know what you want me to do."

"Leave! I want you to leave, Mickey!"

"Nick..."

"Listen- I talked with Alyssa- you can come along with us. Pack your shit up and let's go. We're rentin' a U-Haul, you can drive with me in the truck. Stay with us until you get set, 'til you can afford your own place."

Without hesitation, "I can't do that. Listen, I know where you're coming from- but I'm doing fine. I enjoy being here. I don't know. We're different. I don't hate this place like you. I don't hate Dad. This is my home. This is-"

Nick pointed a singular forefinger at her, then the ground, "This ain't nothing but a grave. A damn grave. It's his grave. But it don't have to be yours."

"I don't see it that way, Nick."

"You have it how you see it then. You watch the old fool stumble around picklin' his insides with whiskey. Go on. But not me. I ain't friggin' doin' it."

"No one is asking you to."

"No one is asking you, either."

Mickey remained calm, "You're absolutely right. Being here is my choice."

"You think you're choosin' out of love, but we both know- we both know it ain't. It's out of being scared. And I'm your older brother, and I'm callin' you on it. And I want you to quit your hidin' and come with me."

"I appreciate your concern Nick, I really do. But I'm not scared. And I told you- I'm all set."

He cracked his neck sideways- lips pursed, then head dropping, dejected- "Suit yourself then. Suit your own stubborn self. Makes me sad, but ain't nothin' I can do." He turned his chin up, eye to eye with his sister, "You'll wake up in twenty years and realize this was a mistake. And I'll feel sorry for you. Because I've had to wake up with those mistakes- like having my kid at nineteen, having to marry Alyssa and play house and piss away my youth- and it's a rotten damn thing having the past haunt you. But it ain't too late for you." From his back pocket a ballcap- Nick set a **WIFFLES HYBRIDS** camouflage lid on his head, covering his black hair cut midshipmen style, "You hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Well, give me a friggin' hug. I'm due home. Need to start packin'. Plenty to do, always- hey- tell the old man, will you?" Squeezing his sister, Mickey being squeezed.

"Why don't you tell him yourself? I'm sure he'll be home soon."

The two separated.

"Ain't got time to wait." Dead reckoning into his sister's eyes, hands in his pockets. "This is it, for now. I'll be in touch. I'll let you know."

Mickey cut past the good-byes, past the moment- she wanted the last say, a chance to defend her father, "He didn't kill her, Nick. It's not Dad's fault."

Apathetic. Granite. Dusted work boots, a key ring with a multi-tool and a bottle opener, near the doorway- a boy forced into manhood, a father who never showed him how- "You take care Mickey, you hear?"

"Why don't you- "

"Mickey. Take care. I'll be in touch."

Out the door, off the porch, down the brick walkway to the edge of the yard- down one country mile, then another- windmills, harvests, grouse, apple pie, autumn festivals, blue ribbons, organ music, joyful sweat- depression, opiate addiction, stasis, penury, domestic abuse, dolorous blood- no looking back, nothing to be missed, no need to wait around and say goodbye.

Mickey leaned on the doorpost, watching her brother- she wasn't upset with him. She understood. It was alright. A deep breath. No mind. Back into the kitchen, past the old yellow'd wallpaper with its cattails and sunflowers, the sagging walls- a cup of instant coffee- a thought passing... Midge Wood pining over Scottie Ferguson... why did Midge get so worked up over that ornery old man... Mickey never understood it... Barbara Bel Geddes was a fox... she could have done far better than Jimmie Stewart... there must have been a complicated backstory that Hitchcock chose not to reveal... there must have been something really heavy between them.

Heavy footsteps- down one hallway, past the bedrooms- floorboards creaking- Mickey stopped in the hallway. Something caught her eye. A brass knob. A flash- a memory- carried with her, forward. Into the bathroom- turning to her own reflection at the mirror, soap and water- then a computer keyboard, a monitor, a lesson plan. Ready to work.

-O-

Mickey paged through another magazine.

A lonesome patron in a decrepit library. Seated upright at a maple wood table besmirched by pencil marks and carvings and gum residue, a thick grey carpet underneath her checkerboard VANS- faded, fading- the librarian had fallen asleep at the **CIRCULATION DESK**, an abandoned post, snoring quietly. A heavy-duty vacuum hose exhumed loudly in the Children's Section thanks to a janitor careful about his time- back and forth, back and forth- on the verge of his afternoon coffee break.

Mickey had finished INDIGENOUS AMERICAN HAPLOTYPES- VESTIGAL MITOCHONDIAL PROTEINS AND THE SEARCH FOR THE ORIGINAL BERING STRAIT PEOPLES and began paging through another article- OUTWITTING GOD? THE ROLE OF CRISPR IN THE FIGHT AGAINST VIRUSES- technological advance after advance- another table with small print, another chromosome map. Mickey enjoyed filling her mind with figures and calculations. Genetics were a recent hobby. She loved the data, the strings of codons and transcription factors, the polymorphisms, the concepts- germ lines, targeted nucleotide sequences, bacterial immune systems- Mickey leaned back, immersed. Thoughts jumped across the screen of her mind- she inspected them, harnessed some and released others- visualizing the mechanisms, going step by step through a particular cellular activity, the inputs and outputs- CRISPR Cas-9 proteins unraveling, snipping, inserting nucleotides- viral payloads, alterations, engineered life- she focused her mental energies. Methodical.

A baby had been born in China resistant to HIV, Hepatitis, Chicken Pox, Measles- born with a fabricated set of instructions, an upgrade. There had been an international backlash after the results were published- ethical considerations, global debate- Pandora with her jar lid opened, Prometheus grilling ribeyes with his fire raging.

A new key had been found, an ancient and impossible lock undone with no turning back.

Mickey brought her almond eyes out a large window, out past the dust and the heavy sunlight. She considered how God might react to our mortal attempts at annealing the fates- our attempts at achieving perfection- not only made in the image and likeness of our Creator- but to transform, to remake ourselves as our own Creator.

She lit a cigarette.

She dismissed the possibility.

No matter how many keys we've cut, how many codes we've unlocked- Mickey couldn't help but taste her own ugliness. The ugliness of others. How could we ever be worthy? The perfection of energy, of consciousness- to become goddesses and gods? After all the sins we had committed, after all the children we had eaten and mothers we had murdered- human history, historical legacies- what we are, essentially-

what I am, Mickey thought- what legacy have I inherited- what legacy have I contributed to- she slowly exhaled a stream of smoke. Lost in her ruminations, a trance fell upon her- an audience to an external mindvoice- somebody listening somewhere to somebody somewhere else, dictated concise and peer reviewed like:

Monikers like the lost generation, the greatest generation, generation-X, millennials, genZ: the name most aptly applied for our current generation is the "last generation." The last generation to grow up in the same neighborhoods our parents did. The last generation to know the decorum of a summertime barbecue, to take notes at school desks in actual notebooks with pen to paper, to go mad fighting in dusky crab apple wars with our secret crush nemeses, to ride bicycles to abandoned lots and get into trouble, to experience adolescence without the accompaniment of smart phone technology. The last generation to refer to our ethnicities in percentages like badges of honor- proud, 100% Irish, or 100% Italian. The last generation before the monoculture- before everything is flat, before civilization crystallizes, before everyone is uniform, insipid, engineered without imperfections, optimized with all the right settings- to produce, perform, to focus solely on the never-ending marketplace game of buy then sell then buy it back and sell it for more. The last generation with a sense of intrinsic, human, spiritual value- having been subject to the commodification of time- retro, futuristic- transformation and denigration of every essential human element. The last generation with a choice to choose whether or not to participate in the social media blitzkrieg, to transform a sacred bit of yellow'd paper with grandma's chocolate chip recipe into a vapid internet post at the disposal of millions of fools to judge. The last generation before the industry of *self* takes hold for good- self interest, self involvement, self motivation, self serving. The last generation with heart, with a hunger for justice. The last generation to struggle against, to stand before. The last generation with a distinguishable youth culture- kicking and screaming discontent, rebellion against obvious social charades. The last generation before the postmodern wasteland stretches out in every direction forever interminable. The last generation with a hope to speak truth and live in truth because the understanding of truth remains accessible- to understand that which is true cannot be downloaded, all truth emanates from within. The last generation to seek out that truth in the realm of experience, desperate like those dying of thirst. The last generation to carry on the lessons of previous generations: to respect Depression Era fortitude and cunning, to embrace the Beat ethos of spontaneity, to shine the transcendentalist beacon forth aching for eternal eureka's of simplicity like the sectional grids of Thoreau's bean patch, to bleed with the stockyard workers of Chicago, to sweat with the immigrant grandmothers of the Rustbelt. The last generation before the idea of generations ends and all class or social or practical distinctions dissolve and great monoliths absorb personality and freedom from the individual, before monopoly takes hold for good like a voracious multiplicative barnacle.

We have come to the end of generations because we have come to the end of the individual, especially in the American sense of the word- not just in concept, but in concrete reality- real in the sense that being a person is being a participant in your life. Authentic. Creative. Not requiring mediation through a device or screen or requiring guidance from a search engine to understand how to become involved in your own development as in developing tastes and interests and pursuing aims. Going all the way, in any direction, so long as it doesn't hurt others and, most importantly, offers a sense fulfillment.

We may even be the last generation who consider themselves as organically human. Don't you suspect as much upon seeing a ten-year-old focused on his parents' iPad in **WALMART**, eyes like mosquitoes in June glued to an electric zapper? Soon there will be android caretakers breastfeeding infants from robot bosoms. Silicon, not skin. What happens then? What is left once those last vestiges of our 'humanness' have eroded away?

Perhaps, even more aptly, we (being me and you with our minds reaching from one word to the next here and now) are members of a "tragic generation." We rode the coattails of our forefathers and inherited a colonized world, conquered by technology and the free market and vast veiny highway systems- medicine and electricity and convenience- all of our woes transmuted from the external to the internal. Our doom requisitioned to us, a last will and testament. A legacy of Atlantic slave ship armadas, the methodical disenfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples, a petroleum fueled assault against Mother Earth- doomed by karma, betrayed by circumstance.

Yet, we are not to be pitied. We consent. We do not question. We allow the dominator paradigm to propagate- we refuse to change course. We summon no resistance, we seek no medication for an active disease which grows within us, self-contained between a span of five inches, from ear to ear- downloaded and festering- our minds are infected, yet we sing thanksgiving hymns about living longer and eating better and having more leisure time to check our emails. We are oblivious, decaying in real-time via live-stream. We are negligent. We are indolent.

We are blithesome inheritors.

Lo, some of our forebearers tried their best: counterculture revolutions, assemblies of change for the people by the people, gender egalitarianism and racial equality and make love not war- blossomed sugar magnolias, ideological fervors. There were causes, movements. People stood for something. Even if the gains were short. Even if the eventual outcome was failure- there was a belief, coupled with action, which required a certain *qualia* of investment. They wanted to get somewhere, do something- they wanted diamond skies, one hand waiving free.

Now compare their energies to our current world: separated, holographic, pornographic, displaced, dysplasia, remote. A world reduced from three dimensions, from three aspects of body mind and spirit- reduced to one dimension, to a world of image, illusion, eye level. Image proceeded then by impulse.

It isn't our fault.

It is our fault.

Paralyzed.

Unblinking.

We who are needlessly anxious, hopelessly disturbed and fragmented, our attention like a spinning compass needle amidst a magnetic storm. We who lack the ability to cultivate any sense of appreciation, who rush onto the next problem of self the next issue the next thing to buy the next phone call the next to-do the next credit card swipe the next meaningless, hollow exercise. We who are unable to touch depth. We who were born to mothers arguing over shipping and handling fees in postpartum hospital suites ignoring our cosmic heartbeats. We who can no longer experience beauty- who position for photo opportunities but never actually exist in the place or position or offer a genuine smile-committed to the image, to the relic, to the unreal- we who are willing to go to such great lengths to betray mysteries incomparable like life and love and spirit all for a touch of fatuous certainty. We who equate patriotism with consumption. We who keyword search the internet for answers to multitudinous queries yet we do not ask the great questions, the important questions which take lifetimes to answer, we who instead type away at our keypads lonely and scared yet turgid with pride, believing we know everything- isolated forevermore at our posts, too ashamed to admit to our fellows and friends and lovers how lonely and scared we truly are. We who are assigned SKUs. We who are fed a diet of advertisement, who consume lies, who are pacified, stupefied and sedated. We who channel television by the mouthful captivated by "reality stars" who don't appear to be human in any real way. We who have discarded archetypical mythologies and replaced them with consumer ethics, market theory- decorated with scientific drivel posturing as wisdom, so now our foundations are nothing more than tawdry filigree. We who have been denuded of our powers, unable to tune into any hidden senses, our guts, our intuitions- outsourced to Google, delivered by Amazon- paralyzed and separated from the gods, then from the earth, and now from each other. We who have been atomized, dehumanized.

We who inherited answers.

We who never asked the questions.

Final.

Tragic.

What irony- the generation with all the answers, unable to ask the right questions. Unaware but over-informed, innervated pernicious by entanglements and wires, shackled down by inputs and outputs. *Connected*, but never connecting with the present moment- a moment to observe breath, to roam in that expansive space between exhaling and inhaling, to celebrate the miracles within that space.

And our pride has calcified and given birth to a firm denial, an absurd denial. We refuse to acknowledge our unconscious responses are the product of default patterns and curated viewpoints we have inherited from a cultural program rooted in greed and waste and injustice. Refusing to believe we have been hypnotized by the state, the workplace, the media outlets- hypnotized to conformity in every way, in every place, at every hour of the day. Locked up in our minds with our storages and lockers and caches and closets full of madness.

This is the way things ought to be.

This is the way things are.

Our only prayers are selfish ones, hoping to break through the middle-class ceiling and join the elite ranks of the economy. We pray for dirigibles like fools. We cling to hopes that someday we'll fly up there and join them. If only we adhere to the rules, play the right way, wait our turn- it'll all work out. *One day it could be you!* Why not me? I could be the one- I'll cash the winning lottery ticket! Then I'll have the luxury to live long enough to be an old man or an old woman stuffed into a padded room, abandoned to suffocate alongside other old men and old women all of us toothless and waiting to die. Ours is a generation that ignores its elders. We mock their ignorance, their lack of felicity with our latest gadgets. They can't keep up, the poor old farts. Hah!

Our poverty is incomprehensible- or maybe our lack of poverty, our blind self-reliance and self-absorption- this celebrated obsession with self which has made us grotesque. A blind delusion- "It's alright, everything is alright"- so long as I can log on, claim the points. "I'm fine." Totally convinced. At best we have deteriorated into obsessed archivists whose sole purpose and dedication belongs to the curation of our own lives- archivists who deposit and deposit again and again. Pictures, posts, snaps, shots, clips- archivists who never go back to take inventory of their archives. Truthfully and most truly hoarders of self. And so we utterly fail to acknowledge the inadequacy of ourselves, of the individual self, of this fatuous world of bells and whistles and dings. We truly believe in it, and pitifully we find it to be worthy of reverence and awe. We don't question it. We don't challenge it. We simply buy the upgrades and laugh at grandma because she still doesn't know how to turn the damn thing ON.

Proud- though in secret we bleed to death with anxiety. Insecure, worried we'll never be enough or do enough or be loved enough or be worthy of love- inadequate and private. Underneath the layers of upgrades and quick fixes, beneath the bells and whistles, there in the cold truth of our inner sanctum lies an overwhelmed, over-stimulated child.

Idiotic sadness cannot be avoided.

It is the hallmark of our time.

A final, absolute fact: we have traded in our autonomy to be surrounded by comfort, to be deluded by security, to be supplied dopamine by a simple click. And the true winners behind these repulsive transactions? A cabal of technocrats who manufacture both the conditions and the outcomes, who stash their loot in offshore tax havens on Monday, then run the *House Committee for Un-American Activities* on Tuesday. On Wednesday, we cheer on their verdicts. We have granted consent, and we don't even remember doing it- on to the next clip the next movie the next *the next the next*- ad infinitum- who knows, who cares, don't ask questions, please be quiet, I'm busy.

Self-concerned, self-absorbed, selfish.

Dislocated from our pure self, from the Self, by our unconscious desires- dislocated by our appetites and our unhealthy attention to fulfilling them, our unhealthy state of unfulfillment. The American Dream, the modern man: consumption at all costs. The American Ethos: bill every interaction and transform any exchange into hard currency. The commodification of everyone, and everything. Sell it. Copyright it. Charge it to the wasteland's tab.

No soul, no love, no truth.

No life.

This life- woeful, squandered. Wasted- a waste, like everything else. Glossed over with our arms wrapped round a democratic, impersonal happiness that is described to us by television programs, that is regimented carefully by marketing directors and insurance companies. On the couch, stoned, wearing an I FUCKED ELVIS t-shirt. We have our lines memorized, the cues- a wave, a smile, a handshake- sports teams, holidays, vacations, new cars- petty armor forged by the machine to use against our secret thoughts of 'What if I can't keep faking it anymore' or worse 'What if I can?'

No oracles remain behind to warn us. Pythia's vapors evaporate.

Forgetful.

Forgotten.

Forgetting in our hurried existence that joy is children's laughter. Forgotten solemnities, shared once between friends, between lovers, between each other, men and women- but now watch it- there it goes- and here something terrible to take its place.

Tragic.

Final.

Finally- the human species was not built to live like this. We are self-destructing. Quickly- high speed, high broadband, high definition- check for the signal and watch the broadcast. Download complete. Submit your comments. Upvote your favorite version.

-O-

A feeling of angst, of unraveling- rolling thunder outside, darkness punctuated by lightning strikes- Mickey closes her eyelids. She can't hold still. Her legs jostle. Unshaven. Heel to shin- the texture creeps into her awareness, morphs into an obsession- her attention is fixed- *I need to do something about this*. The blanket comes off- into the bathroom- a razor, the mirror- lines vertical, long- she enjoys her legs, the sight of them, the feel of them- she feels better- naked, trimming the hair above her vagina- pubic hairs in the sink- she rubs her labia, clears off some of the unmoored hairs, reddish- it excites her- back in bed, her underwear still off- her clitoris wet, firm- edging herself to orgasm, right to the brink- back and forth in several waves, tense, then relaxing- circular- finally she releases.

Mickey slides into her underwear.

Her mind is clear, relaxed.

Her finger delicately flicks a cigarette above the ashtray on her nightstand.

A flash of free association... a memory... a lit cigarette, a book of matches, a man standing next to her... a conversation she may have never had... a gumball machine with nothing inside its glass sphere... a floor beneath her like a tarpit melting into the soles of her shoes... a gruff voice... under a dingy light, between shadows, the Prayer of St. Francis is framed on a wall, a dove soaring between clouds and a yellow glow reflecting off the cheap glass in a fan blade shutter, spinning on a warbled precession above her hung from a low ceiling, the room humid and rotten with grease and stale beer... phantasmagoric and cut up into pieces by this lunatic fan blade... the man now shouting over a din of glasses, of guitars, cut through smoke and wreckage, a subterranean dive bar:

"The scene is dead! You ever wonder where the underground is? Where's the fringe? Where's it happening? Seriously! I sat and wondered like Bob fucking Seger. I peeked under every stone, I looked hard. I wanted to find it. Where are you, you raucous underground? Where is *it* happening? I went to shows, I went to bars, I went to parties, I went to alleyways. I scoured. But then I realized it. The underground is dead! Voila! Coffin nailed! Because the scene is like everything else in America. There's no sense of vitality- anywhere! Lifeless- land of the dead scene's bones decayed to dust, pounded together on flat rock, spat on and baked and turned into thin grey strips to print more useless receipts for more useless junk we have to have! Dead. Sceneless!

"And you know what that means, when the underground is dead? When everyone has bought in? It means we're the last generation. It means these are the end times- a hard rain's gonna fall. Seriously! Don't laugh. Mark my words. Fire and brimstone! That's where all this- all of this nonsense- that's where its headed. And we deserve it! That's the only beautiful part of it all. Look around. Everyone is a complete fool here! An unconcerned fool- so long as tomorrow morning they can wake up and buy their iced mochas with extra caramel, extra sugar, extra large- they don't care! They don't need a scene. They don't need to go underground. Their scene is the scene they get on television. They're asleep! And believe what you want- I don't care- you can make excuses and say it ain't their fault- but I don't buy it. Ignorance is no excuse. It ain't! You're laughing, but listen- if you're okay with everything, if you're going home to watch the big game, well, then you're a goddamned fool too.

"Tell me I'm wrong! You have eyes, don't you? Speaking of eyes- you ever look around- everyone's got eyes like stones skipping off into fucking waves, kerplunk! Sunk beneath the surface. There's nothing dynamic in their eyes. They got no life! They got no original thought! They got nothing to meet you with! Because they don't have a fucking clue as to what's going on, who they are, or where they belong. They've done no investigation. They've gained no personal insight. They haven't worked for anything! They mindlessly find the next thing to buy, and then they buy it from whoever everybody else is buying it from. You understand what I'm saying? Eyes like nobody's home. Only mechanizations- only paychecks direct deposited into precious checking accounts. That's all anybody cares about. They worship billionaires on the cover of Forbes. That's the value system- monetary. But nobody even enjoys their money! That's another irony- they can't even be sensuous anymore. It's all excess. It's all mechanistic. They're fucking Sybarites who can't even feel the pleasure anymore! There's no spirit! There's nothing essential! These people, man- look around- they aren't even here. I can't bear it. I really can't. I look away nowadays. It's too much. It makes my fucking skin creep."

-O-

A new movie preview flashed up on the television screen.

The hour was getting late.

Her father was asleep on the couch.

A bag of potato chips, a glass of water- Mickey wasn't tired.

The image. A memory. Her thoughts:

*This reminds me of my last encounter with Paul Nelson- we were outside the local theater, and I was listening to him offer a criticism of our options. The signage out front listed: **IRONMAN 4- RETRN OF POWER, XMEN: A NEW BEGINING.** Paul was ragging on the surge of Marvel comic movies, which is odd,*

because Paul might have checked-off every box on the demographic checklist which Marvel's marketing department depends on to make creative decisions, to fully capitalize at the box office. At the time, Paul represented the target audience.

Gender: MALE

Marital Status: SINGLE

Tax status: DEPENDANT

Hobby: VIDEO GAMES

Food: FAST

I can hear Paul's passion, evidenced by an especially pronounced lisp, "At some point, the CGI just can't develop any further. Until 3D really becomes an option, honestly, it won't get any better. They've taken it as far as they can. It's the same with the story lines. I'll be the first to admit it- I loved the originals, but each remake unfolds with the same arc. There's no real development of the saga. There are bigger weapons, scarier bad guys, more complicated scenarios to untangle. And all that bleeds across franchises. It's content for content's sake."

I can feel my visceral reaction, too. This happened sometimes when conversing with Paul. I would hear him- take stock of what he had said- look him over- and wonder how in the world a kid like that from a town like this could ever think the way he did. He'd have this shockingly critical perspective. He was right, too. I remember reading Spengler, whenever a culture or a nation is in decline there is a tendency to look backwards into the past, to relive glory days that never truly were, when the forms are exhausted. And such a revival is occurring, it can be seen across movies and television and music- it's the current obsession around 'rebooting' stories and franchises and material. Paul was hip to all that. He didn't even know it. He would never have bragged about it, or referenced Spengler- but he had a strong intuition.

Anyways.

Damn I miss that theater. It was the last holdout, you know? The last cinema standing in the way of AMC MOVIEPLEX's complete domination. Popcorn on the floors, mice. You could have a cigarette in the balcony. I used to love looking up there as a kid- I would be mesmerized by smoke wafting about the projector's light. It was so noir. Erotic. I wonder if that's why I started smoking?

Anyways.

I guess if there was anything physical that attracted me to Paul, oddly enough, it would be his lisp. It gave him an air of vulnerability that most of the redneck idiots I grew up with lacked. No one ever made fun of him for it- undoubtedly a function of his two older brothers on the football team, each of whom possessed a jaw of marble and were known barbarians who drank cheap whiskey by the bucketful.

Anyways.

High school- god, whenever I think back to those days I catch the scent of marijuana smoke and am overcome by the taste of peanut butter. Peanut butter and pot. Senior year. That was as close as I have come to self-sabotage. I had stopped going to classes, started listening to The Clash. I stayed entirely stoned for about a month and a half. Self-destruction: a built-in gene, activated by setting, activated by nature. Everyone has the capacity to implode, and as humans, I feel like most of us are bound to express it in some way or another.

Anyways.

Maybe Paul's self-destruct program involved going to India? Or maybe the subconscious energy to avoid self-destructing took hold of him and brought him there? Maybe he was ahead of nature, maybe he was trying to beat out the inherent limits of his biology? I never thought of it that way. Strange. Stranger yet- if all the evolutionary psychologists are right, then how could such a psychic function continue to be perpetuated in the gene lines? Wouldn't all the self-destructors eventually die out? Not to be obvious, but wouldn't we, as a species, go extinct? Maybe we are in the process of doing just that? Maybe, because modern culture is so ill-fitting to the human mind, to humanity's natural tendencies- maybe Paul has

something in his nature preventing his own demise, a string of nucleotides coded for salvation? Maybe India was his salvation? Nature and nurture. Good and evil. Hope and destitution.

Who knows- I don't even know what the hell I'm thinking about- well, what I do know is that around here, most people are suicide freaks. Nobody's daughter is named Audrey Penfold Masterson. Nobody's son is named Tucker Theodore Reynolds. We're rural mutants hellbent on achieving our own self-destruction. Come down to Harrison County- I'll show you the blood, the skidmarks, the broken tree branches.

Anyways.

High school- a few of the 'popular' girls in our grade became convinced I wanted to fuck Paul. I guess Paul and I used to talk a lot. They thought I had a crush on him. I bet they still do. I bet they heard I went over to the Nelson house, looking for him. They probably think I'm queuing across hemispheres lusting for his cock. That's typical. A woman can't show interest in a man without presumably wanting to fuck him. Plus, I've never seen his cock. Whatever. Not that seeing it would even make a difference. Horse hung or piddly pig tailed- I mean if I was applying for a passport for the sole purpose of finding a cock, I would definitely want to know what aforementioned cock looked like- even though, despite everything, the ultimate irony is that probably less than 7% of men, regardless of their cock's appearance, operate with the emotional and conscious capacity to fully satisfy a woman sexually. And anyways, I'm not about to let the porn industry dictate my sexual preferences or tastes. I wonder where I pulled that number from? Seven percent? I would bet that it's less- less than 7% of men then are worthy of even being pursued sexually, if you were to judge 'worthiness' on their ability to reciprocate satisfaction. I don't even think it's about 'fucking.' To fuck. Again- the porn industry- like all I want is to be bent over and jabbed at with the biggest salami in the deli. Please. No thanks. Been there, done that, thank Christ I was drunk. No. Intimacy requires a little more nuance, a little more tongue, a little more foreplay, a little more union. Fuck is not my favorite word. It's not my least favorite, but it's not my favorite. Sex is fine for me. Sex has more breadth. Fucking is so one dimensionally pelvic, it's so hump-derived- slapping flesh, pummeled and mechanistic- a hundred pumps, fifty lashes, drop down and give me twenty- it's a superficial machismo thing, it's all daddy issues and punishment. Mammalian. Corporeal. No soul. I'm not saying that it doesn't feel good sometimes to be physically overtaken by a man, to let go of your inhibitions, especially with a man you trust- but I prefer sex. Sex usually gets my pussy eaten out. Sex usually means eye contact, post-coital intimacy. Sex is collaborative. Judicious. That's just me I guess, or at least what I've figured out from a few relationships.

Anyways.

Well- technically there's making love, but I don't think I've ever made love. It's one of those things- if you don't know whether or not you've done it, you haven't. Didn't Louis Armstrong say that about jazz?

Anyways.

I don't want to fuck Paul Nelson. I'm not in the least bit physically attracted to him. His conversation skills are better than the average guy around here, sure, but that isn't saying much. The median is somewhere between flyballs and draft picks. But there are plenty of drawbacks- he used to chew tobacco incessantly, his features are somewhat bland and more or less remind me of a Marine recruiter. At heart he's a gearhead who loves tractors and cars- even though he is guilty of being a reader, and an occasional thinker. He probably didn't leave the county until he was in 8th grade when we took the bus to the state capitol. God love him for it, but he's not exactly the eligible bachelor of the year.

He's not my type.

Really.

Anyways.

Why the hell am I still thinking about Paul Nelson?

And why the hell did he go to India?

-O-

From a lecture series titled 'Radical Social Economics'... a throaty, raspy voice... Mickey rolls onto her left side in her bed:

“How many linguistic options are at our disposal to describe the features of a new car? How many brochures and advertisements have been filled by physical descriptors, adjectives and adverbs? How expansive is the gamut of language which can be utilized by an advertising agency? Consider it. But now, now consider how much language is geared towards detailing our emotions, for examining and engaging and ultimately communicating our internal state? Personal, discrete, specific, emotional language? Let’s take another moment here to reflect. Who has heard this conversation before:

“‘How are you doing?’

“‘Oh I’m fine. How are you?’

“‘I’m good.’

“I am going to assume the majority of you have heard this line of dialogue, verbatim, at least once in the previous twenty-four hours. Maybe there’s a twist, maybe the response is, ‘I’m sad’ or ‘I’m angry’ or ‘I’m anxious.’ Still- and this is what our reading was meant to highlight- there is a paucity of language available to us, as members of Western culture, which is tooled to explore our emotional and experiential inner-space. Our options are severely limited, in fact.

“And this is our argument which we can now explore- namely this ‘lack of inner awareness’ as a deliberate function of our cultural, and thus, economic, programming.

“But before we launch into exploring the argument- one quick step backwards- we need a foundational truth. And here it is: language and reality are intertwined. Language influences thought, which influences perception, which influences our individual subjective realities. I’ll trust you completed the reading, and leave it at that.

“Now, back to the task at hand. The Western, consumer-capital program, namely the American brand of capitalism, has systemically eradicated the use and development of emotional language by means of advertising, media, et cetera. The language available to the average individual, in our culture, with respect to previous cultures- and of course here we are relying on linguistic research, which has been documented- has a diminished vocabulary from which to draw his or her insights with respect to emotion and the internal being. Now with that in mind, we can look at the question of why. Why would the American brand of capitalism, our beloved ABCs, operate in such a way that aforementioned ‘diminishment’ came about?

“And here our reading will illuminate the jump- and the jump is that our reality has been curated in a way so that we live ‘externally,’ with our ‘head’ being the center of our five senses. The argument is that the linguistic censorship we observe and can measure across cultural modalities is the result of a carefully constructed agenda which aims to mask the consumer impulse, to ensure the spectral energy of ‘desire’ remains hidden and unseen and unconscious. It is a focal point since this impulse drives the ABC agenda from the point of view of consumer behavior. And the masking, this process of masking rather, this what we will refer to as the ‘crisis.’

“Now for an aside- let me remind everyone of our discussion on the quote unquote rational consumer. Or rather, after reviewing the compelling research from both psychology and economics, the irrational consumer. Have that in mind while we go on here.

“So the crisis- the crisis of DeBorde’s Spectacle if you will, of the economy for economy’s sake- requires that individuals and thus consumers within the ABC operate with an intrinsic blindspot. And this blindspot is with respect to our inner-space. And the ABC, as a cultural modality, will only promote activities which maintain the integrity of that blindspot within the populace, so that within each individual and thus collectively there is a psychological, psychical, domain which cannot be accessed. The blindspot- this is crucial- must be inaccessible for conscious, or conscientious, inspection.

“But why is the blindspot so crucial? Because creating this specific blindspot circumvents any rational deliberation or reflection on the part of the individual, the consumer, with respect to whatever it is that is being consumed. The blindspot prevents the individual from asking ‘Why do I need this new car?’ or ‘Where does this desire for a new car come from?’ Instead, our society, being structured by our economic

modality, only allows you to want the new car, to feel the impulse, the desire, the craving. And then, again because of the way our society is structured- it only allows for you to act on that impulse. Create the impulse, the perceived need, the feeling of inadequacy- and then put the solution at the individual's fingertips. Because if the individual were to critically evaluate where the desire comes from, and how it arises, the system wouldn't function. The ABC, to put it simply, is designed in such a way that individuals are never prompted to move towards the 'internal,' to inspect the blindspot. The ABC only works, in fact, if the consumer remains 'external' and essentially oblivious.

"And here the crisis transforms- or accelerates perhaps. Because now language becomes supplanted by images, by total imagery. Technology has acted as a catalyst here. Reflect for a moment. Look down at your phone screen. Technology has moved beyond the language-thought construct and immersed us, as users, directly within the image. The eyes serve as perceptual organs of immediacy. Think back to our marketing firm- they want your eyes on the low-cut dress, the red convertible, the luxury wristwatch. I recently spoke on this topic with Dr. Anand and he commented that if we were approaching this conversation from an Hindu tradition, we would say the agenda's goal is to keep the consumers' 'lower' chakras burning.

"An interesting sidetrack here- around emotional well-being and communication- there is reason to believe according to some researchers that this inability to authentically communicate one's inner-space or inner-life corresponds to certain negative psychological outcomes- nervousness, anxiety, et cetera. This was touched on wonderfully in the reading- especially with, and I'll take this directly from the text, 'They don't want you to understand why you're upset. Instead, they want you to take a pill twice a day. They don't want you to understand why you're anxious. Instead, they want you clicking away on Facebook for hours on end comparing yourselves to digital avatars and their phony lifestyles portrayed by your peers. They want you to believe *if only I had this, then I'd be happy*. They want you blind to the human, philosophical questions of meaning and fulfillment- they want you chasing happiness. And what is happiness, other than another one of their social constructs? Built by images, built by products, built by bank account numbers, built on the concept of owning the next *it*. They don't want you to realize that after you buy *it*, you still aren't going to be happy.'"

-O-

"Would you mind if I took a look?"

"Look at what sweetheart?"

Mickey scratched at the flesh between her nose and her upper lip. She didn't want to impose, but curiosity nabbed the better of her. "The letter. Can I see the letter, Mrs. Nelson?"

An unconscious palm to her curls, for support, Mrs. Nelson politely responded, "Certainly. I keep it hanging on the fridge. Would you like another cup of coffee while I'm up?"

"No thank you. I'm still working here on this one."

"Alright then."

Mrs. Nelson sauntered back to the kitchen, refilled her own mug, and settled back into the seat next to Mickey. She turned the letter so Mickey could see the handwriting. Reading it out loud.

Mickey felt uncomfortable.

Ma and Pop,

If you can't tell by the picture, I'm in India. I'm sorry I didn't tell you when I left. I didn't know for sure where I was headed. I came out here hoping to see some new things, experience something different- I love you both, and I'm doing OK. I want you to remember that you raised me right, you raised me to do good and have faith and work hard. For now, I don't know when I'll be back. I need to stay out here for a little bit. Maybe not forever, maybe not much longer, I don't really know. I want you to know I'm safe, I'm healthy, and I'm OK. I'll write back again as soon as I can. I love you both, I love Will

and Tim and Katie and Anne and Chris, and Shep too! Tell them all I say hello. Everything is alright, I promise. Will hopefully be in touch soon.

**Love always,
Paul**

Squirming a bit, "And this was six months ago?"

"Bit longer. Seven months. We haven't heard another word from him."

"Interesting."

"No phone calls, no more letters."

"I hate to be obvious, but did you try contacting anybody, outside of the local police or anything, to help locate him..."

Mrs. Nelson answered quickly, with pride, "The embassy. We got in contact with the embassy in India."

"What did the embassy say?"

"Well, the Americans there spoke with some Indian officials. They told us they checked police records. And there were no reports of a death, arrest, anything like that. There was no reason to suspect he was in trouble. So we didn't go further. We haven't done anything else."

"That's how the embassy left it?"

"They said they would let us know if they heard anything. But my husband called them back and said Paul had left to do a religious mission. He was- well, Frank was worried that the government might think Paul left to go join a terrorist group. It's crazy I know- he watches the NEWS all night. Not that Paul would ever do anything like that. But that's Frank- he gets these ideas in his head. And I think- I don't know. There was no reason to lie, but- we haven't heard anything else."

"And the message he left on your other son's answering machine, that was the last thing he said to you?"

"Yes. We haven't gotten any phone calls, any other postcards or letters."

"Have you thought about going over there to see for yourself?"

Almost muted, Mrs. Nelson lowered her voice, "No. Frank said it's out of the question. We're just waiting now. But I feel- I feel in my heart he is alright. I really do. Mother's intuition I suppose. I have faith. I don't sense that he is in trouble. Even when it first happened. I'm- I'm more confused than worried."

Mickey tried to ameliorate any of Mrs. Nelson's fears- conscious that she ought to be delicate, optimistic- *I don't want to upset her*- "My Dad always says that your intuition is usually the only thing worth listening to."

"Well, I suppose- maybe intuition and the Bible. Not particularly in that order. But you're- I don't know. I really don't know. I hope Paul comes home. Part of me thinks he was called by the Lord to a bigger purpose, a better life. But I'm selfish. I hope he at least tells us one day what he's been up to. That doesn't seem like much to ask, does it?"

"Sounds perfectly reasonable to me."

One day... not today, not the shadow of tomorrow... but many tomorrow's away, in a stained glass vision full of future light emitted from distant stars of the past... in another world unimaginable today, when today with Mrs. Nelson at a kitchen table becomes a dead eternity... in this other world... far, far away from the Nelson's home... Mickey would have a conversation with Paul, who would explain his departure in a frenzy of excitement because they've have been struck drunk on each other's remarkable presence, just like this:

"I lost it. I couldn't take the- the inanities- you know what I mean? I couldn't buy into it anymore. It's like I short circuited. And it was sudden. I just- I saw how small everybody's life was around me. How small and predictable. Tiny circles. Does that make sense? And I ended up in this place where I couldn't even have a simple conversation- literally- with anybody. I hated them for it! It's funny. I hated everyone I knew. Everyone from home, my friends and family. I became like hyper-aware of these invisible perimeters of

interest that everyone guards. These sacred little ecosystems where they live and obsess and bother over. And none of it meant anything! It became so absurd! And I couldn't get around it. I couldn't escape this dissatisfaction. It consumed me. I was working a dumb job. I was saving money. I was following what everyone thought I should do. All of it was so useless- but nobody else said anything.

"Honestly, I felt sick to my stomach.

"And see, we would sit down for Sunday dinner, and my brothers would come home with their kids, my sister too. Being the youngest, I saw their families, I watched them do adulthood. I listened to conversations about different types of Tyvek, truck models, bank loans, immigrants and jobs, guns, pregnancy foods. I listened and listened and I waited because I figured eventually one of them might actually say something that resonated with me- might actually talk openly about the worn look I saw week after week plastered across their faces. I thought maybe one of them would come clean- and say they have no idea what the hell is going on. Because that's how I felt. I felt like I didn't have a clue, and I didn't understand why everybody else tried so hard to pretend like they did. But nobody cried out. Nobody came clean. Honestly, they hardly ever asked me for my opinion, what I felt. I was the quiet one, I guess. Well, they figured I was quiet. Which I was. I don't know.

"Sunday after Sunday, it went on. And they kept on talking about the same stuff- they were scared of invisible enemies- liberals, Mexicans, abortionists on the East coast. I sat there and waited week after week, for so many weeks, listening to so many conversations. And none of them ever came remotely close to the core of the issue. They kept blaming things, they kept finding new justifications to be upset at this or that.

"I don't know how it all fits together- but it did in my mind. It came crashing down. All over the span of two or three weeks- poof.

"Because finally, one Sunday, after the plates were cleared- I decided I had done enough listening. It's like a bomb went off. I couldn't stand the prospect of another Monday at work, another semester taking community college classes, another night out drinking with the boys. I couldn't do it anymore. Impulsively after I cleared my dishes I asked to borrow the car. The words just fell out. I gave my mom a kiss after she handed me the keys and I drove to the bank. I emptied my account. Every dollar. Then I drove to Indianapolis. My passport had two months left on it before the expiration- I had gotten one for a family trip, the only family trip we ever took outside the country- to Niagara Falls. My mom insisted on staying on the Canadian side. My father hated her for it, but she won out in the end. It's funny how that worked out- I wouldn't have been able to leave if it wasn't for her. Because we all got passports. And after the trip I used to open the booklet up and inspect that stamp from Customs, over and over and over. I loved that splotch of ink. And I wanted to put another stamp on that passport. So there I was, at the airport in Indianapolis with six thousand dollars and a passport ready to get it stamped. No suitcase. No luggage. No plans.

"I called my brother's house because I knew he wouldn't pick up the phone. I left a message. I told him where I had parked the car. That I was alright. That I had to go, but I'd be back. And I hung up. I bought a one-way ticket to India, because literally that was the furthest away I could go. And the whole India, Indiana thing- it felt right. And then, I was gone."

Mrs. Nelson's voice- back to the living room, back to the shadow of tomorrow, the future of yesterday- a half-finished, lukewarm cup of bitter coffee- listening, Mickey hears a meek voice, "I hope, well, what I really hope is he saw his elephants."

"Pardon?"

"He loved elephants. He worked on a project on elephants in grammar school- there were two types, African elephants and Indian elephants. He cut out construction paper in the shape of their ears. He always wanted to see one. I really think that's why he went out there. He got it fixed in his head. He's like that- once he gets something fixed in his head."

Mickey couldn't help but agree. "They are beautiful animals."

Mrs. Nelson cleared her throat, trying to finish her attempt at changing the subject, "Did you know that elephants have names for each other? And they can paint, they create art. And they even mourn, when one of their friends or family members passes? I learned as much as I could about elephants, after Paul left. And the more I learned, the more I love them too. I really do."

Mickey nodded in agreement, unsure of what to say.

Mrs. Nelson folded her hands over her lap, "He went out there to see his elephants. I really believe that." Mickey lied. "It makes sense to me."

-O-

I don't know what has me thinking about Paul Nelson again. Maybe after driving into town with my Dad for groceries. Maybe it was a face, a conversation- I try my best not to run into people from high school. I refuse to go to any of the local bars. I am in no way, shape, or form interested in being a member of the community. If you knew the details, I think you'd understand. I'm vigilant about staying protected from this place.

It's not that I don't like the people. It's not like I can't accept the fact I'm one of them. I know I am. That past is critical to who I am today. I have no problem with that world, I really don't. I don't mind it.

But I want to interact with the world on my terms. I don't want to contribute to stereotypes, or to fulfill expectations. I don't want to drink Bush Light until I puke. I don't care about the Colts or the Pacers. And I'm alright with that- I don't resent other people for watching the game every Sunday. They can do whatever they want- and I do what I want. I don't want to marry a local boy, start popping out babies. I don't want to go to church. So I don't. And I haven't. And I won't. And that's okay.

So what if I didn't take the golf scholarship? So what if I was hellbent on leaving town, and now I'm stuck here until further notice? I'm not angry about it. I'm happy to be here with my Dad. He needs me. It wasn't meant to be. I wasn't meant to win the Masters. I wasn't meant to develop fiber-optic infrastructures in third world countries. It's okay. I'm alright with it. I have my students, I have my job. I take care of Dad. It's alright. I'm alright.

But I don't know why Paul Nelson popped into my head again...

-O-

"Dad?"

Herb Gallagher was face down on the couch. This wasn't an unusual position. In fact, the scene was typical for a Wednesday morning. Buried in a worn pillow, a blue plaid blanket over his back (a blanket Mickey had covered him with the previous night after she removed his bottle from the floor next to his suspended fingertips, back into the kitchen cupboard, after she deposited his shoes next to the front door on the mat so he wouldn't step awkwardly on them when he awoke, after she exhaled loudly and walked upstairs to her own bedroom), an arm hung over the side with his knuckles on the worn hardwood. However, one aspect was glaringly missing: his snoring. Herb Gallagher's snores beckoned comparisons to a pack of howling wolves, a line of industrial dishwashers, the start to the Indianapolis 500. Instead- silence. Mickey was startled by the silence. She called out again from the kitchen.

"Dad!"

She had gathered a half dozen eggs. There was fresh milk in the makeshift refrigerator outside. She was going to start a fire, boil some water- breakfast. But an ominous silence had interrupted her routine. She stared through the open door towards the couch. Her father wasn't moving. He wasn't snoring. She took a few steps towards him and stopped.

Mickey dug her right hand into her chest. There was a dishtowel in her left. A burning sensation filled her insides, friction heat- falling, a lunar capsule at terminal velocity. A stack of weights pressed over her lungs. She couldn't breathe. She knew it. Before she checked- before she would walk over to the couch, lift the blanket, slap his back, scream his name, rattle his shoulders, check his pulse- before she did any of that, before the tears and the dense pit of sorrow corroded her stomach, before her breath would escape her

and she would fall to the floor hunched into a fetal pose so empty and alone and terrified- she knew. She knew for certain. There was no space of indeterminacy, no quantum either/or.

Seated on the floor, leaning up to the couch, knees bent- an hour of sobbing, an hour curled up fetal and weathering the storm of initial emotions. She had placed one of her father's arms over her shoulder. She held his hand. She kissed his cold skin. Her tear ducts had dried up in her sore eyes. She pulled him into her heart- to say one last goodbye.

She stayed with her father like that, intimate and mourning, for as long as her energy would allow her.

The morning had been one of sunshine and bluebirds. Light poured in through the windows, a great ubiquitous sky stained everything in the house through the windows. There was a vase filled with the last wildflowers of summer, flowers he had picked for her a couple days prior. Pictures on shelves- a family, a past, a future- lifetimes ago. Lifetimes gone.

Eventually Mickey fell asleep, exhausted- slowly, collapsing to the hardwood floor. She awoke to Bowie, her cat, licking her face. It was early afternoon. There was a fetid smell accumulating. Decay.

Mickey sighed deeply, consoled by an irrefutable truth: this had been inevitable. A man who pined after his wife, who was desperate to be reunited with his true love- Herb Gallagher had yearned to make right by his deceased bride for years, he had committed himself to rejoining her- a reunion based on mortification of his own flesh, by dissolving himself inside a bottle of amber spirits. It didn't come as a shock to Mickey- she didn't feel betrayed, or abandoned- her father was a man, and every man died. He was a free man who chose his own way. She understood him. She understood the nature of things.

She gathered herself to her feet and stood above his body.

Confronted by the truth.

She had become an orphan.

She was alone.

Mickey reached for her cat, and after a few minutes of caressing Bowie in her arms, she set the blonde creature down to the floor and constructed a plan of action. There was no funeral home to call, no need to make arrangements, no use for an ambulance, no pastor or parish priest, no ceremony to be held, no public eulogy- trivialities now, the world of the past- more immediate concerns, practical decisions to be made. Mickey acknowledged it would be too hard to carry his body to the cemetery that housed her mother's remains. It was six or seven miles away. There had been no gas for the truck for almost a year. There was nobody to call to help her- even if there was, there were no phonelines to make a call. As it was, she found herself with two options: a burial plot in the back yard, overlooking the field, or a cremation, a pile of burnt flesh to be scattered. A funeral pyre, or a sepulchral deposit? A Cahokian warrior, or a Greek hero? Mickey wrestled with the options internally. It didn't take long. She settled on the backyard. She could fabricate a tombstone, dig up a clean plot, bestow one last gift back to the earth- a man of the earth, lost in the trappings of this world for a while but now returned home. Yes- it's what her father would have wanted. Not that it mattered- not that there would be any visitors, not that there would be any memorial service, not that anybody cared once they were dead and gone anyways. But even so, Herb Gallagher would have wanted to return to the land, to the soil of his home and labors, the dirt of his father and grandfather. She would see to it he went back, in peace, and with one culminating act.

Inch by inch she dragged her father's corpse through the living room, then the kitchen, then out the back door. Dead weight on an old, quilted blanket. Mickey covered his face with one of his red flannel shirts. His eyes wouldn't remain shut- sallow, inescapable and lifeless. She had already ransacked the supply closet, lit a few scented candles. Opened all the windows. She pulled the couch out after him. She would burn the couch. *Bury the man, burn the couch*- she repeated it several times to herself. A smile. Here was the man who taught her when to use a four-iron punch. Out the door, clunking down the steps, inching across the lawn- the futility of her situation. A chuckle.

Once she reached a worthy destination, she sighed, "Well Dad, we made it."

Mickey walked to the shed and found the spade. She paced over the grass for a little while- it had become unruly, overgrown. A meadow. There- the energy resonated- she had found a spot. She set the blade into the ground, put her foot against the rusted steel, pressed down, and lifted. It took several hours of digging, but her labors produced a respectable ditch. Six feet long by three feet wide by six feet deep. One hundred and eight square feet of hollow space. A pile of dirt next to the grave- she lit a cigarette, drank from a glass of water, and stared into the empty place she had created- a place he had created.

It would be dark soon. She needed to finish the job.

It might have been nice to put him in a suit, to clean him up, to do it like how they did in the movies- if this were the movies. Mickey felt no need to window dress a harsh reality. Herb Gallagher wasn't an extravagant man, and he wasn't a man who took much concern for his appearance. He was a farmer. He was a blue-collar'd, brown-fingernail'd laborer of the land. A fellaheen spirit- work love suffer- worry about the checkbook and huddle over the newspaper and smile at holiday dinner tables and drink through weekends and laugh and laugh more and bury away any confusion or tendencies to overthink. Dig plant harvest.

He was a man worn by his labors, shaped by them. He would return to the earth as such, properly.

Mickey rolled her father into his grave with one push, one concluding effort. His body landed. His face pointed heavenwards. The blanket remained constricted around his form. Mickey walked slowly into the house. After a while she returned with his bottle of liquor, a Townes Van Zandt record, and a picture of Herb and Gayle on their wedding day. She set the items next to the plot. Then she descended into the earth. She scrupulously removed the blanket. She straightened out his legs, put one arm at his side- the bottle tucked neatly under it- and the other arm across his midsection- on top of the album and the picture. She kissed her fingers, then set them on top of her father's forehead. "I love you, Dad. If you can, go be with mom. Tell her I miss her. I miss you too."

Dusk descended over the farm. Mickey had finished her duty. The mound of dirt had been returned into its rightful place. Herb Gallagher was buried. Mickey decided she would craft a headstone tomorrow. There had been enough work for one day. She set the spade back in the tool shed and went into the house- unsure of what to do next, but certain she needed to rest.

A bath. A drink. Her pajamas.

Bowie curls into Mickey's lap and the two of them swing back-and-forth in a rocking chair on the porch. Chipped paint, pollen spores- quiet. From the pantry she had pulled out her father's appointed "emergency bottle." A toast for the departed. She reaches for the glass next to her. A sip. A sigh. She looks out down the driveway- across the street, a pair of oak trees, the fields that stretched to the horizon. A busy summer night- crickets trilling, bursts of wind- busy, but quiet.

Mickey locks her gaze above the landscape, into the deep purples and terminal blues- a faint star, glowing, hovering- a lonely beacon, a singular light.

Alone, but ignited- thousands of years, trillions of cubic tons of empty interstellar empty space between heliopauses- Mickey is released from the confines of her life- death and distance separated her from her family- her friends gone- her past, her memories- there was space. There was quiet. A frozen dewdrop in the night sky- a crystal hung so far apart from the rest, never to touch again- touching once before, lifetimes come and gone- alone but free- free to watch, free to wonder, free admission, freedom ringing, ring around the rosy- dance, then bury your father below the horizon, his skin never to be touched by the sun again.

A steel shovel breaks through mealy soil- the sound, the mud torn asunder- the sediment, bacteria and insects- food, expired fleshy instruments once familiar, once upon a time- a hand on your cheek, shoulders you once rode upon, legs that pedaled bicycles alongside you, hair you played with before it turned gray, lips that once kissed you- his lips. Herb, father, Dad, Daddy, Dada- gone- he who was there in the beginning- he winks and abandons everything in a coy act of zazen, leaving it all behind.

Except an essential piece.

The piece of him that made you.

The part of you that lives on, heart beating, from him.

'Not even the stars are alone,' Mickey decides, then smiles.

She takes another drink.

Your father... buried... September... you don't even know the day... the year doesn't matter... fifty-seven, or fifty-six... fifty-seven years old... a month for barbecues and pitching changes, memories like backyard adventures with Mason jars stuffed with grass and insects... a boy once with his life in front of him, then a man with a body grown older than his age, older than a number... he's left his skeleton and fingernails behind, abandoned and goodbye to things of time... no flowers, a few tears... popsicle sticks, cheap plastic swimming pools... gone. My father is dead. I buried him today. He's dead and gone, but even so... he might still be here with me.

But then, at that moment, a plunge- a bottomless finality sinks in. The spaghettifying singularity of death.

Mickey loses her smile.

The stars disappear.

All light disappears.

Falling.

Venus- the morning star, the mourning star and evening star- not a star at all, a planet, an energy- an illusion, her whole life- the whole scene- *What's the point? If I'm here alone- there's nobody. Why go on anymore?*

Mickey considers it.

A handful of prescription-grade sleeping pills, chalky white and waiting in a plastic bottle in the bathroom cabinet upstairs; a poisonous concoction of turpentine or bleach or rat poison, all three available in sufficient quantity; a shotgun blast ringing out over barren fields; a hangman's noose with its abrasive fibers, taut, in one of the barn's rafters- she's worked out the calculations. She's estimated the speed of the wind. She knows which way to aim, which club to use. She could do it, now. It wouldn't be a problem. It would be quick, painless. There was nobody to hold her accountable- Bowie could fend for himself, a capable and proven hunter of field mice. She could set the chickens, the cow, the goats and the pigs free. It would be no problem, no hassle.

No worries- permanently anesthetized, like her father- a man who left this world, a drunk who drank down mouthfuls to numb his pain, to escape the background cosmic radiation of suffering- slugging anodyne, hopeful the next drip might ease his doldrums- a momentary escape- until finally he pulled the last hatch, gone on to a new phase thanks to merciful death, merciful on account of having let him out and freed him from this world of suffering- the misery, a miserable world without him now- he was her world- the world had gone- left- lost- orphaned.

Alone.

Vexed.

Why did you leave me here?

Lucky- her father was the lucky one. A swath of unassuming dirt transformed into a pile of sacred earth, unknowing- the end of a spade dug in and up, scooped and deposited over his half-opened eyelids. Mickey rouses herself from the porch. Bowie meows in a yawn on her lap. The night has firmly planted itself into the sky. She enters the front door. A candle. A vision, born of the dark- she watches herself drop mounds of soil onto him, memories echo like the thumps of clay against his body- caked in plumes of dust, a dry afternoon, hadn't rained for weeks, a tough summer- a disappointing harvest- this time of year, the sunsets are purple and red- without planning it or hoping for it, plucked up and out of uselessness.

More visions: an unending processions of gravediggers, gravefillers- pretty women filling graveyards across the eons- women digging their husbands' graves- daughters mourning at their fathers' sides- oldest sons drunk in driveways- nieces and nephews play kick the can, capture the flag- if humanity sticks around long enough the whole of the earth will be covered by one imperial graveyard- one day the final

gravedigger will fill the plot and smile and celebrate, festive, a *Dia de los Muertos* of colorful wax figures and candlelight and ripe fruit. Maybe the ghost of Oppenheimer will show up muttering lines from the Gita?

Dad never once called me "lucky" for making a long putt. He didn't believe in luck. Maybe everything had been set into motion solely for me to make that putt, to finish up the state tournament with a record low score on the back nine- those same coordinates and calculations which ended my scholarship in college, leaving the game competitively? Maybe every atom ever fused in the furnace of supernovae conspired with intentionality, even the quiet neutrons of frozen deep quasars, to put me alone, in this dark living room, to gaze upon this flickering candlelight? Maybe it is all meant to be? Maybe luck has nothing to do with it. Luck certainly doesn't seem to be for the dead already dead buried under the dirt asleep under a sheet. Who are the lucky ones, the fillers or the diggers? Dad wasn't lucky in life. Maybe he will be in his death.

She extinguishes the candle.

With Dad gone- who would be left to dig my grave?

There was nobody in town. There was nobody anywhere. She realized she had been severed not only from her family, exiled not only from her own home, but from the rest of humanity. No confederates, no relatives, no acquaintances, no good Samaritan on the road to Damascus. *But, what about Nick? Nick might- maybe Nick was still out there? He wouldn't be surprised by what happened to Dad. I bet the only thing that would have surprised Nick was how long the old man managed to fight on. He would be disappointed in Dad. He would feel guilty, maybe- for leaving me here to stay- maybe he'd feel ashamed- he wouldn't regret it though, Nick was too stubborn- like me. He had to be alright, hopefully- his wife Alyssa, the baby (the kid now)- maybe they had caught a break. If Nick were here, he would tell me 'I told you so' then give me a hug. He wouldn't hold it against me, for not leaving with him to St. Louis, for not listening to him- maybe a part of Nick knows, now, he feels it- maybe through vibratory channels, maybe through genetic frequencies, maybe through astral ties, those invisible, coaxial cords that connect people to each other- Mickey wanted Nick to be there with her, now. A tear ran down her cheek. They butted heads, they fought a lot growing up, but Nick was always there to back her up. Nick always stood up for his kid sister- a kid sister- that's all Mickey was now. She wasn't a daughter. She certainly wasn't a mother. She was a kid sister- hopefully, so long as Nick was alright.*

She turns towards the staircase- inside the house with no electricity or heat, no light, the house with no family, the house that at one time could be called a home, but no longer.

Homeless.

Orphaned.

Into her bed, Mickey tucks herself under purple cotton sheets. She whispers to Bowie, now asleep in her arms, "I'm nothing but a kid sister Bowie. And you're nothing but a cat. But here we are. We're still here. We might be the only ones, but we're still here."

Then Mickey over her shoulder, noticing through her window- curtains open and exposed, a solemn lilywhite glow, radiant, firm- "And the moon. She's here too."

A determined resolution, a perfect courage fills her being.

Mickey fell asleep within moments of laying her cheek to her pillows.

Dreaming.

-O-

IT'S THE MOON THAT COUNTS- defiant, pock marked with her craters like scars, burdened by asteroid by meteoroid, battered as all seekers are yet her tender watch is maintained, is held- tenuous like a gossamer silkscreen print hung up in the empyrean and plastered against the midnight, a gatekeeper a last stop between us and eternity unconcerned and unperturbed, a patient witness to our savage dramas, our hours of perfection, our passions- speaketh not a word, passeth not a judgment- an emblem of resolution,

resolve- integral, full- separated from the earth, an orphan, an abandoned sister- stationed, patient- it's the moon that counts.

-O-

"Mick, can you check out the television? Damn thing is acting up again."

Herb Gallagher rarely woke before his daughter, but this morning was different. He didn't drink a typical amount last night- well, he fell asleep before he could drink as much as he would have liked to. Regardless, he was awake and feeling alright. He allowed himself a nip from a surviving half-pint, extracted a Diet Soda from the fridge, lit a cigarette, and knocked on his daughter's bedroom door.

"Gimme a minute, Dad."

Mickey reached over to her cellphone. She pressed the button. OFF. No change. Strange. Again- thumb to the power button- holding- pressure- waiting- nothing. Curious. It was plugged into the charger- it should have plenty of battery- it should be ON. She checked again. And again. No red light. No blue light. The alarm clock was blank. The computer light was OFF.

Feet first onto the floor, a stretch, a creak in the boards- she exchanged one t-shirt for another- a baseball cap on her head- glancing in the mirror- her father from the other side of the door, back for another request- "And Mick?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you Google something- to fix my phone. I should have done the version thingy upgrade like you said, because now I can't even turn the thing on." Herb Gallagher walked away.

Mickey scratched her neck. She flipped off her shorts, put on some underwear and a pair of jeans, and went out to the living room. "My phone doesn't work either."

"Ain't that something. I feel like we're a bunch of city slickers. First thing in the morning, grouching about our cell phones not being right. My old man is rolling in his grave."

Mickey yawned, then, "It's weird."

Herb didn't think much more of it. His attention wandered to a window in the hallway. Past the faded wallpaper, the dusty banister. Outside. "Pretty morning, isn't it?"

Mickey said, "I guess- I, I don't know- hey, have you checked the refrigerator? Is that still on?"

He felt the aluminum in his hand. He demonstrated, for Mickey, "Coke's cold."

"But was it actually running?"

Her father walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. He opened the awkward refrigerator handle-broken and fixed and rigged back to functionality dozens of time- and reached his hand inside. Then he shut the door. He shouted up to Mickey. "Nope. You're right. Everything with wires in this house has gone and crapped the bed."

Mickey walked back into her room. She inspected each one of her apparatuses- computer, phone, television- appendages to the modern Vitruvian- thumb then index finger, depressing POWER- nothing. Blank screens. Worthless configurations of plastic and metal. Dead. No indicator lights. No charge. Useless. Herb shouted from the kitchen. He had taken another pull from the miniature bottle of whiskey in his back pocket. "Power going out doesn't explain it, does it?"

Mickey shouted back, "No, it doesn't."

Herb thought for a second. Sunlight, a songbird- a zephyr eased through the window, the front door open, a torn screen- "Let's fix a cup of coffee and see if things don't clear up in a little." They had disconnected the landline years ago- it wasn't worth the bill. It didn't make sense. It took a while to get used to it, but everything turned out fine.

Mickey checked the outlets, she tried different cords, various combinations of wires and sockets- nothing worked. She tried battery back-ups. Nothing worked. She made her way through the house, methodical, and ended up in the kitchen. Herb handed her a ceramic mug. She accepted.

"It's strange."

"I told you we didn't need one of those electric coffee makers. Can't beat instant coffee. Aren't you glad I talked you out of that last Christmas?"

Mickey set the mug down. She plucked the truck keys from off the kitchen countertop. "I'm going down the road to the Rodgerson's. Maybe their having the same issues."

"Dan Rodgerson doesn't know his ass from his elbows."

"Maybe, but he'll be able to tell me if his television works."

"Suit yourself."

-O-

He wore his hair longer than she remembered. A blondish brown, wavy- she liked it. She didn't want to say anything about it, but she liked it. "So what made you come back?" Mickey had been busy listening to Paul for several minutes. Niceties about the climate, the people, sights and sounds- a polite Fodor's version. She had ordered a plate of French toast, a side of hash browns, a tall glass of chocolate milk. Paul had called her. It was his voice on the phone. He was back home. He wanted to tell her about his trip to India- to see the elephants.

Here they were.

Here he was talking.

Here she was listening.

Paul had barely touched the bowl of mixed fruit in front of him. His voice became lower, an added frequency of bass. "You really want to know what happened? No more beating around the bush?"

"I didn't know we were beating around anything?"

With his signature lisp- "I came back because-"

A wry smile, a coquettish disguise, "All this anticipation, Paul."

"I had a vision."

Mickey chuckled. Surprised. "A vision? Like what- did you see who won next year's Kentucky Derby? My dad would be very interested in that." She was pretending to not be very interested. She didn't know why. Couldn't she be interested? Why would that be so weird? Even after Paul dialed her up- she didn't confess to him that she had been to his house, had asked his mother to read his letter- she kept it cool. She didn't know why. She didn't want to ask herself why she was playing it cool. She didn't think she was playing it *that* cool. She didn't like Paul that way, at least in a way where you consciously told yourself to 'play it cool' when in reality it was very hot and exciting?

Mickey glanced up.

She remembered what he had said- a vision- "What are you talking about?"

Paul rubbed his eyebrows. He chose his words precisely and his lisp became more pronounced, but he had been relieved of all self-consciousness about his impediment. "This is- I don't really- I don't know how to explain it. I'm asking for you to have an open mind, alright?"

Not thinking much, casual- cool- Mickey was barely listening to Paul. Restless within her mind- playing it cool. Be cool. Her response was automatic almost, responding, "Sure. Open sesame. Fire away."

A deep breath. "While I was there, I," -it wasn't Paul's speech impediment that barricaded him between thoughts- it was the content of what he had to deliver- where to begin, how to explain- "I don't know how to start, but, I met somebody. I met somebody important. A, a yogi, they call them yogis out there- I guess, to be honest, I guess I never really found out his official title- but he was important. He had a following of people. And they found me. They took me in, and- when I met him- this yogi- I- he knew, like- he just knew, you know what I mean? He really knew. And he told me- he showed me something important. This vision."

A pause.

Mickey joked, "You could have learned yoga on YouTube."

Paul didn't smile back to her. He became more serious in his posture, his face. "Listen, this really happened, okay? It's difficult to explain."

“What did this guy tell you Paul?”

Paul couldn't quite bring himself to force the issue. Not yet. He delayed. “Do you know what they called me? His followers, the yogi's followers? They called me Baptist John. A bunch of Hindus, calling me, me-Baptist John. And do you know why?”

Mickey's eyebrows furrowed.

With clarity, assurance- “John made ready the people. He baptized them in water. He ate grasshoppers, drank honey- everyone called him a lunatic. Regular folks would look at him and they felt bad for his parents. He was nuts. Sounds familiar? Sounds like me, like my folks, right? Until John had the last laugh. Because what John said came true.”

Mickey was losing her appetite. The clamor of dishes, the waitresses shuffling, the sizzling griddle- the roadside diner's stimuli, its sounds and images, everything disappeared- her sensory inputs seemed to periscope into a single vision. She stopped worrying about being casual or cool, about not being too interested. She was present. She was focused. Here was Paul Nelson, seated in front of her- skinnier than when she last saw him, bronzed, almost red- talking about John the Baptist and visions and holy men.

This was not what Mickey had in mind. “Okay- hold on. So you- you went to India- met a holy man- whose friends called you John the Baptist?”

“I couldn't make this up if I tried. I really- I'm sorry Mickey. I'm sorry for all of this. It's complicated. But- it's why I came home. I had to come back and find you. I had to tell you. I had to find you and tell you.”

Mickey's muscles tightened, excited but confused, “Tell me? Why me? Tell me what?”

A smile- the jaguar's smile up in the canopy- a grin like a wink appeared on Paul's face then disappeared quicker than it had come. Serious, “Mickey- something is going to happen. The world is going to change, and it's going to be a big change. I don't know for sure how, but- everything is going to be different. Everything is going to get worse. Way worse.”

“Worse how?”

“I can't describe it. I don't know for sure. But once everything changes, when everything goes down the drain- you're going to come out of it, and help. You've been chosen. You'll have the answer.”

Mickey set down her fork. “It's not nice to do what you're doing to me right now Paul.” She closed her eyes, then reset. “Seriously. I know we're friends and all. But this isn't funny. I actually was looking forward to-“

His eyebrows raised, sincerely- “Mickey, please. I swear to God. I swear on everything. I'm not messing around. I'm not putting you on.”

Paul wasn't the type. Paul was sentimental. He was kind. An occasional thinker. He wasn't malicious- he wouldn't craft a joke, a joke like this, at Mickey's expense. *Would he?* Mickey couldn't reconcile the conflicting messages in her brain. “Paul, I- I don't appreciate this. I really don't. Whatever happened to you over there, maybe you're confused, okay? Did you take drugs or something?”

Paul reached over across the chrome-lined table, from his booth over to hers. Teal blue and brown-reflected industrial lighting everywhere- a grey sky permeating through the windows from outside. He touched Mickey's wrists with his hand, the left, then the right. “Tell me you haven't felt it, at some level. Some inkling? An intuition?”

Mickey, taken aback, so many directions, so many feelings- unclear, “Paul, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Paul interrupted her line of reasoning, the direction of thought where Mickey wanted to run- “Have you ever felt who you really are?”

“Who I really am?”

“Yes.”

Mickey, squinting her face, unconscious- feverish, about to become upset- she blurted out, “Sure. I'm Mickey Gallagher. I'm the daughter of Herb Gallagher. I live on a dumpy piece of land in a dilapidated farmhouse. My mother is dead, my brother is gone, my father's a drunk. I teach math lessons to teenagers

in poor, rural communities half-way across the globe. That's who I am. And it's okay. What's not okay is making fun of me for it. Taking me out to breakfast, when I was actually happy to see you- excited to- and for you to mess with my head." She forced her hands away from Paul. "I'm glad I could be the punchline of your international joke."

Paul shut his eyes. His lisp disappeared. "You might tell yourself all this, but it's not the truth of you. But it's not only you- it's everybody. We all need to change. We all need to start believing something different."

Mickey continued to grow irksome. Her tone sharpened. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

Paul kept his eyes closed. "I'm talking about the end of the world. A new beginning."

Mickey couldn't believe what she was hearing. More conflicting messages- he didn't present the clinical markers- his mind wasn't all knotted and tangled like a basement workbench covered in orange and yellow and white extension cords- he appeared sane. He looked like the Paul she once knew. This was Paul, wasn't it? Her cognitive dissonance only sparked more anger. "You're an asshole, do you know that?"

Genuine, "This is no joke. This is no lie. I didn't choose you. But something did. I don't know how. I don't know when. But you'll know."

Abrupt, her hand in her pocket, her wallet- money for the food, for a tip- a ten-dollar bill plastered onto the table. "Paul, honestly- I can't even- just fuck you, okay? Fuck you. I'm leaving."

Paul whispered, with force, "Mickey?" He plead desperate at her with his eyes, opened now. She noticed them. She didn't stand up. "Listen to me, please. Listen, I know this sounds crazy-"

Mickey snipped back, "It does. It really does. And even if you aren't being an asshole right now, you're nuts. You've officially lost it. And I don't associate with the clinically insane, okay?"

Resigned, his lisp returning, "I had a feeling this wasn't going to go well."

Upright, her jean shorts, her cute blouse- not too cute, but cute enough- "What gave you that impression?"

"Sarcasm isn't a good fit for you, Mickey."

"Really? Insanity isn't a good fit for you. Or being an asshole. Whichever one it is. Which is it? Not that I really care." Mickey wanted to lash out- she flexed with indignation- but she couldn't. It wasn't worth making a scene. It wasn't worth it. *It's not worth it.* She caught one of the waitresses in the periphery. The ever-present stare of the locals. *Be calm. Calm down.* Nearly a whisper, "Listen. I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I think- you- I need to go. I am going to leave."

"Alright."

Flustered, shaking her head, organizing her keys and phone and wallet, pulling herself together, "I don't know what the- what are you trying to get out of me? I can't even- what am I supposed to do with this information? Like, what did you think- where do we go from here, Paul?"

Paul looked down at the table. He felt alone. He felt defeated. He put a hand on his cheek, fresh shaven. "I- I don't know what else to say other than I'm not trying to put you on, and I'm not crazy. I know it's hard to believe. But I'm trying to help. Help you. I'm telling the truth."

Mickey was ready to walk away. "The truth is- this is not what I was hoping for. I'm really disappointed."

"I'm sorry Mickey. I don't mean to upset you, I really don't. Listen- I'll go home. I'll spend some time with my family. Maybe in a couple weeks, a couple months- maybe we talk again. I'll wait to hear from you. Okay? I'm not trying to make this any more difficult for you than-" He trailed off, unable to fully express how they both felt.

She wanted to tell him off, once and for all, but she restrained herself. *What if he is a lunatic? You shouldn't push those kind of people, right?* Mickey decided to approach their goodbye with tact. "I appreciate it, Paul, I- that sounds good. Listen, I have to go. We'll- goodbye, alright?"

Visibly remorseful, shoulders broken by gravity, Paul murmured, "I'm sorry Mickey. I don't know what I'm supposed to do either, you know?"

A paper napkin out of a chrome holder, wiping off her fingertips. "Sure."

Mickey left Paul to himself. The urge didn't cross her mind- she didn't look back. Into her worn down Chevy, back to a worn-down home. Back to normalcy. Stasis- predictable things like her Dad drinking, the baseball game on the radio, the fertilizer to buy, the cat to feed- she wouldn't dwell on her conversation with Paul Nelson. She asserted several times to herself that she would never see him again.

Paul Nelson.

John the Baptist.

What the hell happened to you?

-O-

High school. Buzzing youthful energy. Mickey has recently been incited by Howard Zinn; and Paul, Mickey. They love history class. Their professor is the best in the district. Mr. Harper. Accelerated track. Homework. A project. Essay critiques and analyses. Together. In the library.

Mickey nearly shrieks, "The baggage of useless traditions is everywhere, Paul! Look around. Their influence in our politics and government can't be understated, like- the controlling parties are basically machismo fraternities."

Look up. Did she notice? Her legs are so creamy, her birthmarks... god I want nothing more than to be in her... I want to take her hair in my hand and pull her mouth to mine, to lick across her lips and chin and thrust into her like a fuel-injected piston... lick her breasts, her nipples, red and perky and oh what I wouldn't give... to taste her body, taste her sweat... her pussy's wiry hair stuck in my teeth... cum over her legs, her toes... those sexy black skateboard shoes, no socks... I need to stop this... I can't concentrate...

Mickey earmarks another book. She highlights a final section. "You remember when Mr. Harper introduced us to Campbell, that talk about culture? I have it in my notes. *Cultures are boundary defining rules, a set of sympathies and sentiments, intended to create dumb citizens. And those sentiments are regiments, which are based on fear.* Fear runs culture like it runs politics. Male dominated fear. Rich old white man fear. And what are rich old white men afraid of?" She looks up from the page, "They're afraid of losing the power! It's reflected in our government. In the defense budget- like, the Reynolds article, remember? Page fifteen or sixteen," flipping through a packet, "Okay. Here it is. *America's cultural values have like been heightened to a state of paranoia- right here- hypervigilant, hyperactive, product fetishism, xenophobic, homophobic, nationalistic paranoia.* So, like my point is- when we, the citizens, feel this kind see our government failing- I think that's the point I want to make, to tie everything back to the assignment on constitutional rights- the right to overthrow a government is built into the constitution, when that government stops working for the people. That's the point."

Pointed like my desire desirous of your warmth your insides your fleshy womb portal of melt of pistil to pollinate to cum inside of you and fill you in a flood of gismy sperm gymnosperming and whitewashed gooey glaucous into the sacred void of your chambers, filling you up forever in your embrace... worshipping you, to worship you with my tongue and fingers and cock and dedicate to you every part of my being, to pay homage with my life offered up to you a goddess worthy of a golden altar and perfect sacrifice... my lover and mother to all the world the mother of all creation embodied in your sexuality, in your curves, your life-bearing, sylphy motions I will follow you forever into the end of time prayerful we abscond to secret grottoes emptying and filling each other for eternity... my god what I wouldn't give... what I wouldn't do... my goddess, my beloved, an icon of wood let me be nailed into you and onto your body like the perfection of Christ on the Cross our physical form married and joined in spiritual union I will renounce everything in your name so long as I can exalt you, feel inside of you and breathe back a force into you but also deriving from you... be my valentine... be mine... to be with you that way the only way which I can't let go of I can't stop thinking about...

"And check this out- Jacksonian democracy- the democracy of numbers. This was a shift in the mindset of citizens, as voters, part of the electorate- people assume the choices presented to them are the only options. They were being sold a product, as citizens, and no longer considered their fundamental rights. They forgot the government was supposed to work for them, to act on their behalf."

Blistered sphincters and lubricant and the smell of clean pain, worn leather and chrome... in and out... what I wouldn't give... your luscious topaz eyes like sea pebbles wave after a wave at your feet eroded beneath the water drowning in the ecstasy of our bodies' fusion to look down at you for you to look up at me in that way, beaming out from under your thin eyebrows your delicate lashes above your high cheekbones your pointy chin your triangular face your hair tied up in that patented bun... your eyes on fire... twin stars suspended in a dark sky... a fission... density of matter, our bodies firm, pulse... ignite... a strand of hair escapes from her hair tie falls across her cheek, onto her breast... kisses between lips, your tongue, smooth... tasting you... hearing you ask for more...

"And that's the point this last author- what's his name? Thomson- that could tie it together, don't you think? The shift in politics brought upon by the market economy- democracy and capitalism. *The state became a new kind of church, serving the gods of the market economy-* the gods of rich white men protecting their territory, right? I think that works. I think that brings my essay full circle." She looked up to a pair of blank eyes, lost, wandering planets. "Are you listening to me Paul?"

Escaped from a jumbled core, pitted like a plum, his throat clears nervous- the teenage boy- his words, "Yeah, of course."

-O-

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"On your wrist."

"It's a feather, attached to a leather hoop."

"What does it mean?"

"Means I'll have protection from bad thoughts, bad dreams, bad energy."

"Bad energy?"

"Right."

"Why do you need protection from bad energy?"

"Because it's out there. And sometimes I feel like it's on me, and I can't do anything about it."

The old man mused, "Your mother prays. Goes to church. Doesn't that get rid of the bad energy?"

"You know it never worked that way for me."

"Does she know about this?"

"No."

"When were you going to tell her?"

Back home for winter break. "I wasn't."

"You know she'll see it. Then she'll be even more upset."

"I'm an adult- you said so yourself- I can't control if she's upset or not."

"I understand. But with the way she's been feeling, I'd appreciate it if you could pick a spot that doesn't put her over the edge, you know what I mean? I don't want to bring any extra stress into the picture. You understand? That's just being considerate."

"I told you, I'm not going to tell her."

"Alright. You want to go to the range?"

"Isn't it supposed to snow?"

"Not until tonight, if it does at all."

Mickey didn't respond.

"What do ya say, kiddo?"

"I don't think so, Dad."

"Well, I'm going to head over in about an hour. Let me know if you change your mind."

-O-

Herb Gallagher had been drinking. The lawn bore the marks of an unsteady groundskeeper- groomed in a wobbly pattern of waves and curves, the occasional hieroglyph, patchy and inconsistent across the acre

of grass behind their home. The engine was OFF. The hood on his red John Deere was warm, a can of cold Budweiser in his hand- several others in the trash. He had been admiring the view- out into the country, out into the fields beyond the yard. He had one hand holding the can, another on his hip. Wearing a bedraggled gray t-shirt, his stained work jeans, a red bandana in his pocket- he didn't budge when Mickey pulled the car up their driveway.

"Dad?"

Herb turned around to meet his daughter. "You see it out there?"

"See what?"

"End of the rainbow."

Mickey parked herself alongside him, hand over her brow, playful and searching. Storm clouds to the East, sunshine to the West- a faint yellow, a red, a violet- she walked up next to her father. "Yeah. I do. It's pretty."

"Not as pretty as you darling. But damn close." He put the hand from his own head onto his daughter's shoulder. Sweat and grease and salt and iron, dirt and blood and earth- pinching her collarbone, "How'd you hit 'em?"

"Alright."

"Head down?"

"Yeah."

"Follow through?"

"Every swing."

Herb noticed a distressed slump in his daughter's shoulders. A sapped, tired color to her cheeks. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing really." A lie. A white lie. A habit. An answer.

Herb could read his daughter. It wasn't time to prod. "Don't you have your teaching to do? It's almost 3."

"Yeah, you're right. We'll talk later. Don't take the mower over the gravel again, alright?"

"Wouldn't dream of it. Got me some good standing to do here. Standing and watching. A lost art." Mickey pinned up a smile and began to walk away, but chasing after her, reminding her, Herb's voice- "I love you sweetheart."

Over her shoulder, "I know, Dad. I love you too."

-O-

She ended up at his door. Her car parked on an asphalt driveway- striding up, her tightest pair of blue jeans and a sweetheart-cut blouse, black, green bra straps exposed and several beads of sweat- impulsively, here Mickey found herself pushing aside a strand of brown hair from off her face. Distracted. Confused.

She had questions to ask.

Paul answered the knock. His mother had seen Mickey through the kitchen window and put her dishtowel down in an effort to prepare herself to greet the visitor, but Paul had sprinted from the television den to the deadbolt. Before the matriarch could say anything, in a flash, the screen was exposed. "Hey Mickey."

"Hey Paul- got a minute?"

Paul closed the door behind him. "Are your electronics shut down too?"

Mickey whispered, forcefully, "Paul, what actually happened to you over in India?"

"What do you mean?"

Mickey grabbed his arm and pulled him further onto the porch landing. Still whispering, "You know exactly what I mean. What you said at the diner. What you told me."

"Yeah?"

"Was it true?"

"Of course it was."

"You aren't messing with me?"

“No”

Mickey paused. She set her hands on her hips. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you?” Pointing skyward, then a circling motion, a lasso, a hoop, “The blackout, all this equipment getting fried- you knew this was coming. You knew it, didn’t you?”

Paul smiled, “You’re giving me too much credit, Mickey. I- I guess I had a suspicion something would happen, eventually- but who could’ve predicted this kind of-”

She cut him off, “It was two weeks after you showed back up! I mean, you said it yourself- didn’t you say there was going to be a disaster? Did you- I can’t even believe I’m asking this- did you have anything to do with this?”

Paul chuckled. “I told you Mickey, I don’t have the imagination for it. You were always the more creative one. It’s something though, isn’t it? What better way to humble mankind?”

“Humble?”

Paul tried to explain himself, struggling on the hard consonants, “I mean- stripping folks from all their precious gizmos- what better way to force them to reanalyze their priorities. It’s poetic, ironic- I shouldn’t say it, but it’s kind of brilliant.”

“Brilliant?”

“There’s a lot of good that can come from it. I was just in the den, reading, and in the quiet house, I-”

Blunt, interrupting him again, chastising him, “Paul, forget about the damn bright side! I want to know what really happened to you over there.”

Paul’s mother was at the front room window.

The pair walked off the stoop, down the steps, and onto the yard- far enough away to provide at least the illusion of privacy.

After gaining a safe margin, Paul explained, “To be honest- when I got there- I stayed good and stoned for a couple months. Bhang tea for breakfast lunch and dinner. I mingled with expats. I went on sensuous adventures with locals. I saw Delhi, I toured around. I saw the Taj Mahal. I went to Bengal to see the jungles. I dipped my toes in the Ganges. I took trains. I rode motorcycles. Then I wound up at the foothills of the Himalayas. I wanted to climb Everest or something, I don’t know. I was running out of money. It was crazy- I was, I was thinking about that Brad Pitt movie, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and I thought maybe- it was nuts.” Paul laughed, playing out the fantasy quickly. “I was nuts. But one afternoon, out in a city square, I was confronted by this guy.”

Mickey was listening intently. “Confronted how?”

“Like he stopped me in my tracks. He got right up under my nose, pointed a finger at me, and he said, I remember it like it just happened- ‘Indiana in India.’ In perfect English. It freaked me out. I must have looked like I saw a ghost. Then he took me by the shoulder and started leading me down the street. So I just followed him. I didn’t know what to say.”

Mickey tried to imagine it- Paul Nelson who hadn’t been north of the Dairy Queen on I-114 for several years, escorted down back alleyways in an ancient city in a foreign country- “What?”

Paul shrugged, “It spooked me. I probably should have run. But in retrospect not running was the smartest thing I ever did. I was open to it. I was done resisting. He took me to a place called an ashram- a temple and some buildings near the river, like a monastery. There were other people there- everyone was poor, like they had nothing, dressed in rags practically- but the mood was so high. It was so beautiful. They gave me a little mat, a little room, a robe- I got some milk and rice every day. They took care of me. They didn’t really speak any English, but I could understand them- it was weird.”

“Sounds surreal.”

“That’s the perfect word. It was surreal. I don’t even remember how long it went on for- weeks, months- they were purifying me. I learned how to pray. Meditate. They were teaching me. I got quiet. I got clean. Then I met him.”

“Him?”

“Their teacher. They called him Ramamurti. I found out that he had instructed one of his followers to find me in the town square that afternoon. He fated it all to happen- he told them a Westerner would be in the square with an aimless look about him. He told them to clear my head out, then to bring me to him. And so that’s what happened. I met Rama, and everything changed.”

Mickey paused for a moment. A deep breath. “Alright. So you book it to India. You meet a holy man named Rama. He predicts the apocalypse. And he tells you I am the next savior of mankind.” Mickey looks up at Paul. “Am I missing anything? Or are these the main points?”

They both laughed. A sheet of ice, broken.

Paul caught a glimpse of her eyes then turned his head, focused on his hands- “Those would be the major parts.”

Mickey shook her head. She was more relaxed. She pointed her thumb over her shoulder, back towards the house, “You tell any of them?”

Quickly, unconsciously rubbing his aquiline nose, “You think she could handle it? Her head would explode.” Paul pointed backwards towards the kitchen window over his shoulder. Mrs. Nelson was perched in the window, occasionally disappearing behind a curtain.

Mickey sighed.

Paul, in a more serious tone, “Besides, it would only scare them. Just like it scared you.”

Mickey was beginning to accept what she was hearing. “I’m not scared anymore. Now, I’m- I’m curious. What exactly did this Rama guy say to you?”

Paul cocked his head with a grin. “He isn’t a gas station attendant, Mickey. This Rama ‘guy’- he’s literally, as it was described to me- he is a spiritual being who descended into our world from another one, from the astral plane- and he’s here to show us what’s out there- he’s a manifestation of the divine. He’s a selfless deity- a god in human form. Indians call them ‘avatars.’ Like the movie. Except he’s not a blue alien- he’s an old, pot-bellied Indian man. But that’s his disguise. And the way it was explained to me was that he was here to help us because a tragedy was headed our way. He came here to make sure mankind could have a way out, to work through it.”

Mickey didn’t blink. “Alright. I’ll get on board with it. Rama is a god sent here to help us. Roger that. What did he say to you?”

“When they brought me to meet him, well- I found out later that he usually didn’t touch people except to bless them on their foreheads, but when he greeted me, he reached out his hand. We shook hands, I sat down on a little piece of cloth next to him. Everything he said was translated from Hindi. After we shook hands, the translator said that it made Rama very happy to shake my hand the ‘American way.’ I got a kick out of that. Then Rama told the translator it was an honor to meet me. The guy next to him, his attendant, he said ‘Rama is very honored to be in your presence.’ So naturally I asked him why? What’s so special about me? He’s the holy man, right?”

Mickey began to connect the story, where it was headed- she knew why Paul was special- “John the Baptist?”

“Exactly. Rama told me I had met the next Redeemer. The next incarnation, in this world. Then he just stared at me. It’s like he knew it was going to flip me out. And it did! I got panicked. I think I said ‘You have to be mistaken.’ I mean- can you imagine how weirded out I was? Here I am, a Midwestern farmboy on hiatus outside of Itwa, northern India, and an old man in a loincloth is shaking my hand telling me what an honor it is to be in the presence of someone who has met the latest avatar of Jesus Christ. I- I didn’t want to let Rama down, but- I told him I didn’t know what he was talking about. I told him again that he had the wrong guy.”

Mickey gulped. Now she was scared. She felt nauseous. Sick. She wanted Paul to stop.

A red pickup truck flew by down the road.

The breeze went silent.

Paul continued, "Then from out of thin air Rama shows me an orange, in the palm of his hand- an orange, as in the fruit, unpeeled- and he eats it in one gulp. Down the hatch. As he wipes his lips, he smiles at me. And in that moment, right there, I saw your face. I saw you. It wasn't like a memory, or an image- I was with you, standing in front of me, covered in light, in diamonds almost. I couldn't- I don't know how else to explain it to you, Mickey. I wish- I wish this was easier to understand, more believable. But you were there. You were with me, with Rama, we were all together. And then I heard his voice, in perfect English, in my head. He said to me, 'You must both be brave.' Then the vision ended. He didn't move a muscle, didn't smile, didn't say another word. I'm- I had so many questions, but his attendants, the devotees, they hauled me away. Rama didn't even shift his pose while they dragged me out. I guess his message was delivered. I wanted to stay- I was fighting to get back, but nobody would let me near him. I waited around for a few more weeks, a month maybe. Then, one afternoon, Baj, the head devotee, he walks into my room. He gives me a hug, hands me a plane ticket, a bus ticket, and tells me to hit the road. He says 'Adios Juan!' I laughed so hard. I hadn't laughed like that in a long time- I'll never forget it- I was so bugged out, but the humor took the edge off. He said I was blessed, and I would know what to do."

Mickey stammered, "I don't understand, you know?"

"I feel the same way," Paul said. "I don't know what it means. But with the electricity, the power grids shutting down- this isn't a coincidence, Mickey."

Mickey ran her left hand through her hair, front to back, then her right- an attempt to straighten out all the loose brain fibers- a shift occurred. "Paul, I'm a nobody farm girl from nowhere. I'm not the second coming of Jesus. I'm a remote learning expert- I'm not even a real teacher. Let alone a Redeemer. This is, this is nuts."

"Mickey, I understand how- "

Her tone shifted. Her mind calcified against the possibility. Her rational, logical mind- defensive- "No. No you don't Paul. You need help. Serious help." She backed up away from him. "I'm sorry. Anybody who- it just, it isn't right. It isn't normal. There's something wrong with- I hope you get some help. I hope you and your family stay safe through whatever this is, and you get some help."

With his head down, "I'm sorry, Mickey."

"It's okay. You have to get help though. I don't- I'm not sure we can talk anymore. I don't want to talk for now, okay?"

"I understand."

Grunting, disturbed, Mickey had to finalize it in her mind- "Ok. Good. This is all some misunderstanding, some weird coincidence. I have to go, alright. I have to go."

Paul searched into her eyes for approval, for reconciliation. "Okay."

She chuckled, frustrated. She realized where she was, on Paul's lawn, his mother- she whispered, harsh, "Just so there's no confusion between us- I am not whatever you think I am. I don't know Rama, I don't care what he said. For all I know this is a figment of your imagination. Okay? You have issues- you need to get them checked out. Please stay away from me- please stay away from my family, okay? I never did you any harm. I never did anything to you."

"I know you haven't Mickey. I'm sorry, alright. I'm sorry."

"Please let me be, okay?"

"Alright."

"I have to go. And please, don't go around town talking about this- I- just get some help, okay? Get some help."

Paul gulped in his throat.

Mickey jostled, upset, and treaded back towards her Chevy. Past an old basketball, a chew toy, a faded picnic table- once painted blue, years ago- storm clouds and hail, fertilizer and snow- weathered, worn-down the Nelson's driveway, she opened the car door. She put the keys in the ignition, checked the rearview, and left. She was scared for a mile or two- but then a peculiar amusement took hold. She took

a deep breath, then, "Leave it to Paul Nelson to take a vacation outside Indiana and end up losing his mind. I can't believe I might have been interested in him." It was psychosis. It was explainable. It was alright, it would be alright- she clicked on the radio and drove. No music emanated from the car speakers. Not even static. Only silence.

-O-

"Hey Mick, can you grab my jar of nails in the shed?"

Mickey wiped a bead of sweat from off her forehead. She had been turning over their vegetable garden, hunting for pests and unwanted insects, and stopped by the back porch to check on her father.

"What if I go into town and grab some fresh screws? They'll hold better."

Herb responded ardently, "Why the heck would you go and do that? Got me a bunch of nails in the jar. Good as new."

Mickey wiped her hands together, attune to the callouses and the dirt between her palms. The particles of earth coagulated into larger clumps. A habit- rolling dirt between her fingers, flicking the balls. "Dad, they're not good as new. They're rusted. You'll end up having to replace them after the winter, just like you're replacing them now. Don't you want to just fix it right?"

"I am fixing it right. The right way to fix it is to use what you have. You don't go burning through the money when you don't have to. We aren't millionaires, Mick."

Mickey sighed. It was always about the money. Saving a buck here. Pinching an necrotic, gangrene penny there. Reusing this piece of sheet metal. Recycling that engine cylinder. Herb certainly cooked up plenty of ingenious solutions, solutions driven by thrift, but he didn't acknowledge the limits of his ingenuity. He didn't understand the entire economic picture- he poured money down his throat every day (albeit in the cheapest form of brown liquor he could find at HARRISON'S, bought in bulk and at discount).

Yet Mickey never thought to lecture her father, to explain to him in plain forthright terms why his hang-up around money was silly. To lay down a diatribe like: *Stop cultivating a mindset where you assess your actions in terms of what impact they have on your bank account, assessing your relative happiness in terms of how much money you have! Destroy the notion that the acquisition of wealth will necessarily acquire personal fulfillment and satisfaction. There is no relationship between the two. Subvert that connection. You need to establish a sense of security, and primacy, within yourself that is independent of your financial status, independent of a number in a bank account. "If I had enough money, then I'd be happy, I would do what I want to do." It's a self-imposed barrier we've been conditioned to believe. Drop it altogether. "If I had this or that object, then I would be alright." It's all the same trap. Commodities and money are interchangeable. Don't assign objects or assets the ability to act as an antidote for your unhappiness. They don't bring completeness. Their acquisition only propagates and amplifies a sense of incompleteness. You buy the house on the lake, but now you need the boat, and once you get the boat you need the jet skis, and once you have the jet skis- ad infinitum. It's a psychic infection- the desire, the cling, the greed, the want, the thirst- it acts independently within us, dictates our actions and thoughts, and we feed into it. Stop feeding it. Get past it. Let's go.*

Mickey had stopped giving imaginary speeches.

She had stopped playing preacher, rock star.

The words weren't even her own.

She reached her eyes across the house, wrapped her vision around the fields and the backyard and the beat up shed and the junked cars and the chicken fence, cottonwoods and spiderwebs and frayed boot laces, dandelions and wild lilac, a noon day sun pulsing over the country baking the air and the land- her people hard at work. Here she was. Here was her father. Thrifty. Frugal. It was him. A blind spot- every man has one. She understood the man working in front of her. She felt compassion for him. She loved him despite himself and his faults- she even loved him for them.

But did she understand herself?

She knew what people might say, what her brother might offer- her fear of success, her fear of failure, her fear to leave home and become something more, her sense of inadequacy- they were explanations, but they weren't her reality. Mickey was self-assured. She was self-aware. *I'm not afraid. I don't care about the status or the achievements. I have a responsibility to my family. I'm fulfilling my duty.* She affirmed it once again. *I'm here on my own accord. I'm here because I want to be. I'm here and it's fine. I'm fine.*

But do you love yourself, despite yourself?

Despite what?

Exactly...

She came back and set the jar down next to her father. "I'll help you hammer a few in. But first I'm going inside for a minute- do you want a glass of water?"

"Nah, it'll only make me sweat more."

Mickey shook her head and fought off a smirk.

-O-

"Your mother was a praying woman Mick, but it never suited me. We share that trait."

Mickey shrugged, "Well- what I remember was I had a choice between Sunday school or going with you to Old Capitol and being your caddy. Sunday school didn't really stand a chance."

Herb nodded. His thin cheeks, his wrinkled forehead, receding hairline- lightly sunburnt nose, a scar under his lantern chin- a glimmer out his seafoam eyes, full, the whites tinged yellow. "I suppose it didn't. And I suppose I shouldn't have biased you so much, one way or the other."

"What's making you think about all this?"

Herb tapped a corncob pipe on his palm, "I don't know really. Not sure. Guilt maybe?"

"I learned more on that course than I ever would have with a bible in my hands." Mickey closed a book onto her lap. She paused for a second, collecting her thoughts on the subject. "Those people are damn fools anyways- all the ones I knew growing up- going to church, youth groups, marrying their high school sweetheart- hating liberals and abortion clinics. Stupid if you ask me. And I felt that way long before I learned about the evolution of the Republican party, about Ronald Reagan and Karl Rove- there's nothing to feel guilty about. You saved me from all that. When I think about how they've been manipulated, brain washed- a golf course was a much healthier place to raise a daughter."

Herb leaned back in his chair. He pondered the facts. He clicked his lips, "Well Mick, I think they're only looking for something or somebody to tell 'em it'll all be alright. That they're doing a good job, and it'll all be alright."

"I guess. Still seems stupid if you ask me."

"Stupid, well- I figure it's more like they're way of coping with the possibility none of this really means a lick. I don't know. I never talked much with your mother about it. It was one of those things. I think a part of her hoped that if she prayed enough- she thought God was keeping me sober those years before I went back to the bottle. The funny thing is, it was really her. Her and those hips." Herb exhaled a 'woohee' through a tiny hole in his mouth.

"Entirely unnecessary, Dad!"

"How do you think you made it here Michelle Marie Gallagher, six pounds seven ounces, twenty and one quarter inches, two parts Scottish, one part Irish, one part German? Wasn't no stork- tell you that."

"And that's my queue." Mickey stood up. Herb packed the bowl of his pipe with a fresh pinch of leaf. Reminiscing...

-O-

Mickey pulled into the Nelson's driveway.

Dull, yellow paint chipped off clapboard cedar siding which lined the exterior of the house, at least the portions which weren't fortified by brick. A broken tree limb sprawled out, downed from the oak in their yard, a storm- no crops in the field, no corn or soy- an abandoned truck, an abandoned tractor- their picnic

table remained stationed in their lawn, nearly conquered by overgrowth. A floating board above a field of switchgrass. Sundry heaps of junk were strewn across the property. Mickey stepped out of her car and walked through the knee-high weeds. It was summer, gnats clung to her thinning white tank top. Grasshoppers jumped out of her path. She swatted a horsefly. The front door hung open. Mickey approached but halted at the base of the steps- no dog came, no strange glances from Mrs. Nelson greeted her. The wind must have blown the green blouse from inside the house which now hung on the handle, where it flapped precious in the breeze. Ghostly Americana. Abandoned. Nostalgic. Painted under a bright sky- the dereliction had nowhere to hide.

It was too late. They must have left. They must have evacuated to the city. The edicts had been issued- the pamphlets explained the risks, explained why the rural areas were in trouble, explained why the cities were safe and how the **AGTC** (*Administration and Governance of Tactical Compliance*) would be waiting to provide assistance. There would be benefits. There would be clean water. There would be food. There would be safety from the terrorists. There would be electricity. There would be a new life- better than the old one.

Pamphlets and the men in camouflage uniforms carrying them- carrying guns- carrying orders- patches on their shoulder, stars and stripes and **AGTC**.

Overcast weather was headed her way from the west.

Mickey hadn't come back to see Paul for almost nine months. A friend faithful to his word- Paul had left her alone entirely. She had almost forgotten about him, about his psychotic 'vision' and fictional adventures- but she hadn't. Questions ate at her. In the quiet of her mind, when inner peace drew near, at the end of a long day's work or early in the morning before the work began- in the spaces which should have provided solace- there she struggled most. She fought and wrestled with Paul's message. A frightening idea would appear, it would take hold and remain for hours: *what if Paul was right? What if there is something I need to do? What if there's something more for me?*

Back behind the wheel. There was no reason to linger. Back home without any answers. But maybe for the better. Departed. Everything he said- it went with him. Here was a more powerful omen, more powerful than any visions at Himalayan foothills: he was gone. As Mickey drove home, she found peace. Back to her life with a perfect resolution on that hanging thread.

Relieved.

In the kitchen with her father- rain drops popping on the roof- gutters trembling like dam walls against a burst river- a pot of hot coffee on their handmade kitchen table.

"Where'd you go?"

"The Nelsons."

"What was doing over there?"

"Nothing at all. They left town."

"They heard the calling too, huh? You didn't happen to check their liquor cabinet?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Nelson didn't drink, Dad."

Herb ruminated, "Christians?"

"Christians."

"Lots of Christians taking off for the city. Damn surprising, isn't it? This land usually keeps a tight hold on folks. You couldn't get me to move to the city for all of Solomon's treasure."

"I know, Dad. But the soldiers, the papers they've been circulating- people read that stuff. They worry."

"If you have read the papers, you make sure to stick to the sports, the weather, and the funnies. All the rest is folks in suits trying to sell you soda pop and life insurance and junk you don't need. Your brother was sucked into that whole mess."

Mickey walked over to the living room. A puzzle on the floor. She sat down, searching for an end piece- El Capitan, the northern section of Yosemite Valley. After a few minutes, "You ever wonder what's going on with him, with your granddaughter?"

Herb's oversized upper lip curled slightly, then, "To be honest Mick, no I don't."

"Do you think you'll see him again?"

Without hesitation, "No."

"Do you miss him?"

Without hesitation, "Yes, I do sweetheart. I miss Nick. I miss his family. I miss your mother. I miss our family- but I can't think on those things, Mick. Simply can't. Your brother was a good kid, and I imagine he's a good man somewhere now. I wish things didn't turn out the way they did. But I can't change it. Time goes on, people do what they do. And even if I could change something- I wouldn't. You know why? Because I'm here with my beautiful daughter, who gives me more love and brings me more joy than any man born ever deserved. And that's the damn last word on that." Herb walked over to the puzzle, leaned over and kissed his daughter on top of her head.

"I think about him and his family, the baby- I hope, I hope they're alright."

Herb picked a piece up from off the pile. A sky-blue corner, a crucial piece. He set it into place. "You know the one thing I could never figure about Christians? How do they know who goes where? How does the score get tallied? It's too damn serious. Too many rules. Too much red tape." Mickey's search was over, for now.

Herb stretched his arms above his head and turned back towards the kitchen. Walking away, another errand to accomplish, "After all this is over, in my estimation, I think we'll all be able to sit down together, share a drink and some laughs, and look back at everything like it was one big trip to the county fair."

Mickey smiled. "That would be something."

Before his exit, a shout from the door, "Wouldn't surprise me in the least, Mick."

-O-

Mickey focused with laser precision at her task, working in parallel lines- two hundred yards out, two hundred yards in- slow, steady. A bucket in her left hand, her right hand free to snatch the white, dimpled balls as they appeared. Because the land was so poorly farmed, and the soil leached and denuded of nutrients, hardly any grass or brush could grow. There were islands of flora, but plenty of arid, dead mud deserts between them where her targets were easily sighted. One there, another there. A pair of rubber bands dangled off her wrist. It was a crisp, crab apple autumn afternoon- faint oranges and subtle ambers, blooming cumulonimbus, fluid yet crystalline. The corpses of dandelions, the dead stalks of wheatgrass- an earth shedding her excesses, preparing to conserve- to survive.

Mickey had removed her hooded sweatshirt revealing a long sleeve'd black t-shirt with an emblem of the album artwork for *A LOVE SUPREME*. Herb Gallagher had found a way to reconfigure Mickey's turntable into a manual crank gramophone after the power went dead, after the gas ran out on the generator- it took him a couple of weeks to pull off, but he surprised her and warmed her heart. She still had her music. His music, given to her. It was one of the first things he did when all this started.

Mickey continued on, dissected the ground, snagged up more balls, then went back to her mat. She heard jazz, the wind. Herb's voice.

A cigarette before she left home, another before her first swing, and a last for her return back. A three-smoke day. A treat. By hand-rolling her own, Mickey had been able to stretch her store of tobacco much further. Herb said it would be easy enough to grow and cure a few plants in a greenhouse, but they had never been able to find seed. That kind of sustainability would have been important- the General Store had been sold out of tobacco for some time. Not that it had ever been consistent, after the Knockout. She remembered waiting in line, day after day- the smile on her face after learning a pack of smokes or a bag of leaf had arrived in stock. It had been a long while. General Stores, lines, other people, money- gone. Three, four years now. She didn't see anybody. She didn't need money. She didn't mind if her remaining stock of leaf had gone dry, acrid. The smoke still tasted sweet to her- especially once she had filled the bucket, positioned her mat, and took stock of the land in front of her. Mickey had rearranged target flags, added new trash cans, barrels- a comprehensive shooting range. Tom and his girlfriend jumped ship long

ago. Mickey imagined the last night between them, the last bag of crystal- their crestfallen goodbyes. Nobody came by the range anymore. Nobody had the gas, or the patience. Nobody was left.

The six-mile round-trip walk to Old Man Paynter's didn't bother her. It was nice to get away from the house. Occasionally she practiced her short game in the Gallagher backyard, but she preferred the mats and the excess of golf balls afforded by the range. Today she had brought a 6-iron, a wedge, and a 3-wood. When the weather cooperated, Mickey made the trek upwards of three times a week. Something to do. Something to be involved with. Her acumen for the game returned. She enjoyed practicing, crafting her swing, improving her feel.

Exhaling, she noticed the wind carrying her cigarette's smoke at about 10 miles per hour. She gripped her pitching-wedge and launched a ball 100-yards. High, looming- landing it within six feet of her target. "And Gallagher is poised to take the lead at the Masters!" she toyed out loud. Then she chuckled. Had Augusta National been spared the crisis? Were there still golf tournaments being played? Who cared. It was going to be a fine afternoon. Fine indeed.

No mind. Clear head. Ball. Target. Body. Club.

Shot after shot, accurate and in rhythm- Mickey lost herself in the process. In each step of the process: lining up the ball and the arc of the shot, visualizing the draw or the fade, estimating the depth of backswing required to make the distance, addressing the ball, altering the coordinates of her feet, balls to toes and finally settled square, a shrug of her shoulders, an extension of her hands, a deep breath in, one last look outward to confirm the trajectory and map each frame of the shot, a deep breath out, a slight flick of her wrists to bring the clubhead up, arms straight, hips turned, weight shifted, right foot pivoted, head motionless, shoulders on a pendulum, apex, twitch, release and rip and fire down to align the sweet-spot of the face, contact with the ball, follow through, head firmly positioned downwards. She heard her father's voice "No need to look up to watch the ball. If you hit it right, you'll know where it's going to end up."

Shot after shot.

Jazz.

The wind.

Until one last battered *Titleist* remained in the basket. She felt the same way she always felt, confronted by the last shot- how had it gone by so fast? She wanted more- invigorated by the results of that afternoon. But Mickey treated the dimpled mass in front of her no different than any of the others. Methodical. Consistent. Repeatable. Same as the one before it, and the next to come- a concatenation of quantum zips heading off in both directions- but at the critical moment, Mickey cheated. She lifted her head upwards. She couldn't wait. For whatever reason she couldn't display the necessary patience. She had to see the result. And so she did- a duck hook. Atrocious. Wasted and fired astray- disappointed. "Damn." It rolled. It rolled and rolled.

Once the ball stopped, a thought- it appeared to her, this thought- inspired- a feeling in the form of an image then a sound, of faces and voices and scenes across her entire life- of her brother, her father, her mother- collage'd into a tapestry, a mandala sewn together by her own internal guilts, her own inadequacies, her own secret fears of never doing enough never being enough never living up to her potential- decorated by the despondency from losing her father, the changing seasons- sensations and deep vibrations and conscious patterns and the beat of her heart, woven- open- hung on the wall, in plain sight it read: *Mickey, you shouldn't be here.*

The consistency, the repeatability, the comfort.

Comfortable.

You shouldn't be here.

And after a quiet moment with the thought, listening and hearing and feeling the sensation of its presence, how it made her feel, how she reacted to it- the thought transformed. The thought became a personal truth. It became a mantra.

I shouldn't be here.

Her mind opened up to Paul Nelson. It had been years since her last ruminations on Paul Nelson- a psycho schizoid lunatic weirdo- but here he was. Again. With her. Her truth. Mickey acknowledged him in her heart and decided whatever Paul had seen in India- it was true. Maybe not in a literal sense- Mickey wasn't concerned about redeemers or salvation eschatology- but in the figurative sense, in the sense that she wasn't meant to be in Harrison Country anymore. Her ticket had expired.

It was time to stop cutting her own hair. Rereading books with Bowie. Switching out the umbrellas by the door, a different color each month. Dusting the mantle. Adjusting picture frames. Chopping wood. Playing golf. Waiting to die.

I shouldn't be here.

In that instant, a fox peered from out from yonder- out where the dirt met the sky, where the fields of weeds bled- its triangular head, twin perched ears, a rich auburn color, black-tipped and white-fluffed. A rare vulpine sight to be accounted for in the daytime. But there he was out in the distance, head up, watching Mickey- Mickey watching him- mutual acknowledgment. A tip of the cap. A vote of confidence.

Maybe it wasn't too late.

Maybe this is the start.

Her sweatshirt went back over her body- a long walk home, a long way to go. Mickey stopped. Instead of carrying her clubs back with her, Mickey decided to leave them behind- maybe another little girl and her father, maybe another happy childhood, maybe another world- a supplication. She positioned them thoughtfully down at her favorite stall, the one at the end. She wouldn't need them anymore. They had served her well. Their purpose had been fulfilled.

There's something more to do.

After reaching the main road Mickey turned back. One last glimpse. She said her goodbyes to the driving range. She said her goodbyes to a childhood, to a homeland, to a sense of comfort and custom. One last glimpse, and then footsteps. The first steps.

-O-

Each morning she knelt at his gravestone. A visitation ritual. She followed the letters of her own handwriting, carved at the workbench into a plank of unfinished pine board:

HERB GALLAGHER- BELOVED HUSBAND, FATHER, FARMER, LOVER OF LIFE

She pulled weeds, she planted wildflowers. Sometimes her vigil was brief, sometimes she remained for hours besieged by memories, besieged by dreams. But no matter the length of her stay, each morning she felt the urge to pledge, once and for all, it would be the last. *This is it. This is the last time I'm saying goodbye. I'm going dad. I'm leaving. I don't know where, and I don't know how. But I'm going.*

An urge, unrealized.

She could never force the words onto her lips.

Mickey's safety was never threatened during her time at home, alone with Bowie and the chickens. The national guard must have kept a post somewhere in the region, because every couple of months she could hear a parade of large vehicles in the distance. She would abscond at the sound of engines- dashing off for the fields- a 'bugout' shelter she had dug near one of the fence lines. A makeshift trench. But it was mostly quiet. She grew distant from the **AGTC**, from the rest of the world. Though it didn't mean Mickey shirked away from taking measures to ensure her protection- she slept with a Mossberg 590A1 Tactical Shotgun alongside her in a twin bed. Safety OFF.

She hadn't seen anyone for so long. Her conversations with Bowie grew more complex, nuanced.

But she didn't leave.

She could never force the words onto her lips.

Liberated from the guilt of being Herb's caretaker, liberated from the baggage of Harrison County, of Indiana University, of the expectations and requirements of anyone or anything else- yet ineluctably drawn to stasis, unable to break through.

Each morning she walked outside with the seeds of a dream, a glimpse of potential.
Every night she went to sleep with a rationalization, shackled by fear.

-O-

"As long as we don't bother them Mick, they won't bother us." A reclining chair, his right boot clunked onto the floor- the end of a day, dinner served- a time for talking, for relaxing.

"That's what I would call an 'insulated worldview,' Dad."

"Sure is. But a reliable shotgun allows you to be insulated- so long as it's clean and loaded. What the hell did the world ever do for us anyways?"

"Don't you feel a little uneasy never knowing what's happening out there? I mean you don't even know if Louisville basketball is playing?"

Herb kicked off his left boot. "Nope." A glass in one hand, Bowie the cat in the other.

"But what if there's trouble and we don't even know it?"

Swishing the booze in his mouth, under his tongue- "Well, if it's really trouble, and it's really here- we'll know it. I'm not about to start being afraid of ghosts. Not tonight."

"Dad. Please. I'm being serious."

Herb tucked his chin to his shoulder, opened his eyelids deliberately, and humphed out of his nostrils.

"Mick, I love you sweetheart. I do. But we have this conversation once a month. This same conversation, verbatim. Month after month. Two years now. Since that first morning. Don't you reckon?"

"More than two years."

"More than two years. And we always arrive at the same conclusion- there isn't anything to do that we aren't already doing. We control what we can control. Some folks left. We stayed. We're fine."

Mickey had been knitting a scarf, turquoise, a powerful color- poignant- it stood out amongst the relics of their drab living room. "I'm happy you're fine. That must be nice."

"Come on, Mick."

"No, I am. You can be oblivious, worry free- you can do your work then drink yourself to sleep every night- no, that's great and all- super- but / need something else. I can't do it anymore. I really- I don't know how much more I can go on like this. Everyone left. Every newspaper I've seen, every radio-report we ever picked up- I don't want to die out here with you. I don't."

"I'm flattered, Mick."

"Dad!"

"Mick, what do you want me to do?"

"Anything!"

Herb smiled. "I can't change a thing kiddo. And I'm not even sure anything needs changing. Except maybe the tractor." He scratched his chin. "I wish I had a little more money before the lights went out so I could have replaced that damn tractor motor."

"How can you say that?"

"Say what?"

"That nothing needs changing! Look around, Dad. We don't have a life anymore. Or do you just not care?"

Herb shook his head, ever so slightly, "Mick, I got all the life I need. We grow our food. We raise the animals. We do our chores. We eat well. We got a roof over our head. My life doesn't depend on whether or not they're running the Derby this year. It just doesn't. Nothing shut down for me."

Sarcastic, irritated- "Must be nice."

"Mick, I can't be what you want me to be. I can't. I'm no city slicker. I'm not leaving my home. We have everything we need. We do as we please. Nobody comes around for taxes, nobody bothers us- hell, getting the bank off my back was the best thing that ever happened to me- outside of you and your brother and your mother! We live well out here. Close to the earth, like the old days."

Mickey went from the couch to her feet. "We're not a part of anything anymore."

"We're still a family, aren't we? Mick- when you were a baby- it was a summer day, you were ten-months old or so- I'll never forget the moment- I looked at you, I looked into your eyes, your beautiful eyelashes flipping, your smile- I was convinced I had seen the most beautiful thing this world had to offer. That was the top of the mountain." A look of contempt washed across his face as he finished his thought, "I don't need to be a part of anything else. The world is nothing but- it's people. It's a big mass of crap- a big, porcelain thumping crap that's too big for the toilet. People make war. People pollute the air. People hate each other for no reason. I don't need to be a part of any of that."

"Then you're fine to let it all burn?"

A chuckle, complete, "What good has any of it been? We- people practically destroy everything they get their hands on. Including each other. Hell- they bombed churches with little girls inside." Herb took a long drink. "So I say 'Hell yes.' Let it go. If that's our justice, I accept it."

Unable to accept the finality, forgetful of Alabama- a blush in her cheeks, the lines of her figure, lean and coiled, "Dad, you can't just say that. It's not justice. It's more innocent people dying. It's more bodies."

"All it really means, Mick, is that instead of Googling it, now you might need to listen for the crickets in the field to know when Springtime has shown up!" A deep laugh- a proud laugh- quick on his feet- Herb Gallagher was smitten by his remark.

"Dad, people in hospitals were tied to life support when the power went out. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Everybody dies, Mick. Death is the boundary of every life."

"That's easy for you to say!"

Herb stopped. His eyes dropped away from his daughter. He felt her truth, his truth- in a clear light in plain sight- "I guess it is. You're right. It is easy. I'm a sad old man who lost his wife. Who might have even done her in himself. So yes. You're right. It is easy for me to say. I am not afraid of death."

"I'm sorry dad, I- you didn't- nobody did her in. Alright. Nobody controls anybody else's life. It was her time to go."

Herb pawed at his itchy chin, the scruff- "You think I'm coming to mine?"

Mickey paused. "The way you keep drinking, treating yourself- I don't know- sometimes it's like you're headed towards it more than it's coming to you."

Herb nodded. "That may be so." He said it without hesitation. He said it adamant solid, spoken from experience- spoken from a life lived under the twinkling of misaligned stars, amplified by the cruel bitterness of circumstance. If you live long enough you inevitably suffer and begin to envy little ghost children in the highest of heavens who passed on young, died innocent, gone to sleep pure and innocent before any contaminants could take hold, frozen in childhood... they were spared... their lives were saintly and exempt, idealized, and that's why they sleep so soundly... envious of two-year-old cancer victims, seven-year-old girls drowned at the lake... spared life's suffering which is life itself, to live is to suffer... spared the pain, the torment... gone quick, lucky... adieu with a halo... last one there is a rotten egg... instead of crying amidst a pile of empty bottles, wondering impossible why's...

Mickey sensed the words which her father required at that moment. She located them, "I love you, Dad! I love you. And this isn't about- what I'm saying isn't about you, it's about- there's still a world out there. There's still something to for me to do. I feel it."

Straightening his dirty shirt sleeve, "I guess that's where- I'm an old man, Mick. I lived my life. That's where- we've got different outlooks, sweetheart. I did my work. I put you and your brother into this world. I gave this world more than it deserved, in my opinion."

Mickey replied, mordant, "Way to lay a guilt trip on me."

Lighthearted, Herb responded, "Wasn't meant to be any kind of trip. More of a compliment." Another pour, another tip of the glass- his digits crooked, broken several times over, a near imperceptible scar between his thumb and forefinger he acquired while fishing drunk- large, worn hands, a worn forehead, crow's feet spread out of both eyes going *caw caw*- old enough to understand his daughter was young,

and he wasn't. "I get it, Mick. I'm not asking you to be like me. Nobody is making you stick it out here. If you want to go into St. Louis or Louisville, I'll support you all I can."

"How can you support me- we have no gas, no way to go anywhere- how would you, how could- by sitting here getting drunk?"

Herb swallowed. "It's my way, Mick. An adult man, or woman, is entitled to do it their way."

Mickey's emotions switched, now she was fed up. "So long as they're not hurting anybody? Right?"

"And who am I hurting?"

"Me! Me, Dad! You're hurting me!"

"How?"

Mickey wanted to explode. She let down her knitting and went up to her bedroom. If there had been a button to push, a fuse to light- a lightning bolt to ride out across the thunder- oh the places she would have gone, goodbye. Between hatred, resentment- moving through each emotional color- betrayal, frustration- confusion, abandonment- each tone passed over her for the next hour, alone and seated cross-legged on her bed. But then it was pity- she became overcome by a sense of profound pity. Herb Gallagher- a pitiful creature. Her father's question, "How?", was truly genuine. He didn't understand. He couldn't conceptualize how applying a warm numbing agent over his unending internal pain had anything to do with his daughter. He couldn't see that Mickey had sacrificed everything to be with him, to carry him through, to offer him the last bit of love he might get out of life- and to do it at her own expense.

-O-

A late evening- Mickey sorts through her father's catalogue of vinyl. Thumbing the rectangular covers. Whenever she brought herself down to the floor, cross-legged, and pulled the old plastic milk-crate into her possession, she would pretend that she didn't know what lie in waiting. Sometimes she would invent names of bands, hoping to uncover fictitious treasures- *Moscow in February*, *Depth Charge Finale*, *The Thrust*, *Riot Loveliness*, *Twilight & Da Vibrations*, *SOMETIMERS*, *Fritz's Long Haul*, *Twice Cut Cable*. As she flipped along, she would inspect each jacket, each picture, each track list, each list of acknowledgements-engrossed. She lusted for the feeling of the paper wrappers against her fingers- the decaying liners meant to safeguard the wax-pressings, to preserve their fine ridges and avoid scratches.

Late, rainy- Mickey makes her first selection. She sets the needle on the old machine. Hand-cranked. A phonograph. Her ears are open, humming with anticipation in front of the oversized horn. A simple motor turns. Gene Krupa. Count Basie. Thelonious Monk. Ella Fitzgerald. Trane. Chug-a-lug. The night bleeds into itself, a wound which migrated wider and wider, fibers torn, the darkness spreading- she listens to each note. She appreciates each instrument, each mood.

Absorbed.

Searching.

She yearns desperate for a signal.

But simultaneously- afraid of whatever voice might deliver it.

Then, out in the yard a tree limb cracks- a ground snare- a rabbit. The trap was producing. Mickey and Herb caught an assortment of wild game. She listens. A desperate struggle- then it ends. She closes her eyes to take stock of the hare, hanging outside, out there in the night, out in the darkness.

How did things end up this way?

A vision of a sinking stone.

A vision of the rabbit.

She leans forward, her abdominal muscles tight against her bones, her thin frame- another crank on the handpiece. Twenty, thirty turns- another vinyl disc- another place- anywhere but here.

-O-

"I know I left my clubs at the range Bowie."

"I know- you're right, I did say that. But it's not that simple."

“Where do you expect me to go? There’s no gas in the car. There’s no train station around. No buses. What am I supposed to do, call up a limousine to drive me to Chicago? Our town is abandoned- can you remember when we walked out that way last year? There was nobody around. It was spooky. And you were more scared than I was! I’m not going back there.”

“I can understand why you’d feel that way.”

“You tell me!”

“I hate to break it to you, but I don’t mind it as much as you think. It isn’t that bad.”

-O-

Loneliness like suffocation... like the only kid in the class who didn’t pass the test, his paper face down on a bubblegum elementary school desk of particleboard with one of those folding tops and he reaches inside for a pencil to zip out of his dinosaur pencil case, too scared to flip the paper over... he can’t help but make out the faint red marks... alone... like outcast 1970’s lesbian teenagers in suburban America stuffed into awkward prom dresses feigning a smile for flashbulb photo-ops... worse than that... worse than family barbecues with mom and dad and your siblings voting one way behind a dinner table political front and you stranded on the opposite end... worse than losing your scratch-off winner outside Moody Street Spa with an empty wallet in your back pocket of your black jeans, a hole in the kneecap... worse than Christmas Midnight Mass woken to a realization by consecration bells that you’re the only one in the pew who doesn’t believe... worse than oysters... alone... alone like Satan cast down from angelic spheres into eternal damnation, denied His love, doomed to the taste of sulphur and the smell of burnt flesh... alone like refugee Aztec grandmothers on the run from Cortez’s bejeweled sabers... alone like abandoned fire station doorbell babies... alone like heroin shot midnights knowing you’ll be sick in a couple of hours... alone like highway EXIT ramp cardboard signs that read Homeless Vet or Mouths to Feed or HELP... alone in a crowded subway car on the ride home, lost the job can’t pay the mortgage can’t afford the kids’ tuition your wife on her second round of chemotherapy... alone in shelters and halfway houses surrounded by furtive eyes, don’t let the bedbugs bite... alone with machines that beep and monitors that dip in a mechanical industrial medical bed situated upright a red light blinking then an alarm, you can’t breathe, an intense pain shoots through your chest, nobody to say goodbye... alone... gagged and bound and locked away... breathless... lump’d throat dry mouth’d crack’d lips desperate a grave dug into your stomach abysmal like an abyss falling through the crust then the mantle towards smoldering magnetos and there’s no hope against the inevitable.

Desperate for contact... for a kiss on your earlobe, a rub of the shoulder, feet under the table, a hand brushing up on my side, a full-bodied embrace, a high-five, a strand of hair between fingertips... I haven’t been made love to, and I haven’t made love... a virgin death would have been preferable, a cloistered priestess shrouded behind a veil... craving touch. Hungry.

Stuck behind this window, another sunset. But nobody to tell how it makes me feel, no one to explain why the reds and the purples compliment each other so well, like asters and goldenrods, no one to pour my thoughts and feelings into, out to... no one to explain why even if the winter sunsets are more subdued than summer’s, I actually prefer them that way, it makes them more regal and pronounced, with that nautical twilight extending and those deep dark blues... how they remind me of a particular Stuart Davis painting... I could scream out, but it wouldn’t matter. There’s nobody here.

A condemned woman, one foot two foot up to the gallows’ creaky platform and the boards bending under my weight, heavy... the rope around my neck... yet, never seeing the end. Never feeling the weight drop out from under me. Unable to complete the sacrifice. Perpetually masked, darkness, fibers of hemp... liminal paralysis... paralyzed, unable to feel... no warmth... cold.

And I’m the one to blame.

By design- left alone, leave me alone, no thanks, I’m fine. Fine. I’m okay. It’s all good. I was afraid... afraid to be like them when all I want is to be like them- their jokes, their hugs, their jovial beerglass afternoons- would it have been so terrible? What would have been so wrong with that? I wouldn’t allow myself to be

tyrannized by normative stereotypes- I couldn't go the way of the many- fine, but you never did anything about it. You never entered a new community, or created one for yourself. A loner. Alone. You never made yours an identity of affirmation. You... I was simply a product of negation. Or worse? Passivity. Immobilized by fear. A crepuscular animal, afraid of the dark, afraid of the sun- picking up scraps, whatever was left behind. Afraid to go further, go beyond- I should have fought harder to keep my scholarship, I should have stuck with the game, I should have taken the internship and never looked back, I should have believed in myself, fought past the deep guilt and shame and the heat waves over my skin and the uncomfortable itches and the queasy stomachs, I should have dealt with it- I should have looked at that little girl a long time ago and told her it was alright to be afraid, alright to be disquieted- I should have gone back to the school yard while she was mocked for her overalls and told her that she was beautiful- I should have told her other little girls are mean but it's all because they're just as scared as you- but it's okay because the world can be a damn scary place but you have everything you need inside of you- apple slices and cheddar cheese, a teeter-totter, the playhouse in the yard - I should tell that same little girl 'I love you.'

It's too late now.

The girl is gone. I am gone. Resigned to the confines of this mangled interiority, this shell- Bowie, a gravestone, field hares, dust on the mantle- for what purpose? Too scared to live when life was offered, now too scared to die when death is the only step forward.

Suffocation. Desperation. Cold. Regret. Fear. Paralysis.

Alone.

PART TWO: A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS
or
Vision Gathering- Purity will confirm a Source



It took the **AGCT** (*Administration and Governance of Counterterrorism*), specifically a branch designated The Bureau of Financial Stability within the **AGCT**, almost five years to formally repossess Mickey's father's house. Their repossession was done on grounds of national security. A mandate had been issued under the guise of protection- ostensibly to protect citizens outside the 'proximal urban centers' from terrorist violence. The Interzone. After five years, the paltry Indiana neighborhood appeared on a list of battalion orders. An official report, completed within the first months of the Knockout, listed Harrison County as 100% evacuated, but a round of secondary "confirmation" checks had been ordered by Central Command. When the **AGCT** agents broke in at dawn, they were shocked to find Mickey. They were even more shocked to find her alone.

It was March. Patches of snow peppered the ground. Two men in a Jeep- a perfunctory assignment, bored. Show up, confirm the area is vacant, check the box, onto the next.

Mickey was asleep with Bowie near the fireplace. The front door was kicked open. She screamed. A man in a suit told a man in a soldier's uniform to lower his weapon. There was terse conversation between the three of them. A field manual, standard operating protocols- the man in the suit had read the procedures and conducted himself according to the guidelines. The man in the uniform stared at Mickey's breasts.

Inquisitive, the suit asked, "Are you alone?"

Mickey, tactical and deliberate, "No, my father is out hunting. Quail season."

The soldier looked disappointed. The suit coughed, "Well, we ought to wait for him."

"It's alright. I can relay a message." She noticed the soldier and pulled a blanket over her shoulders.

Official paperwork was exchanged. The man in the suit pointed out a key phrase in the stack of papers- "If the aforementioned residential address houses an occupant within the boundaries ascribed by the deed of record, whether in a structure or outside of a structure, it is henceforth required that said occupant is to declare to a representative of the **AGCT** within three calendar days of presentation of this information or dissemination of the information contained in this writ, in any form, an intent to vacate, registered as a signed document of compliance and agreement between said occupant and a designated state official." He paused. The suit was obviously a banker of sorts, and he took great pleasure in interpreting the legal jargon for Mickey. Walking her through the "fine print." It was obvious to Mickey this had been a man who built a career on fine print, on interpretations, on hanging around with soldiers and police officers and other institutionalized agents of authority.

The long and the short of it was this: she had three days. A complimentary luggage container was left in the living room- a pea green, plastic ellipsoid- which would be vacuum sealed and sent alongside Mickey in her travels. "Gather up whatever can fit into the storage bin, and we'll have it waiting for you before you arrive." She would be transferred to Chicago via St. Louis- but it wasn't called Chicago anymore. "Freedom Six." There would be a series of shuttles, of buses then a train. "You and your father will be much safer there, trust me. It goes without saying- this is all being done for your own good."

The man in the uniform continued to stare at Mickey's breasts.

"The house is paid off in full. There's no mortgage on the house. Take the land, but leave us the house."

The man in the suit replied, "That simply isn't an option."

Mickey tried again. She offered collateral, for the payment on the land. There were valuables, assets. Didn't bankers negotiate with assets? Her mother's jewelry, Herb's collection of vinyl, farm equipment, the car, useless bijoux- "Pack them up and bring them with you

Once more, she offered, "Have the farm, the fields and the dirt. We only need a roof over our heads."

"Back taxes. I'm sorry but that won't be an option. And besides, this isn't a matter of money. It's a matter of security. You're not safe out here."

It's always about the money.

What about St. Louis? Her brother, last she heard, had left for St. Louis with his family. He wanted a better job. A better life. Couldn't she stay in St. Louis, try to find him? "In all likelihood he's been transported to

Freedom Six with his wife and child. St. Louis was evacuated over three years ago. I'm sure once you reach Freedom Six you'll be able to locate him. There are directories. Life is much better there. Did you know there is electricity? People have clean water."

"We have clean water here, too."

The man in the suit smiled. "I'm sure you do."

The soldier grunted.

"Three days should give you enough time to pack everything up. We'll be back on Friday. We'll arrange for a ride to the train depot in St. Louis. I'll be back with the sergeant here." Friday. That meant today was Tuesday. Tuesday. This had been the first Tuesday in years. Mickey was shocked to learn the concept of Tuesday had continued on, had been useful, had been maintained. Tuesday. She hadn't felt the need to record days with names other than- Rabbit Stew Day, Tend Garden Day, Driving Range Day, Sit by the Fire Day. Tuesday. They had come on a Tuesday- according to the world which still named days.

Mickey accepted defeat, for now.

The soldier spoke to the suit. "We ought to wait for her father."

The man in the suit looked over to Mickey.

Mickey shrugged her shoulders. "It's up to you. It could be hours. It could be days. He makes camp out there sometimes. He doesn't come home until he feels like he's bagged enough birds."

The man in the suit looked down to his watch. A watch. Time. Hours. Minutes. The exact time of day- not a winter afternoon, not a spring morning, not a summer midday- an assigned number, data, a consented methodology. He looked to Mickey, who seemed to be daydreaming, "Listen. Tell you father. Both of you need to be ready when we come back. Is that understood?" In no uncertain terms.

The soldier began to move towards the kitchen- the window- the backyard- the headstone. Mickey barked, "What sort of guarantee do we have? That you are who you say you are? That you'll do what you say you'll do?"

The soldier turned around. He gripped his weapon. "I'll personally guarantee it, how about that?"

Mickey did not respond.

Back in the Jeep the two men debated on who would deliver the report to the Area Commander. This had only been the third inhabitant since they had started their assignment. Each report inflamed the Commander. He despised oversights, errors in paperwork- the town should have been cleared years ago. Briefings had been delivered. Maps had been circled then checked. This zone was supposed to be clear. Ultimately the soldier won out- the bureaucracy would make the call. But it was now under control- it would be resolved- this was the purpose, wasn't it, of a confirmatory double checks? They were doing their job. They could pass on the blame to a previous command.

When they came back on Friday the soldier decided, "You can have the first go at her if you want. You won't take long anyways."

The man in the suit gulped. He couldn't stand being around camouflaged fatigues any longer than he had to.

Meanwhile, Mickey, inside the house, beamed with clarity. She knew somewhere inside her that this day would arrive. Nothing else mattered anymore. It was time to move. There was no question in her mind- she would be gone when the soldier and the man in the suit returned on Friday. She would evacuate- but not in their military vehicle. She had studied enough history. She sensed that whatever was being pawned off as "for her own good" in state stamped documents- it had to be deceptive. With something as catastrophic as losing all electrical equipment, with every form of digital technology eliminated instantaneously- the only way to meet the chaos and disorder would have been sheer force. Drastic means which justify the ends: control, authority, order. And Mickey wasn't going out on their terms. She wasn't going to pack any bins, board any trains, take any suggestions- it would be on her terms.

She tossed a couple of logs into the fireplace.

She fanned the flames until they reached a sustainable level.

Her eyes in the dancing plasma- Herb Gallagher's advice offered long ago on a slick putting green rolling left to right, downhill- "Mick, there's only five people in this world you'll ever be able to trust. Your mother, your brother, and me are three of them. Once you fill up your list, after you meet one or two more- you make damn sure to remember that you've run out of space every time you meet somebody new."

Mickey warmed herself up, then began to work.

That day turned frenetic. Mickey aggregated what she considered to be essential gear into her canvas hiking backpack: a single-person collapsible tent, a couple of knives, a weatherproof jacket, two wool blankets, a towel, her expired driver's license and birth certificate wrapped in a plastic baggie, three sets of clothes (one for each season), a couple of ball-caps, a firestick, a tinderbox, a road atlas, a cast-iron pan, a small copper pot for water, several books of matches, a black tarpaulin eight feet by twelve, sandals, a pair of gym shoes (tied to the outside of the pack), six boxes of ammunition, rope, a pair of waterproofed leather work gloves. The pack weighed nearly as much as she did. By evening she had her cargo pants stuffed with a baggie of pre-rolled cigarettes, a compass, a lighter, a sharpening stone, a Polaroid photograph of her family taken at Mickey's fifth birthday party. She had fixed herself food rations- a dozen cans and jars- and stuffed those into the backpack.

The wilderness- the woods- she had gathered enough knowledge about the local flora and fauna, enough common sense from growing up on a farm- she could fend for herself. It made sense. She would see who else was out there. She would do it on her own terms. Back to nature. Back to the garden.

Tuesday night- for Mickey this day had been reclaimed and renamed as 'Adios Bonfire Night.' She had collected the family photo albums, heirlooms, furniture, sentimental articles- she piled it all up, doused it in kerosene, and set it to blaze in the backyard near Herb's gravestone. Bowie and she watched the flames ascend. A symbolic act of defiance. Not that any **AGCT** bureaucrat or soldier would fuss over it- but she wanted to be sure everything of her family, everything of her past, would be gone with her departure. All the memories- the Christmas stockings, the Halloween outfits, her mother's jewelry, the old 45's playing on the record player- they would leave with Mickey. She would depart with them, with her, insider of her, in her heart. She blessed each object, each moment in time- she touched those places in herself before organizing them into the fuel pile. Catalogued within her spirit.

Mickey stayed up through most of the night, burning the physical totems of her memory, burning what traces of the past were still left in the world.

In the morning, with the pile gone, before the sun rose, she made one last trip to the outhouse. A cold shower. A full breakfast. She napped until dusk. She woke up, slung the Mossberg over one shoulder, then the pack over both. She bent over to make sure her boots were tied tight. Then she closed the broken front door of her family's house for the last time. She would never see it again. And that was alright. She would miss Bowie- she kissed him and stroked him, left plenty of food in his bowl.

"You've been a good friend, Bowie. I've had to say goodbye to everyone else. Now I have to say goodbye to you. The house should keep you warm through the Spring- there will be plenty of mice to keep you fed. Don't let those bastards give you any trouble, alright?"

Before the moment passed Mickey had been dreading the interaction- convinced it would be fraught with emotion, difficult- but it was over and Bowie stood upright with his whiskers perked. His eyes relieved her with assurances. He would be alright. Mickey understood. Bowie was a good cat, but he wasn't a road companion. He would do fine on his own as the caretaker of a homestead.

She walked off the front porch and towards the backyard. She said goodbye to Herb. A kiss on her fingertip, then to the marker- kissing him, kissing this place, her childhood and her formative years, the delights and the suffering, the whole word- kissed goodbye. As she went forward, a flood of memories spilled over her like middle school art projects toppling out of a shoebox- his hairy forearms, the spider vein on his right calf, the scar on his chin, the smell of whiskey- she didn't ask him for anything, she wasn't worried- she wanted him to know she would be alright.

Mickey liberated four chickens, two goats, a cow and a pig before setting off into the fields beyond the yard. Once her father's fields, and his father's before him. Now they belonged to the **AGCT**. Or so they would think. She would carry them as well.

But- she considered her options.

No.

The **AGCT** could have the fields too.

Take everything.

She felt relieved as she walked off Gallagher land. She was now, technically, in the Rodgerson's lot. Walking, further- a burden, lifted. Years of paralysis. Most of her twenties. Languishing. Enconced. Static. But now, she had a purpose. A wave of equanimity. A sense of relief- she was no longer a baby sister, she was no longer a daughter, she was no longer Mickey Gallagher Miss Indiana girl on an Indiana night the high school golf phenom the smart kid in math class the outsider the quiet one the caretaker the friend the doll who had never made love who never went to the big city who never broke free- every version of herself, a phantom. Everything that once defined her, that once decorated her and dressed her in costume- she walked past them all and left them in the fields. Disappeared. Gone.

-O-

She'd fallen into a meditative groove. Working her way through the farm country, through dead patches of land, through thickets and weeds and finally butted up next to the highway by late afternoon, the sound of her boots on the cold ground like an Orphic beat- steady, hypnotizing. She was surprised by how quickly the dusk had passed into night.

It was her plan to travel through the night, to be on the safe side. Every morning, she'd locate a ditch or a thicket, sleep through the bulk of the day, then take back off at sunset. It would be easier to travel at night. Less conspicuous. More cover. More solitude. And that boon of a full moon!

Her plan: three days of walking until Patoka Lake, the National Forest. Four days at the most. Pointed north. Along the state highways, past the Interstate, west towards the setting sun. An obvious destination. Pristine country. Open. Fertile. Glowing with childhood memories. She had considered heading towards the Ohio River, fantasy dreams like Huck Finn bobbing down the Mississippi, pointed at New Orleans- but it was too risky. Her people weren't sailors. She would find a place to call basecamp. She would hunt. She would fish. She would plant seeds and forage. The days were stretching longer, wider- by the time she settled in it would be warm enough to wear a t-shirt. Spring would be in full bloom. Summer wouldn't be far behind. The lake's water would be cool, welcome. It would be alright.

For most of the night she watched her breath as she plodded alongside a two-lane corridor of asphalt. Overgrown. Vacant. Haunted.

Mickey didn't see any vehicles over the course of the evening.

At sunset she picked out a glen about a half mile from I-64 without much to dispute and she made camp. Sore. Cramping. It had been a long while since she had embarked on a trek like this. She let her body go slack and plunged her head down to rest on one of her wool blankets. The other blanket wrapped around her tight, huddled in a single-person tent. Warm enough. Semi-comfortable. But still- sleep was near impossible. Wary. She couldn't settle. Each time she drew near to drifting off she became alerted to the sound of her own nostrils, fixated on a thought that she would go on sleepless another six, seven, eight hours. An insomniac. Reeling. Agitated. Tossing and turning restive through the daylight. Only an hour or two of actual sleep. Maybe it was her circadian? Maybe it would take a day or two? Rest the body- the mind will follow. Her father's voice on a boiling fairway afternoon in July the sun evaporating the blue out of the sky, "The mind will follow Mick, just keep your body in flow."

So it went. Thursday into Friday, Friday into Saturday- across the Interstate, a mad sprint- no semitrucks, no commuters, no tourists on tour- eerie. Each night a trudge, each morning a well concealed bivouac. An abandoned REST STOP. Billboards- *Cell Phones, Attorneys, Fast Food*- white wooden crosses along the road- a world forgotten. The stars to guide her. Her Pink Moon waning moment by moment,

imperceptible- reappearing each night a little slimmer, a little less- herself. Crunching footsteps. Deep breaths. Cramping, then relief. Mickey's headspace went blank. Sleepless, restless, dirty- losing touch with any sense of continuity. Her thoughts became more amorphous. Saturday into Sunday. When the dawn's sunlight appeared on the horizon, it felt she was being transported to an ethereal plane, a new world. Nighttime took on the feel of total dreamstate. By Monday she had to confirm her position on the map, then re-check it, every three hundred yards or so. Indecisive. She was dazed, her brain in quicksand like corndog state fair psychosis, distorted- but at the same time uncannily alert. Animalistic. On Monday night a vehicle came into view and moved alongside her flank- a military engine purring diesel, a Humvee unharnessing flood lights- Mickey instinctively dropped to the ground for cover and didn't move until the threat had cleared. Automatic. A survival instinct, a deep will to remain concealed and alive preserved in her cerebellum, her hindbrain- essentials- on and on she walked.

Then, like an Arabian mirage, it appeared- her lake. Her legs had reached the park. Weak. Strung out. She tucked the atlas away in her bag and lost herself in the brush, aimless.

She pitched a more permanent camp- a tarp, the tent, a firepit dug out- she collected tinder and some branches. She struck a match. She zipped open the cover. Then Mickey collapsed into her sleeping bag. Exhausted.

Her mind would not shut down. There was so much to do: plant seeds- a handful she had stashed in a Ziploc- in hopes of a garden; construct a permanent shelter, fortified, a lean-to with leaves as roof shingles and a wall of logs to keep out the breeze, insulated by moss; the snare wire, a deer blind- tracking game trails; a cooksite, in case of bears; a firewood cache; running water- a rain collection system, a filtration rig. But it was sleep. Sleep. All she wanted right now was sleep. Exhausted. Her thighs, her calves, her shoulders, her lower back- aching. But her hindbrain remained awake. Her body would not shut down. Sleepless. Hungry. Torn open. Tearing. Broken. Breaking. The lack of nutrition, REM cycles- unhinged- the conditions took hold of her mind. Nature took over. From a logical perspective- at least from an outside perspective- to an observer watching the drama unfold- there was a natural explanation for what happened to Mickey Gallagher that Sunday evening. There were variables that could be calculated, accounted for. There were equations. There was medical literature, psychological studies. It could all be explained. Right?

A small fire. The tent door open. Her head in a vice, constricted.

Here we are.

Here is Mickey Gallagher.

Present.

Slowly, surely- a vibrant wash of colors expands across her field of view, vivid, sharp, encompassing- bleeding over each other, the visible spectrum like a pool of oil dripping and accumulating, the fire- a fire lit up in front of her- oranges and reds, electrically charged- pulsing in and out- Mickey takes a deep breath. But then a lurid shift. Immediate. A harsh blackness- a blank screen, void yet shadowed by something ominous, large- a curtain had come down upon her- she groans- then hears a whisper:

"Sweetheart, what are you hiding from?"

Mickey's heart swells with fear. She slams her eyes shut. Blinking. Her vision returns. Opening- the inside of the tent, the fire, the trees and brush surrounding her camp- nobody. Nothing. A woman's voice. A calm voice, a compassionate voice. Who? What?

Hearing the same voice, again: *"Why are you afraid?"*

She trembles. The shotgun- where is the gun- Mickey dashes into her pack, safety OFF- extending the barrel- she barks as fiercely as she can fake it, *"Who's out there?"*

The woman's voice responds, *"I am all around you, in you and before you, behind you and above you and below you. I have watched, and waited. I have blessed you- I have chosen you."*

Mickey is paralyzed. A silence. Finally, *"Chosen me? What do you want?"*

The voice answers, *"I want only what you can give."*

Confounded, her grip firm against the shotgun's neck, "What does that mean? Who are you?"

The voice, *"I am behind everything you have seen and lived. I have given up everything so that you could see it and live it. I am everyone you have known and cared for. I am everything you have feared and hated. I am the beginning and the end. I am the love which now holds you together and brings you forth. I want only what you can give."*

A visionary portal opens up- transposes her across a hundred billion years, from galactic emanations to cellular organelle dynamics, up and down the tree of life into her own life across all lifetimes- jettisoned into the playgrounds of consciousness, swept away entirely. It might have been seconds, it might have been hours, it might have been a hundred years. Mickey realizes it must have been a hallucination- lack of food, sleep- she plugs the numbers into the equations. Rattled. She releases her grip on the gun. Shaking. Within her mind, 'Okay. This is okay. I'm hallucinating. I need to sleep. I need to just get some rest and wake up.'

The voice interrupts her, *"The time to rest has ended. The time to act is now. You will see it. You are on the path."*

Mickey shouts back, "The path to what?"

The voice booms through her body, *"The path to life. The world of man is dying. Your brothers and sisters have fallen. They suffer."*

Mickey's energy wanes. Sitting down, the gun on her lap, her hands on her temples. She wails, forlorn, "I don't have any sisters and my brother is somewhere in St. Louis! I don't know what you are- this crazy- you're a figment of my imagination- I- leave me be! I beg you, please! Please leave me alone! Leave me alone!"

The voice responds, *"So be it."*

Tears escape and run down Mickey's cheeks.

Madness. Psychosis. It had to be. She is going insane. She has to be- *I'm losing my mind*. But crazy people don't think they're crazy, right? Mickey is certain she has gone crazy. *This is crazy. Chosen? Paths? Brothers and sisters suffering? Is this the byproduct of a twisted unconscious? Some repressed guilt complex? It has to be. It has to be a remark my mother made twenty years ago, re-emerging as a psychotic episode- it has to be. There's some explanation. It's okay. Settle down. Stop crying. There's a logical explanation for this. Chosen for what? I don't want to hear anymore voices, see anymore universes- I can't deal with this. I need sleep. Relax. Just relax. Take a breath. You'll be okay. You just need sleep.* Desperate to unhear, to unlive the experience- to recede into nothing, to be unborn- *whose voice was that?* A body trembling with fear- she cannot erase it from her memory. *It has to be the hunger, the starvation. I'm losing my mind. I'm losing my mind. It's okay. It will pass. Sleep. Get some sleep.*

Or was I sleeping? Was it a dream? Maybe it was a dream? Is this all a dream. Am I dreaming right now?

Mickey pinches her cheek.

This isn't a dream.

Mickey's field of vision jettisons forward, warping down a spiraling tunnel. Away from her body, suddenly. Her body left behind. In front of her is a city, clouds, broken steel ruins, a cracked column, shattered glass... no sunlight... bodies everywhere, men and women and children... so many bodies... so much death... images and feelings blurred together, perceiving no longer from her vantage as Mickey the person with five senses and a perceptual center but rather from a vantage of the eternal, of the world soul the eye of the world the third eye seeing between shadows... intense nausea, decay and despair and torment... rats and birds peck at the carrion remains... laughter echoes out, a terrible laugh fills the streets... red, then gray, then black... a room full of men at a long table... back into herself.

Mickey vomits bile outside her tent.

The fire has extinguished itself.

Smoke.

Deeply troubled- *this, it has to be the end. This is it. I've totally lost it- I'm- I should- why wait? Why put off the inevitable? That ridgeline before the lake, back a half mile or so, to the east- remember? Yes. It would be high enough. It could work. I could jump. Into the ravine. I bet there are some boulders, rocks in the gulch. That would suffice. It would be quick- especially if I went headfirst. I can do it.*

Violated, terrified- the voice, the vision- madness. *Is it a demon- a possession? Did something take hold of me? Would it do so again?* She can't risk it. She has been turned inside out. *This isn't good. This is- the ridgeline. Get to the ridgeline. The fall would kill you. It would definitely kill you. Go. Now. This is too much. This has to end. You tried. You tried your best. It's ok- but you can't wait around. It will be easier this way. You're out of food, you're far from home- the world is ending- peering through that portal- you weren't supposed to have seen it- what you saw- a hallucination. Do remember Rachel Hossberg's grandmother? The twisted old lady in her rocking chair, her bedroom always locked, the hallway reeking of dirty diapers, a crazed old woman muttering to herself in the shadows about 'drains' and 'hooks' and 'claws' coming for her, around every corner- remember Rachel sneaking us past the bolted door, the old woman in the corner, cowering on the floor- "the drains are underneath us, sucking us, the hook drains dry the blood hooked into us, watch out"- madness.*

Panting. Mickey is unable to settle. She stands up. She abandons her camp. She is running.

She reaches the cliff, the rockface. She scrambles her way up. Desperate. Scared. *Will it come back for me? Would it take me again? I won't let it. No. Scrambling upwards. Her knees ache, her thighs burn. Keep going. It's not far. This can be over. This can all be over. Your parents are dead. Your brother is gone. Nobody knows you exist- except this awful force.*

She arrives, where the dirt turns to stone, the summit. She exhales, reaches out with her vision, her feelings. She is ready.

Then, the woman's voice- a voice from outside her mind which fills the wilderness, fills Mickey simultaneously, a vibration then a resonance, echoing- *"You have been chosen."*

Mickey begins to wail. Bottled in for so long, holding it together, bolted shut- her mother, her father, the house, her brother, her life back home- gone, forsaken to this twilight kingdom. Mickey breaks apart, overwhelmed in a fit of sorrow. An atavistic yawp across the land. Screaming. Gasping for air she folds to the ground. Her feet give way. On her hands and knees, further- her cheek to the ground- curling up, her hands over her ears, a shutter. Exhausted, she cries and bemoans, reduced to a whimpering, "Leave me alone! Please! Please! I beg of you! Leave me alone!"

A whisper in her left ear. *"You will bring them a vision. It will bring peace. It will end the suffering."* Eyes closed. A hand on Mickey's back, her shoulder, rubbing her- an impulse to jerk, to rattle herself free from its grip- but the touch is not foreign, it contains the tenderness of her own mother, she can feel it. She remains still. She knows this feeling. She inhales and opens her eyes.

There is nobody present.

She exhales, sits up, and whispers defeated, "Why me?"

"Because you are the only one left with the strength to make the journey. Now ease your mind. Rest."

On command- a wash of relief- Mickey's muscles relax. Her tears evaporate. The presence, the force- the spirit has left her, for now. Spirit. Maybe it wasn't a possession, demonic- but an intercession? The Holy Spirit? The Holy Ghost- she loved the concept when she was a child- the holy ghost- mysterious, crafty- lurking. But there is no more analysis, no more making sense. Her mind goes motionless. She collapses back to the ground.

Night begins to fall, a crescent moon rising- the earth cools. Purple sky above her, crisp air kissing her cheeks and the birds of dusk singing their songs, a canopy once dappled with sunlight now hanging low weighted by crystallized plumes of cloud- she squints, gazing out over the world.

Mickey doesn't have the strength to make it back to camp- resigned. Sleep finds her. Warm. Centered. At ease. Empty, restful sleep. Outside of time, outside of space- beyond the dream kingdoms, consciousness, between death and life- beyond the duality of good and evil- at the source of both- formless, eternal.

-O-

Mickey is awoken- awakened- woke- waking up to a different voice- a human voice, a voice close to her but outside of her- "Hello there." A relaxing voice- blurry, the lines between dream and sleep and wakefulness- Mickey blinks. A fire is lit. Glows.

Mickey's body shoots upright, rigid- awake, coming to inside a foreign sleeping bag, sweating, terrified. She is confused. An acidic impulse, a wave of nausea mixing through her insides gurgles in her stomach up her throat- panting- coughing- wanting to vomit, but nothing to eject- sweaty, clammy- *breathe, just breathe*- she dry heaves, retching- gasps- *that couldn't be real, it couldn't be*- she replays the words, the images- the woman's voice- *a dream. It was all a dream.*

She looks up from the fire.

A coyote howls- a laceration across the frosted woods- an opening- a portal. A signal. Her eyes a little wider- a sliver- a fraction- more, more- floundering, and now regaining. She had been waiting for a signal.

Arrived. An arrival of fate. *Am I awake?*

Startled, she asks "Where am I?"

"Take it easy. Take it easy. I haven't done you any harm. Found you this morning, darn near frozen to death out by the ridge. I'm Marshall. This is my camp."

Mickey feels her face, her hands, her feet. She is in a sleeping bag. She is unharmed. A headache- a dry taste in the back of her throat- Marshall walks from a chair on the opposite side of the fire, leans over, places a tin cup in front of her, an arm's reach away. "Pinecone tea. It'll help."

Mickey inspects her host. A grey beard worn slapdash over his neck and sideburns. A twinkle off his narrow, hazel brown eyes. A pipe in one hand, a tin cup identical to the one he had offered her in his other hand. He walks back to his seat, unhitches a blanket over his lap- seated, his station near a pile of logs next to the fire. Gaunt cheeks. Red, wrinkled forehead. Bushy eyebrows. A familiar face- she had seen this face somehow, somewhere before. This John Muir adventurer of the wilderness whose sustenance comes from the holy scriptures of nature- gone off to the mountains to find God- a holyman calm between his ecstasies- crusading for Hetch Hetchy, blazing trails across Alaskan frontiers, humming sweet and pure in a damp Himalayan cave. Mickey reaches for the cup. She blows off a bit of steam, drinks. "Thank you."

"Strange place to fall asleep, out there on the ridge- I thought you were dead at first. I couldn't move you on my own so I rigged my sled and hauled you back here. Figured you might be hurt, so I tried my best not to budge you too much but- how are you feeling? I was concerned about a spinal injury or something- are you- how do you feel?"

Mickey takes another sip. She nods. "A little sore, but I'm okay."

"Happy to hear that. Do you mind if I ask your name?"

"Mickey."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance Mickey. I'm Marshall Winters. Poly High class of 1975. Never went to college. Worked a trade, electricians union, IBEW. Made an honest living. Married, had two boys. One died in battle serving his country. The other died battling a drug addiction. Raised in Missouri. Ended up here a couple of years back. Been in these backwoods, living off the land since the world went to hell in a handbasket."

Mickey immediately trusts the man. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance as well."

Marshall adjusts his blanket, "I'm sorry- it's been so long since I had the chance to talk to somebody else other than myself- I'm excited and I'm being rude. Tell me- what about yourself Mickey, where's home?"

"South of here, little less than a hundred miles. Indiana side of the river."

"A midwestern neighbor. Fantastic. Good to be in the company of a neighbor."

Mickey smiled. "Likewise. Hey- thank you, for helping me out."

"No trouble at all. Was my pleasure- I haven't had the chance to be of service to one of my fellows in quite some time. Made me feel like there was a reason for me being here, a purpose. Purpose is one of the

most valuable treasures a man can have. Haven't felt that way in a long time. Selfishly, you might have done me more good than I did you."

A silence between them, reflecting- insects click and flutter, boughs and leaves rustle- the coyotes are quiet.

"If you don't mind me asking another question of you Mickey- how did you come to be out on that ledge?"

Another silence. Mickey speaks up, "I really don't know."

"That's fine. Quite alright. I don't know much myself anymore. Hard to keep track of anything. Has its perks, but sometimes- it's been more than five years since the electricity went dead- seems like yesterday sometimes- other times, feels like more than a lifetime."

Mickey perks up, "Has it been that long?"

"Indeed it has."

"Five years." Her voice trails off.

Marshall nestles a log into the fire. "Funny thing is, when I think back to the beginning- most people where I was from were mostly worried about how they were going to watch the ball game on their television! That's something, isn't it?"

Mickey cracks her neck. She adjusts, raises her chest, straightens out. "People are funny like that. My Dad was worried about keeping his beer cold. He ended up drinking more whiskey."

Marshall chuckles. "Smart man. Is he out there looking for you?"

Mickey pauses, "No. He's back home. In the ground."

A respectful bow, "I'm sorry to hear that. My condolences."

Mickey finishes the drink in her cup. "Me too. But he was overdue for it, ever since my mom passed."

"Have you been around other people much?"

"No. A government official and a soldier about a week ago, but before that- everyone where I was from packed up and went to the city."

"People did the same by me. I guess we're the last to stay. Don't know if that makes us the fools or the wise ones- time will tell."

Mickey, almost unconscious, "I don't think it will matter."

Marshall peers into the flames. "There was a story I read, a long time ago, when I was up north working up near the Indiana Dunes State Park at one of those hydroelectric power plants. IBEW sent me up there on a nice contract, they took good care of me. But that's beside the point- anyways, a boy, I think ten or eleven years old, he was walking over a beach trail with his mother, having a perfect day. Must have been July or August, a summer afternoon- hiking, picnicking, down by the shoreline- but on their way back to the car, down the dune, he takes a step, and disappears through the sand. Little kid vanishes. Sucked down right into the dune. Mother lost her mind trying to dig him up. Took a couple days, a backhoe and a team of volunteers to fetch the boy's body. Nightmare getting the equipment up there. Anyways, ecologists in the area said it was a- what did they call it- a, a decomposition chimney. More or less a hollow cave left under the surface of a dune. See when a root from a tree decays and rots, it leaves this area hidden under the surface. One wrong step, one unlucky step- whoosh. And this boy- well, the decomposition chimney collapsed when he took that unluck step, and he was swallowed up out of nowhere. That was a powerful image- real powerful. And the more I got to thinking about it, thirty years later now- when this newspaper article came back to me during a recent bout of thinking- which is about all I do now, thinking and then not thinking- I realized our society sort of fell into a decomposition chimney. We've been swallowed up, out of nowhere, and nobody was prepared. But we're different from the boy. An essential difference. Because I don't think it was bad luck. I think we had it coming. We took so much for granted. The world had gotten so convenient. And it was all at a cost. So- what happens? Mother Nature is the greatest killer out there- she's a shrewd mistress. She plays by her rules. And I think with everything we were doing- the global warming, the pollution, the garbage in the oceans, the species dying out- she pulled the plug. Whether or not we deserved it- that's for her to decide. I was thinking that the

other day- did we deserve it or not. I don't know. All I know now is we're slowly dying in the dark. And I don't think there's any excavators around to dig us up."

Mickey appreciates the story. She considers the metaphor. She nods. "That makes a lot of sense to me. Initially I wanted to evacuate to the city, but- something didn't feel right."

Marshall agrees, "It did not pass the proverbial smell test, no it did not. You're right about that. Heck, my mother used to say if everyone is doing something, it can't be any good. And the way I figured, between the government and those billionaires- with that kind of power at stake- those kinds of folks do not go gently into the night. They've cooked something up."

Mickey looks down at her empty cup.

Marshall flings the blanket off his lap. "I apologize. Like I said- been a while since I played host. Here, let me get you a refill. And here," as he rises up, grips the kettle, he unzips a pack- "peanuts. Eat something. You need to get some energy back. These are my favorite- honey mustard."

Mickey grins, accepts the refill, the food. She chews at the peanuts, swallowing- "Thank you again for helping me, Marshall. I don't really know- I haven't eaten in a while. Haven't had any water. I must have fainted."

Marshall shrugs, "Any thanks belong to my own mother. Was lucky to be raised right, raised on a river, raised by a woman tougher than any man I ever met including my own self." He has sat back down, and then unpacks a leather pouch from off his neck, pulling it out from under his coat. He packs the cherry wood pipe in his hand. Filling the bowl. Almost imperceptibly, he offers Mickey the first puff. A gesture. A lunge forward of his hand.

"Not tonight. My head and everything." She shakes her hand, appreciative of the offer. The air fills with pine, with skunk, with succulent flowered earth. Marshall exhales a large cloud of blue smoke. Mickey is covertly smitten by the man in front of her. Here is a person of interest. A gentleman. Like her father- but more inquisitive, more- she prods, "How long have you been out here, Marshall?"

"I can't say exactly, not that it makes a difference but- once those **ACGT** (*Administrative Coalition of Government Trust*) or **AGTC** officials started herding people out of their homes into the cities- did you see the pamphlets? The flyers?"

Mickey nods.

"I mean, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, but my goodness. Once I saw those- I told people, I said this is how it all starts. Government agencies disguised in acronyms. Pamphlets with smiling pictures, families at holiday tables. I said this is bad news any way you slice it. But it didn't matter what I thought. People were going to do what they were going to do. But I didn't waste time after I saw those flyers, boy, I took off. Easy for me, on account of I was alone anyways. I figured nobody would fuss over me. But to answer your question- must be four years, a little more. Four years this summer. I've been in this area particularly for- well, this was my third winter. I like it here. It seemed a natural place to settle down. I met a few people here and there along the road, folks with a similar mindset, but there weren't many. I heard rumors of gangs, of vandals- I can't speak to that. Back home all the talk was about the terrorists- I haven't see any to speak of either. It's been a long time since- well, that's why I'm rambling on now. It's good to be talking. It feels good."

Mickey smiles. Marshall sees it. She takes a sip of tea, "Go on. I enjoy listening. It's nice to be in the company of another voice, other than the one in my own head."

"A rare pleasure, that. Couldn't agree more. Anyhow- I suppose- see, I figured with the climate, the terrain out here, the game and the freshwater- I grow some cannabis, tomatoes, hunt the occasional deer, trap the occasional squirrel or rabbit. The land is treats me well, it produces. Made sense to drop anchor. What didn't make sense was going on a train car with your bags packed into a strange city, buying an empty promise a soldier was selling you at your front porch, a gun in his hands. No way. Mother nature, sure she's ruthless, deadly, cunning- but she's also beautiful- whatever she has in store for me, I can accept

that. And I have. But I didn't want to roll the dice with people. I didn't want to lose everything at the hands of a bunch of desperate lunatics."

Mickey acknowledges his decision, "Logical."

"You'd think there would be a bit more logic in the heads of folks. But I can't speak for them. I think most people wanted to go back to living like the way things were, to get a semblance of order. Ball games and cold beer! Take my neighbor, Eileen Heart, I'll never forget it- telling me like it was so simple, that folks could carry on like it was the 1980's or something, before computers took over- she was convinced we could just go back in time. She was a good gal, Eileen. But that wasn't how I saw it. I didn't know where things were headed, but-" Marshall grins, wide, beaming, "I didn't need to. This worked out for me."

Mickey reflects back in time. "I was guilty of it myself. The first couple of months were difficult. I was so anxious to log back on, you know what I mean? I was addicted to my computer, my phone- I felt naked without them. I couldn't work anymore- my job literally required an internet connection. It's weird to think about now."

Marshall nods, "It certainly is. A different world altogether."

"A decomposition chimney world."

Marshall chuckles.

Mickey considers the implications. "I think about all the people who really needed the internet, technology- all those folks in hospitals, people on airline flights when it first hit, navy captains on boats- so many people must have died right away. I like the idea of being taught a lesson, of learning and growing, but at that cost- I don't know. It's hard to square up."

Marshall, serious in tone, in posture, "Hard to square up indeed." He scratches his beard. He is pulled into something, a distance grows between him and Mickey- she can sense it.

Trying to ratchet him back, "What did you make of that world? The world before everything happened? Before we were swallowed up?"

Considering- considerate- Marshall reaches for the iron kettle, stationed on a rusted iron grate above the subdued campfire like an adjustable stovetop burner- his camp is extraordinarily well maintained and equipped: several water catches, a palisade fortified bunkhouse with a tripwire rigged with aluminum alarm cans on the widest perimeter, a cook house, stones encircling the firepit, a dug pathway around the camp, a massive firewood cache. A smokehouse. A line for clothes. Homemade traps. Bushcraft chairs. Fishing poles. There wasn't anything about backwoods survival that Marshall couldn't figure out and do well. He gingerly pours himself another glass of tea. Then, "I've had the chance to sit back and watch how folks have changed across generations- and I can say, from my vantage point, limited as it is- what I can speak to is this: folks stopped listening to their own intuition. The last decade or so, before the Knockout- the way technology took over- I noticed mothers stopped passing on knowledge to their daughters, fathers to their sons. People knew less and less about the world they lived in. There were no more lessons, no more myths- no imagination- it became this - 'Google it' thing. We were more concerned about useless facts, about what to buy- than how to live. There were no stories. I never heard any good stories anymore. Everyone adopted this 'Google it' mentality. And women, in my opinion- once women changed, the whole thing was shot. See, men are dumb, simple, violent, sex-driven creatures. Women truly hold the fabric of any functioning society together. They have wisdom. Women know the secrets of life- they're connected more intimately with creation because they are creators. Native American matriarchs for example- those tribes lasted for thousands of years out on the plains hunting buffalo- all because women ran the show. I think when our society lost that maternal- what can I call it- a guiding presence, when we lost that- then we lost our direction. So even before the blackout- our society had already been on this decline." Pausing, "Then we fell down a chimney!" Marshall laughs, satisfied with his assessment.

Mickey takes no offense to Marshall's insights. She gazes her inward eye back on her own mother. The only real lessons she had ever picked up in earnest were from her father: how to lock an interlayer grip on a sand wedge, how to aim long on an uphill put, how to turn your wrists over on a draw. Mickey

speculates, "I appreciate your perspective, Marshall. I guess it's all speculation at this point, anyways. When they cut the grid- I guess it didn't matter where we were heading, good or bad."

A curious incursion of his eyebrows, furrowed- Marshall glances up from his tea- "They?"

Innocent, Mickey responds halfhearted, mostly because of the sudden shift of disposition worn on the man's face- "The terrorists."

Marshall removes a grey wool cap, a guide cap with ear coverings, a woven piece of paracord across the brim, "Terrorists? I thought you didn't buy those government flyers?"

Mickey is frozen.

Marshall continues, "I'm going to fill you in on something. And before I do, let me make myself very clear- I was alive on September Eleventh, I watched those buildings burn on the television. I had a son get killed by a dirty bomb doing a patrol in Afghanistan. I hated those conspiracy theory punks who said it was all a fake. I cursed them all. But when the power went out, when everything fried- the whole infrastructure- that wasn't no terrorist attack. I knew an environmental scientist back home in Missouri. We both saw it- the sun spit out an electromagnetic flare that wiped out our chips and our transistors."

"The sun?"

"The sun." Marshall stands up, ambles a few paces, a stick, he pokes at the embers- he checks the contents of his pipe's bowl- "A massive flare hurled a beam of particles through space- once it reached us, it chewed up the electromagnetic poles on the earth. That's what happened. No lie."

"A flare."

"A flare." The old man chews on his own lip while exhaling smoke. "You don't believe everything you see on the TV, read in the newspapers, do you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because there's always an agenda."

Marshall tightens, "Right. An agenda. And who do you suppose controls the agenda now? Who pitched you the idea that terrorists knocked out our power?"

"I don't know. The government."

"The government we knew is long gone. The Senate, the House, the Supreme Court- none of it exists anymore. You know who runs the show? The billionaires. The heads of those big companies. They all banded together. And their agenda changed. See, instead of saying 'You need to go out and buy this doodad or gizmo,' well now it's 'You need to believe this story to stay alive.' The stakes are raised, see? Those billionaires control the resources, control security, control the story, control the message- and since they control the future, now they can rewrite the past."

Mickey is apprehensive. A gust blows through. She can't help herself, "I don't mean to be rude, but how could you know for certain? That it was a solar flare?"

"Aurora. It went on for days. You didn't see the aurora?"

Mickey struggles, "I don't- I can't remember. It rained- it rained after everything happened. I remember that. We even thought it might have been a power outage, from a storm."

A bard telling his story with relish, emphatic, "If you saw it, you'd remember. It was majestic. Green, blue- and like I said, my friend who was a scientist- he laid it out to me. See I might be nothing but an electrician and a grunt, but I paid attention in high school physics. I inherited a mind like a trap- thanks to my mother. And I remembered learning about the aurora, the magnetic storms in the northern hemisphere, in the Arctic circle. The only way the same phenomenon could bleed this far south was if a huge number of particles were present in the atmosphere. An incredible amount of energy. Cross my heart- there wasn't any terrorist attack. It was the sun."

"But why would- why not acknowledge what happened as a natural disaster, and go from there? Why terrorists? Why move people to the cities?"

Cold air into his mouth, warm air through his nostrils- scratching his sideburn, a gold Claddagh ring still on his finger- "Because men in power want only to stay in power. Simple as that. By creating an enemy, creating a war- they were able to do whatever they want. Ironically the threat of war is far easier to mobilize people around than a threat from nature. Tell a man a rainstorm is coming, he isn't going to ask you for help- maybe an umbrella. Tell him a battalion is on its way, he's going to listen to whatever you have to say if you can offer protection."

"How has nobody caught on?"

"Well- I guess that's the problem, isn't it? Funny thing is all anyone had to do was look up those first couple weeks after it happened. The proof was there. But nobody talked about that. I guess people had forgotten how to use their own five senses, to solve a problem with their brain. I guess, too, that they were too scared to do much thinking regardless."

Mickey is dumbfounded- she begins to understand- the official, the soldier- the trains, the cities- something terrible had been happening, this whole time. Five years. The world had turned more awful than she could have imagined. Mickey exhales, "That's crazy."

Marshall nods, then, "What's crazy is that we're a bunch of cavemen who ended up fiddling over Wi-Fi connections." He looks to Mickey for a smile, doesn't find it- then, somber, "In the grand scheme, it probably had to happen. Maybe it was the only thing that could have prevented us from destroying ourselves and everything else with nuclear warheads."

Mickey absorbs his revelation. An impulse, out of her mouth before she could examine it, before she could become self-conscious and retreat. "Maybe the Earth called out to the Sun?"

"That's about the prettiest thing I've heard in a long while, you know that?"

Mickey pivots, not sure where her previous comment came from- an unfamiliar voice- "I can't imagine what's going on now in those cities."

Marshall tilts his head, then shakes it. "It ain't pretty, I'll guarantee that." Another spark at his pipe, "Here's a story. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was on the road, in Des Moines, and there was a red light. Traffic had stopped. And a woman and a man, both wearing construction vests, you know the kind, with the neon yellow and orange? Reflective clothing. They were out there on the street corner communicating to each other, in sign language, and they begin to cross. I waited on them, obviously. I watched them- I was really- I don't know, I was struck. For whatever reason it struck me as being beautiful. But then suddenly one of them green-arrows hits on the light, a RIGHT TURN ONLY, and the fellow behind me starts laying on the horn." Mickey notices the tension in Marshall, his shoulders broaden, his face tightens- he is reliving the moment- frustration oozing, visceral- "Things like that- they started happening more and more. And I think about that- well, maybe it's all been for the better."

Mickey gulps, "I saw those things too. Ugly things."

Ugly things... ugly people... the kind of people and things that used to exist before the outage and subsequent hysteria... internet personalities full of bombast commandeering trends, those make-up glossy social media influencers... GI Joe eBay experts buying low and selling high... droves of modern men who loved their computer more than their wife, hordes of modern women who loved their credit cards more than their husbands... the modern family- tennis clubs, fast food, soccer practice, television episodes, plastic wrappers, data plans, coffee grinders- phony middle class feel-good nonsense... Moonlight Graham buys another blue hat... the popcorn needs more salt... characters from a distinctly American upper-middle class... characters who mercilessly took emotional hostages, who lacked any type of sober reflection, who lacked sympathy, who forgot about their neighbors down the road in their same cities and towns struggling to pay rent working sixty-hour weeks dying young and marrying young trapped underfoot to the whole system, who as island tourists on vacation while a landscaping crew trimmed row after row of hedges never once considered the third-world of human detritus hundreds of miles below the poverty line, languishing in slums... who gained the most benefit from advances in healthcare, technology, financial transactions and represented the most well accounted-for people in the lineage of

humanity, who had simultaneously devolved into the most neurotic, unbalanced, and insane... people and things... a middle-class Darwinian race of corpocapitalistic karoshi sexless finks with their family lined up smiling in holiday themed outfits pasted onto Christmas cards... simultaneously killers but also completely benign... recursive conversations about weather forecasts and box scores... a single one of them consuming more energy, requiring more resources than entire villages across the ocean... a *coincidentia oppositorum* made flesh, made real, kept real by contradictory forces that maintained a tension which signified reality itself despite this paradoxical unreality... people, things, tension... pride, greed, cupidity... godless, faithless, desultory... banal evil like *Al Rokker and the Smukker Jam Centenarians*.

A whirlwind of images, of faces and moments and ideas that no longer existed- relics, folklore.

Modern man, the man of the industrial era, the man of science, the rational man of logic and reason- a sorcerer in his own right- but sorcery to what end? Empty. Disconnected from the sacred. Apollo had left his sun chariot and bought himself a Tesla. The moon, the stars- the gods- no act was consecrated. The accomplishments of Western thought AKA rationalism AKA scientific deduction AKA the quest for truth AKA refined empiricism AKA skeptical lassitude, done in the name of progress- progress- what did we accomplish besides a lonely place at an empty table in a world incapable of producing saints or miracles of any kind? Elliot said "Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries bring us farther from God and nearer to the dust." Decadence. Emptiness. Hollow men- sophisticated but unappreciative, un-appreciating. Emotionless. Unflinchingly correct. Devolved linear: from being, to having, to appearing. Men who traded personhood for digital avatars, to deliver themselves from the awful world they had created, from the awful lives they were living- only to fill the emptiness by constructing new lives and lifetimes of laminated bleached perfection. Their ancestors built cyclopean stone monuments to Athena and Mohammad. They create phantoms ready to LOG OFF and delete. Where had the phantoms and the avatars gone? Where were the lonely people stuck inside of themselves with no retreat, no artifices to hide behind, the *CIGARvixxen45's* and *UltimatStaRwArsFAN77's*- what happened to the profiles and users and apps- where did they all go, where have they all gone- unmoored into the sea- did they make it, were they making it?

Brooding together, their minds bleeding, Mickey and Marshall.

Mankind of internet-search-engine-induced worries and warning labels like **PLASTIC MAY LEECH IN SUNLIGHT, OZONE ERODES AT ALTITUDE**... healthy people notating symptoms concerned about their impending deaths but living only to buy and buying only to escape and blind to the actual reality of death and the lessons death could offer concerning life and living and meaning... snapshots of themselves in mirrors unable to reflect instead consumed by a new mole, fretting over a wrinkle, a cough, stressed, telling people 'I'm stressed' and stressing them out more... plastic, plastics in our intestines in the cows we skin and debone file't'd in the fish in the summer squash long polymer chains in our eyeballs our coronary arteries, polyacrylics and vinyl and long-chains fueled by the Big Oil machine fueled by petrochemical plants funded by Uncle Sam... bits, pieces, dissolving carcinogenic with bad intentions like rare brain cancers... constant worry like an attack by infinity vultures... what about the drinking water? The manganese content, the arsenic levels? When was it last tested? Buy the kit. Buy a dozen, they're on sale! Buy the organic cotton! Buy the certified non-GMO portions! I don't care how much it costs! Change dry cleaners, this one isn't certified! Scan the UPC codes! Reschedule for a more convenient pick-up time! Mickey interjects, entangled in their converging thought-streams, "I don't miss any of it."

"Me neither." Marshall affirms loyalties with Mickey, who he has now concluded is a worthy friend, and a worthy audience, "Wasn't much substance to it, was there?"

Ill equipped as they may be- they were children once to a mother and father- considering her own terrapin loneliness now, her solitude only days before but might as well have been a lifetime ago- Mickey refocuses, truly delighted and grateful to be with Marshall. The comradeship suits her, rejuvenating. Their exchanging ideas, in silence "It's good to be here with you, Marshall. It's good to make a new connection." Marshall puffs, smiling.

It had been ugly.

It had been beautiful.

Simultaneously.

A flood of new images, a fresh current of faces and voices: children, happy children generating laughter... a young woman in a wheelchair asking her mother a volley of questions at humble dinner table over chicken dinner plates with *Why doesn't anybody feel bad when they kill a mosquito? Isn't that still killing?...* picnic sandwich first dates... an old, habit-gowned woman with a limp who smokes dessert cigars at night and runs a soup kitchen by day never asking what's in it for her... selflessness and joyful sufferers out there altering the course of history like Trappist monks at Vespers like diligent kindergarten teachers handing out crayons.

Marshall and Mickey can feel them nearby.

They reconsider their positions.

Consider this:

Tragedy. Printed in the newspaper. Told over dinner tables. Two different columns. Both twenty-nine years old, both sons and husbands, both leave behind one-year-old daughters. One man- a brain tumor. The other man- a narcotics overdose.

Who is more deserving of sympathy? Whose family deserves more compassion? Who earned the forgiveness of your judgement? Why is it presented as a binary?

'They're entirely different circumstances!'

Watch out for the judges of Patmos, the horse of Elijah. We all decide whatever we need to decide but nature scoffs at our 'rational' morality and our Ethics Seminars and our undergraduate research. The law is what you get, and we all get it.

But you don't know what you'll never know.

Ronnie Whyse was in seventh grade and didn't have any friends when his father died suddenly from a heart attack. He was adopted by a group of neighborhood guys, several years older, who drank and smoked pot but didn't care about how many baskets he missed during recess basketball games, who didn't ask about math quizzes, who turned him on to punk rock and granted him permission to be angry and pissed off and feel alive. The older boys didn't look at him 'that' way, the way other people looked at him, like Ronnie was broken, like he had the plague. Other people too scared to say anything real because it might be awkward- because they might be confronted with Ronnie's emotions. Those neighborhood guys gave Ronnie somewhere to be, someone to be with, a world that was hard and simple. A world that allowed him to vent anger, to express rage. At the same time, Mrs. Annosa, Ronnie's art teacher, could have volunteered to stay after school and let him use her paints, she could have bellowed certain creative talents he clearly displayed, but he was a lightning bolt, and she was scared of thunder. The other moms and dads, they instructed their kids to stay away. Ronnie eventually dropped out of high school and remained mostly stoned but he worked a job and he loved a woman and they made a baby together. Now he's dead and you don't think he's worth your sympathies? Because he wasn't a heart surgeon? Because he didn't own a Volkswagen? Because he didn't play the game? Because he was a junkie? Because Jeff Carter, the other guy, the brain tumor- because he did all the right things and made all the safe plays and fit all the stereotypes of what 'success' is supposed to look like? Because Jeff grew up near the country club and had a new pair shoes every Fall, had parents who drove him across the Tri-State so he could play club lacrosse? The kid who always had money for lunch, who all the teachers liked who all the girls loved who drove the new car at sixteen who won the athletic scholarship? The same kid who called his dad after being arrested on Spring Break for assault and rape and the judge threw out the case because his dad knew the right

lawyers and had enough money? Who do you choose? The guy who “didn’t deserve” for something tragic and awful to happen? Why choose at all?

In the end, we all get it.

In the end, we’re all each other has.

For all the world’s evil, there had been beauty.

For every dark night of the soul, there had been a dream.

Dreams of the dreaming. Dreams dead... life used to wake us up from our flowerbloom youthful dreams... old age, yearning to retreat to sleep like carapace goodnights... numinous... *I’m desperate to know your dreams...* Land of the Sleeping Rainbows... the moon must go to bed now, so it can grow big and shine bright tomorrow night... Pharoah’s first night in the pyramid... phantasmagoric flashes... five years, a world fallen into the underbelly of history. Merrily, merrily...

Strange companions in a pitiful dream.

Pitiful companions from a strange dream.

Pitiful dreams of strange companions.

Strange dreams with pitiful companions.

Strange companions from pitiful dreams.

Pitiful companions in a strange dream.

Pitiful dreams with strange companions.

Strange dreams of pitiful companions.

Strange dreams in pitiful companions.

Pitiful companions of a strange dream.

Pitiful dreams in strange companions.

Strange dreams from pitiful companions.

Strange companions of pitiful dreams.

Pitiful companions with a strange dream.

Pitiful dreams from strange companions.

Strange companions with a pitiful dream.

Marshall shifts back into not thinking.

Mickey follows him.

Silence.

After several minutes pass, Marshall offers, “I forget sometimes what a cynical old man I’ve turned into. I forget sometimes that I might have calcified more than I’d care to admit.”

Mickey forgives the man, “It’s all very- complicated.”

A coyote howls in the background.

Marshall says, “Don’t worry, they don’t give me any trouble. Sounds pretty though, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, they do.”

More silence.

The fire crackles.

A question nagging him, “Mickey- what’s your family name, if you don’t mind?”

“Gallagher.”

“Mickey Gallagher, you are the best thing that’s happened to me in a long while. A good long while. There’s a good head on your shoulders. Whoever taught you up must be proud.”

Mickey blushes. She feels like her father is with her. “I like to think he was.”

“In some way or shape, I got a hunch he still is. Life is a mysterious dance. Death might be even stranger.”

Mickey does not respond.

Marshall quietly reaches into his breast pocket. He clicks open an old utility knife. A stick from off the ground- whittling, shaving by shaving. It goes on like that for several minutes.

Mickey's sadness grows, doleful, her longing to see her father, to fade seven-irons and cut fairway woods- her grief lingers, then transmutes- angry- it's easy to be preachy around the campfire, easy to say what Marshall said and smile- she breathes, then, "I appreciate you saying that- but maybe I'm just alone. Maybe my father is dead, and he'll never be with me. And maybe we could just acknowledge that. I thought you were supposed to be the cynical old man? I'm sorry- I just, it's been- it hasn't really hit me until right now, for whatever reason. I'm- it hurts. And I don't want to sugarcoat it. I want to be honest with each other. I want to be real friends- because this might be the last friendship I make. I don't want to bullshit. My father is dead. He's gone. And it's okay."

"I apologize, Mickey. I only- I can only speak for myself. From my experience. Q.E.D. And from what I've seen, heard, felt- yes, everything dies. But it is recycled in some way or another. Death brings life, life brings death. Ain't nothing's gone forever. That's the way I see it."

Abrupt, snapping- Mickey remonstrates, "That's a very naïve way to view things."

"How so?"

"Because you're not grieving over anybody."

Marshall tightens up, privately counts to five, then relaxes before explaining himself crystalline in a real low voice, so low the vibrations barely carry the wind between his mouth and Mickey's ears. "My wife- Alethea- she was on hemodialysis when the blackout hit. For two weeks we drove around creation looking for a machine that worked- hospitals, clinics- we obviously weren't going to find one, but we had to try. It was a death sentence. Little by slow she swelled up. And she suffered all those two weeks, she suffered something- it, to this day I- she held onto her rosary, and we kept searching. Bravest thing you could imagine, facing hell like that. She never complained a minute. She never said the word 'unfair.' She never talked about what she did or didn't deserve."

Marshall stops, catches his breath, clears his throat, "But finally, we had to come to terms. There was nothing that could be done. So she told me to take her home. And when we got back, she went to our church, Our Lady of Refuge- she was so swollen, I had to have her hold my shoulders so I could set her down on the kneeler in front of the candles- I set her down, saw the agony in her face. But she told me to kneel. So I knelt with her and prayed, and she leaned next to me and told me it was time. We cried there for a while. The red candle shades glowing. I- I go back there all the time. All the time, to that moment. It's like a piece of me is still there, living in it, forever. And I- well, we went back to the house, kissed each other, had one last drink together, read our marriage vows, and said our goodbyes. She told me not to worry- she had made it right with God. I knew already before she asked- I didn't even let her ask. I pulled my gun out, she covered her eyes- I- kissed her- then, I put a single bullet in her head. The worst thing I'd ever been asked to do, but I had to do it. She needed me to do that for her, so she didn't have to suffer no more. She had done her time. Paid it."

"After I said goodbye to my darling- you know what I did?" He motions, an index finger, his thumb- "I put that gun right up next to my temple. Square to my head. It was hotter than hell- the end scarred me. And I- I waited there with it a whole night. Sitting. I waited for my finger to pull. I wanted it to- but you know what? I couldn't pull the trigger a second time. My finger wouldn't budge. She never mentioned it- she never said 'Don't follow me.' I think part of her thought I would. And part of her wanted me to. It's- like you said, it's complicated." Tears welling up in ducts, in the corners of their eyes, collecting and beading like a foggy shower door, molecule by molecule, human hurt by human love by suffering by ecstasy, building then coalescing then streaming in tandem down both of their cheeks, Marshall and Mickey. "And like you also said, us being here is a connection. A connection is a beautiful thing."

Mickey hovers speechless. Her rational mind is frozen- an awkward struggle, a search- "Marshall, I'm so sorry."

Pinching his tongue between his teeth, head down, a puff of air- "My darling had to go. I had to stay. And I said what I said because I believe it. She's still with me. And your father, he's with you."

Mickey's vision is foggy and unclear, she wipes at her eyelids- "I really hope so."

Marshall pats his cheek with a bandana. "Hope is all you really need."

-O-

Mickey woke to the smell of woodsmoke, and her own body odor. She needs a shower. She unzips the sleeping bag. She unzips the tent. Marshall offers a quick nod from across the fire- he is boiling some water to add to oatmeal. Breakfast. After an acknowledgement of 'good morning' between them, a question- curious, noticing her surroundings in the daylight at Marshall's camp- "So what's the story behind these piles of stones?" She points to a sequence of cairns, their odd arrangements and heights that seem to mark a perimeter, "Here, all around the campsite?"

"Well, they're- ", Marshall pauses. He chuckles. "It's funny to explain, to hear myself explain this- funny because I'm an old man exiled out here building up miniature pyramids and sacred geometry, and I never thought I would have to explain them to anybody. But here I am. About to reveal what a Looney Toon I really am."

"How do you mean?"

"Let's just say this is my way of acknowledging the natural world. Reorienting, if you will. That- well, that might be all you want to hear about it."

Mickey smiles, "Lay it on me."

"Alright then-" pointing, "each of those stones is there for a purpose. I set them along different astronomical paths, to mark certain events. That there is a solstice marker. Those ones out there mark the full moon by position at about midnight, month by month. This one here is Venus. See- I can follow the seasons, follow the year- without ever having to look down at a watch. I just look up at the sky, then consult my markers."

Mickey is impressed. "How did you figure this all out?"

"Looking up, I suppose." Marshall grins at her, and Mickey smiles back. "I had a science teacher turn me on to the sky- to stars. Disaster. Astronomy. Asterisk. The Latin- *aster*. Math came easy, but Latin was my first love. Anyways, I got hooked by the eclipse- I saw my first and only total solar eclipse in 1970- I convinced my mother and she drove us down to the Florida panhandle- March 7th 1970. What a lady, to do that for me. And I'm grateful she did, because that was a sight to behold. I grew up, I learned more- learned about meteorites, super novae- I loved electricity because of stars, because of atoms and energy. They shaped my life. I suppose this is my- it's my way of doing things a little bit different. Reorienting. We're a part of this huge network- each one of us, our planet- we're nodes in an incredible network- one that puts to shame any wiring schematic I ever worked on. And we forget all about it. Can you imagine? The equinox, the solstice, the lunar cycles, the wanderings of Venus and Mars, the constellations. People forget, but we're still- it's still right up there. We're still part of it."

Mickey acknowledges his dedication, his enthusiasm, but is not quite sure what to make of the piles of rocks. "This must have taken a while."

"Well, I always wanted to do this in my own backyard, but I never had the time. So I guess- I got what I wanted in a way."

A moment passed, a silence- bird songs, chirping in the canopy, a warm breeze sweeps in. The kettle boils. A squirrel bounds between oak branches. Mickey stretches her arms to the sky, then to her toes.

Marshall asks, "Sleep alright last night?"

Mickey doesn't hesitate, "Out like a light. Thank you again for putting me up."

"Think nothing of it. Nothing at all."

Mickey glances away from Marshall when he looks over to her. She's hiding something. As a boy he was taught not to poke his nose in other folks' business- but there weren't any folks, there wasn't a neighborhood, there was no social hierarchy- there was Mickey Gallagher. A girl. A confused girl, a Haligonian girl blown across town after the explosion. A windblown young stranger. A survivor. A friend.

Marshall dips into his tent. Out after a rustle with a plastic bag under his right arm, tucked into his side. "I've been saving this for a special occasion. Coffee. It's instant coffee- but it's coffee. We'll have us some coffee this morning."

Mickey was lost in her thoughts, the voice...

"You like coffee?"

Mickey clears her throat, "Yeah. Oh yeah- sure. That sounds great."

She reaches into her pants- a compressed pack of cigarettes, the sharp edges rounded off and faded. She pinches out a single smoke. Then, realizing she had company, "You want one?"

"No, thank you. Quit years ago."

"Good for you. It's tough."

"It was." He turns away, then back. "Say, how many you got left?"

"Last two here. Have a bag of leaf and some papers in my bag back at camp."

Marshall unwraps the plastic bag, unfastens a series of rubber bands- a canister, a lid- "Last two, huh?"

Mickey walks over to Marshall and hands one to the man. Pandering, "It's no fun smoking alone. I won't tell anybody."

"That's a promise?"

"It is."

Marshall ambles over to the fire, plucks a small piece of kindling from off the wood pile, lights Mickey's and then his own. "Tastes damn good. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Marshall exhales, pleased by the volume in his cloud of smoke, "You know- I won't tell anybody either."

Mickey gulps- a tiny pit in her throat, descending- "Tell anybody about what?"

"What you were doing out by that cliff. I can see it in how you gaze off. I'm sorry- I, I shouldn't meddle where I ought not to- but- since we're friends now- like you said last night, no bullshit. So I want you to know that you can tell me. No need to be polite, to hide our fears- seeing as we're the only two people around here- let's be exactly who we are to each other, and let's accept exactly who the other is. You were on to something. It's only proper. So now I'm asking you to take your own advice."

Mickey rips into a long drag. "It's only proper. But there's nothing else to tell. I was tired, exhausted, starving. I passed out."

Marshall nods.

Silence.

Birdsong.

The kettle hissing.

Mickey reaches for the cup Marshall offers, full of hot water. "Thanks."

"One scoop or two?"

"Two."

"Two it is. Here you are."

Marshall dollops a second spoonful into his own. He glances down at his hand- a cigarette nearly finished, extinguished- practically disappeared. He could already feel the craving. It had gone too quick. He sanctifies the final hit. Tastes it. Holds it. Savors it, the smoke and the coffee alternating between his cheeks. He flips the burnt filter into the smoldering fire pit, "Thanks for that. That was- well, it was damn fine."

"You're welcome. Thanks for- for everything."

He clinks his mug to hers.

"You ought to eat. I'll have the porridge finished soon- are you hungry?"

"Not really." The voice... Mickey begins to swim further and further from Marshall, and he can tell.

Attempting to anchor her, for a moment, abruptly- "I was just thinking about our conversation last night. I enjoyed back and forthin' with you. I really did. I got to thinking more- when the flare hit- it was an

opportunity. Like you eloquently put it- the sun was giving us a chance. We had a golden opportunity- and we let it slip by. We really- we could have taken so much back. But we didn't."

Mickey reemerges at the surface, for a moment, "How do you mean?"

"We could have taken a step back- society had become this rat race. Folks had become defragmented, mentally. We could have- and I understand how this might come off, this good ol' days talk- but I grew up with working-class, blue-collar people, and even though we didn't have much money, every mechanic I knew, the fella who owned the gas station, the barbershop attendant, when I was with them I heard conversations about politics, about social reform, about art- their minds were going, boy. My father read Shakespeare. My mother listened to Vivaldi. We didn't have money, but we had our minds. I watched the world flood itself with mounds of gadgets, endless distractions, - I stopped hearing those conversations about art, politics. I watched folks become nothing more than the products they bought. There wasn't anything else going on. And the solar flare- we could have let go of some of that."

Mickey nods. She drops her cigarette out on the ground near her foot. Steps on it. A habit. She bends down, and tosses the butt into the fire. "We could have learned from our mistakes."

Marshall is energized, "Exactly. Exactly."

Mickey tastes the faux coffee, the ersatz grounds- it rendered a delightful, acerbic bite. A realization, a proposal for Marshall, "Who's to say we still can't?"

"Beg your pardon?"

"I mean- why can't we learn from our mistakes? Technically, neither of us have been to the cities. We don't know for sure what's going on. Maybe things are different."

Smug, but not with the intent of belittling her- a puff from his nostrils, then composed, assured, "I don't need to go to the cities. I know exactly what's happening. Nothing has changed. In fact, it's gotten worse. I guarantee it."

"What makes you so sure about that?"

"Don't mistake me. My wife and I- we might have lost children, my family name might be gone with me- but that doesn't make me a misanthrope. It doesn't mean I don't believe in the story of humanity. And that's what pains me to no end- I hope I'm wrong. But I know how people behave in this kind of a situation. They're scared. They're vicious. They'll trade anything for a sense of security."

Mickey doesn't respond.

She figures he's right.

But she doesn't want to tell him so.

Marshall takes a moment to fix a bowl of porridge and forces it into Mickey's hands. "Maybe the best thing we can do is try to understand what connected us- and why."

Mickey lets her guard down. "Couldn't it just be a coincidence?"

Marshall unbuttons one of his jackets. "No such thing. Not in my line of work, at least, what I can speak to. Q.E.D." Marshall walks over to his shelter, hangs the canvas jacket on a hook. "To be honest with you, I think you have a future well outside of this park. You keep touching on the idea of *hope*. I want to understand what I'm supposed to do to help you get to where you're going. I might die out here- but I get this feeling- you're going somewhere. It might be the cigarette. It might- I doubt it. It's something else- I feel it in my bones."

Mickey can't help but dip the wooden spoon into the bowl and empty a full helping of porridge into her mouth. One spoonful, then another. It felt good, the warmth in her belly. She takes a sip of coffee, then, "I haven't told you something. Alright? I don't know if you're going to be inclined to believe it, because really I'm not sure what I believe of it."

Marshall perks up. He's dragged her back to shore. "The cliff?"

"The cliff."

"I'm inclined to try and believe anything you tell me, Mickey. Fire away."

Mickey sets down the bowl and saunters over to one of Marshall's rock piles- she removes the top stone, rubs it against her palm, her fingers, "Before the grid went down, a kid who I grew up with ran away from home. He was a friend- a good friend, I guess. His name was Paul. Nobody knew where he went. But one day out of nowhere, Paul came back. He found me and he told me while he was gone, in India, he had met a holy man. He told me the holy man called him 'John the Baptist' because apparently Paul had met the next messiah, or deliverer, or whatever- this holy man explained to Paul that he was a very fortunate person because he had met the next incarnation of Christ." A cough into a closed fist, "So- obviously, this is completely bonkers, right? It was ridiculous. The whole thing was nuts. Absurd. But if that wasn't crazy enough- because it didn't end there- Paul told me- he told me that I was the person the holy man was talking about. So, at that point," Mickey sighs, "I mean, what would you do? I thought Paul was on drugs. Back from India? Telling me I'm Jesus? It was- it was scary, honestly. I was scared. And I told Paul to get lost. I didn't talk to him, I didn't want to see him. I wiped the whole thing from my memory. It was irrational- a drug addled fantasy. I denied it- and I've never told anybody else, except for you, right now." Marshall is calm. "Alright."

"Alright. Alright- well, in case you didn't guess- there's more. Because when somebody tells you that a crazy person came back from vacation to reveal to them that they are Jesus- of course there's more." Mickey chuckles. "So don't worry. I have more. I can't even- I can't believe I'm saying this out loud. The other night, when you found me- when I first made it to the lake after my walk- I heard a voice. A voice called out to me- it told me- that I was chosen. I heard a voice telling me," Mickey is unable to keep eye contact with Marshall, "I can't explain it. And after I heard the voice, I saw a vision- I can't explain it. It was, I- I passed out, and the next thing I knew I was with you. So. Here we are. I am now as crazy as my friend Paul. I have ostensibly heard the voice of God- and not a voice in my head, a literal voice from off in the distance, calling out to me- telling me I have been chosen, and why am I afraid, and," Mickey's tone sharpening, her syllables quickening, "to bring peace to the world and deliver the goods and who the fuck knows what else because now I'm a fucking lunatic who hears voices and sees apocalyptic visions. And I'm actually confessing this to another person. To you! Who I now will never be able to look at again, because the level of embarrassment and shame right now is literally unbearable and making me itch."

Mickey shakes her head, then brings her hands to cover her face.

The old man glances into his tin mug.

A flashback- unable to pull the trigger. His wife beside him, her lifeless body. He's sitting on the edge of a bed. Why? Why couldn't he pull the trigger? If there wasn't a higher power, a force, working to protect him that night- a power that denied him a logical suicide- why hadn't he followed his wife? Why couldn't he finish the job? What prevented him? What force? What kept him alive? Living- he is alive. He is here. He listened. He understands. "You a praying person, Mickey Gallagher?"

"As in somebody who prays?"

"Suppose you could define it like that."

"No."

"Neither am I. But maybe we oughtta be."

"Why?"

"Because last full moon, when the glow came up right above that pile of stones there and through the clearing, after I went to sleep- I've seen you before. I dreamt about you. I dreamt about you that night. My wife introduced me to you. And she said 'Marshall, you take care of her. She's special.' We were all sitting around my campfire. And I never remember my dreams. Never. But that dream- it was real. It happened. And then you came- I couldn't put my finger on it- but now- I recognize you."

-O-

"It's too long a walk to Chicago. St. Louis will have to do- they told you they had transport there, that they would get you on a train. So that's where we have to go. We'll pack up rations. I'll drag the sled."

“Not a chance, Marshall. That’s practically the heart of darkness. We have no idea what we’re going to find.”

“The heart of darkness is exactly where the candle needs to be lit.”

“No way.”

“Then what’s your plan Mickey Gallagher? What good are we doing from our campfire here? You need to get to where the problem is.”

“And then what?”

“How should I know? But you’ve made it this far, haven’t you? Don’t matter what’s after that. Focus on the next thing to do.”

Marshall’s chin drops, his eyes reflect a great distance. Mickey can tell he’s gone within himself, with somebody else, somewhere else- his wife- a warmth appears, washes over him. “She would have gotten a kick out of me saying that to you right there. She really would have.”

Mickey allows him a moment before a question, “How far do you put us from St. Louis?”

“Two hundred and thirty miles. Ten days walk, nine hours a day. We’ll follow I-64 right into it. Due West. We’ll play it right back into their hands- attacked by terrorists, our farm overrun- running for cover- please help. You understand? That’ll get us to Chicago- pretty please with sugar on top- thank you kindly. It’ll work. I know it will. I’ll play your old man. You play my daughter. Ten days.”

“Terrorists?”

“Precisely. We’ll let whatever soldiers we run into play their role. They’ll be so happy to play it, they’ll forget the whole game is make-believe.”

“Why are you doing this, Marshall?”

He paused. His pipe. His leather pouch. Cedar, pine- skunk- “When I was a youngster, my mother caught me sleeping in one morning when I should have been out doing my chores. She came into my bedroom, ripped off the sheets, and started hollering like something terrible at me. She said you got to live every day like it’s your last, like your pants are on fire. When you’re dead, you’re dead a long time, and you regret every one of those mornings you slept in and let the world go by. She told me to get to. And I never slept in like that again, not another day of my life.” He claps both of his palms together, a compressed snap- “That’s why I’m doing it. I’ve been sleeping in lately. It’s time to get.”

-O-

Marshall’s hands are bound together behind his back. There is a cut above his left eye. Blood leaks across his field of vision.

A woman sets him on his knees. Derisive, “What am I doing here? Listen old man, this is my land! This is my ancestors land, thousands of years before you showed up.”

Mickey tries to make sense of the situation. “He didn’t mean it like that. He just- didn’t the **AGTC** force you out?”

“No, they didn’t force us out- they killed us off! We were their terrorists! They shot my brothers, my mother! ‘Cross the whole area they brought their guns and tanks. They left burning houses, bodies. But we stayed! So no, no they didn’t force us off. And neither will you!”

Marshall grunts, “We’re not forcing...”

“Shut up old man!” A kick into his ribs.

Mickey tries again, “Why didn’t they put you onto the trains, into the city?”

The woman laughs a haunted laugh, the laugh of terrible irony, of suffering for generations after generations never to find justice, never to find an answer. “Because we ain’t white! There’s never been no ticket for us! Sure, our neighbors got shuttled out. Sure did! Military told us to wait our turn. And once our turn came, after everyone had left, well- then they opened fire! Called us UNDOX. Called us the enemy. Well, they were right! We are the enemy. Now we’re your enemy!”

Mickey pleads, “We have no trouble with you.”

"Don't look that way, does it? You listenin' to her?" Nodding to her partner. "Get a load of this whitegirl!" She backhands Mickey across her cheek. "You got trouble with us, bitch. You got plenty of trouble. See, we hid out. We found the other survivors. We survivors, bitch! We buried our families. You got nothin' but trouble with us!"

Marshall exasperates, "Jesus Christ."

"Ain't no Jesus Christ out here, old man. No more white man lies for us."

Mickey, a blindfold across her face- darkness- her face numb, "We have no intention to harm you. We're passing through. Please let us go."

"Suppose we do? What happens when they catch you, put you against the wall? You tellin' me you won't give us up to save yourself? I ain't makin' that bet. You know too much. The only way we stay safe is if your mouth stays shut. Only one way to do it."

Mickey's sleeve is tugged up- it reveals the dark blue swirls, the tattoo on her wrist- the woman's partner catches sight of the design on Mickey's skin. "Ohpa! Look!"

"What?"

"Look here."

Her partner, burly, braided hair, he directs the tip of his tactical knife's blade at Mickey's inked feather. The steel presses against Mickey's skin. Mickey imagines bleeding out through her wrists.

Ohpa grabs Mickey's arm- the gun still out, the safety OFF. She removes the blindfold. Her eyes contact Mickey, her face changes. Mickey is surprised. The woman demands, brusque, "What does this tattoo mean to you? Why you put this on your arm?"

Mickey glances down. Her wrist. The feather. The dream catcher. The beads. "I did it- when I turned eighteen I decided to- it was for protection. My mother loved red tail hawks- it rubbed off on me. I could never go to church like she did but- I figured this was my symbol, my connection to something bigger."

"Where is your mother now?"

"Dead."

The woman blinks, then looks out above Mickey. A stud in one ear, another in her eyebrow. A black skull cap. Sleek, black hair flowing down each of her shoulders. She refocuses on the bound captive in front of her, "Where are you going?"

"To the cities. To where the **AGTC** is."

"Why?"

Mickey, "To change people's minds. To heal the wounds."

Ohpa, exasperated, "Wounds? What wounds could you possibly have?"

"I also lost everyone. This isn't my father- he's my friend. My only friend in the entire world. My mother and father are dead, my brother is gone- they took my home, they took my land- they took everything from me, too."

"So you know our pain?"

"I know my pain. I'm not saying it's yours, as bad as yours. I'm only saying I know what's mine."

The gun's safety clicks ON. The woman slowly rolls back her coat sleeve. A tattoo. Her left wrist. A feather. A dreamcatcher. She points to it, then to Mickey. "We each have our pain. You go to the city, and leave my people alone. Don't me bring me anymore pain. I won't bring any to you."

Mickey finalizes their agreement. "Our paths will never cross again."

Ohpa lets her sleeve down. She wears her mother's eyes, eyes like the shoreline, green and cerulean and sandy brown, dappled- she feels her mother's presence, for the first time in a long time. Inside of her. Seeing the world through her. Acting, now, with her. "We'll take you to the where the military zone begins. You'll have to go from there." Ohpa addresses her partner. "Untie the man. We walk with them there."

"Ohpa- you sure about this?" The man sets free his grip on Marshall.

"It's a sign. We have to let them go. We bring them on."

Her partner, shocked, "You for sure?"

Untying Mickey, "As long as we hold up our end, they'll hold up theirs. I'm for sure."

Mickey extends her hand. "Thank you for helping us."

Ohpa's hand remains fixed to the gun. There is no handshake. "This ain't no help from me, or him. This is help *for* us. We don't want any more of your kind around here. I hope you are the last one we ever have to see."

-O-

A drawl and twang Mickey had been accustomed to her entire life, Marshall shouts, his voice altered- a falsetto, hillbilly cry- running from the cover of the tree line he screams, "Help! We saw them! We saw them back in Pike County! Help! Help!"

The brown and green camouflaged soldier points his weapon on Marshall, sighted, locked in. A gruff voice responds, "Who are you?"

"Help! We're so glad to see you! We need help! We just made it!"

"Stand down! Stop running and put your hands on your head!"

Marshall acquiesces and slowly moves his hands to his head, lowering himself down on his knees. His facial expression pleads with the soldier, "My daughter's back in the brush. We came together. We mean no harm."

A second and third troop, after receiving a hand signal from their group leader, deploy towards Mickey and corral her next to Marshall. They are both face down in the gravel. Three soldiers stand above them. One digs a boot in Marshall's upper back.

"Are you armed?"

Even under duress, his accent remains thick- "Yes, sir- a shotgun in the pack. Handgun as well. My daughter there she's got another shotgun. No bullets in the chambers, safety on. We mean no harm to you."

The soldier applies more pressure onto Marshall, "Where are you coming from?"

"East. Been on a trail for a couple weeks now trying to find St. Louis. Trying to get to safety. You see this gash above my head?"

"You didn't run into any battalions on the road?"

"No sir. We got jumped a few days back by a gang of terrorists. That's how I got this shiner. You're the first help we seen in a long while, thank God."

The soldier barks, "Why doesn't she talk?"

Mickey lays silent on the ground. Quiet. Playing the part- wounded, crocodile tears down her cheeks, overwhelmed.

Marshall responds, "Hasn't said more than a few words since seeing her cousin and auntie die. Would you? Watching those sick bastards burn a family alive in their house? Hell no. She's in shock I reckon. Damn bad shock."

-O-

After an hour sitting outside a vault-style steel door with rusted hinges thicker than broomsticks- several dents marring the finish- the handle ratchets clockwise. A short, stout man- his boots dug in firm against a waxed navy-blue tile floor- a chemical grade gas mask covering his entire face- camouflaged fatigues, terse- "The captain will speak to you now."

Marshall rises up at the same time while motioning Mickey to remain seated. "Alright for my daughter to stay out here?"

The soldier nods.

Marshall adjusts the collar on his coat and follows the soldier past the open slab. He is directed down a brief hallway towards an interior office- the officer, clearly a subordinate to whoever Marshall was scheduled to meet, knocks twice at another door, and a voice on the other side acknowledges. Before Marshall walks in, he notices the stars and stripes and **GATC** patch. He squints. *Government Alliance for the Thriving of its Citizens.*

The door shuts behind him.

On cue, Marshall gulps then smiles, "Mornin', sir. Daniel Gallagher. Pleasure to make y'r acquaintance."

"Take a seat, Mr. Gallagher."

Unmasked, a face like a Roman patrician- firm jawline, clean shaven, piercing steel-grey eyes opaque and resembling gunmetal, short black hair parted to the side, thin lips, aquiline nose- rakish- curious, but cautious- an introduction is offered, demure and to the point, "I am Captain Reynolds. I am the Civilian Relations and Naturalization leader at this base. I understand you were picked up earlier this morning outside the perimeter near an access checkpoint. According to the report you were armed with two shotguns, a handgun, and several tactical field knives. You surrendered yourself immediately to the first soldier on duty you encountered. Your daughter had, for the most part, necessary citizenship and proof of identity documents on her person, but you did not. You claimed to be on the run from a terrorist faction who had set fire to your home, and you seek asylum at the base, and possibly transport to Freedom City Six in order for you to reconnect with other family members."

"That's affirmative, sir."

Questions emanated from the mouth of Captain Reynolds, who during the interview removed his black leather gloves and admired the finish of his brass buttons several times. He diligently recorded notes onto an official form. Marshall dodged and lied wherever necessary. Their conversation picks up here, as Marshall's tone changes in a manner intended to incite empathy from the official, "Sir, she needs to get on the train and up to the city. She needs a chance. Ain't no life for her here. I'm a man past his prime- she's young. She needs a life. You get her up to the big city. Please. She's all I got."

"No civilian boards without an Interzone **GATC** pass."

"Well then how do we get her one?"

"You don't."

"Well sir- come on now- my boy served in Afghanistan. I was damn fire chief of our town. We're of the same damn blood, alright? Me and you, and my dead son. Patriots."

Captain Reynolds did not look up from the form. "My condolences."

"We take care of our own, don't we? I sent money every month to the Wounded Veterans. I never asked for a damn thing, even after what he sacrificed. But I'll tell you what, those boys in his company, they checked in on me. They were good men, called me up. They reminded me- they said, 'We still take care of our own.' Semper Fi. Now, what does it take to get my girl a pass?"

Matter of fact, Captain Reynolds replies, "I don't issue the passes. I'm not in a position to put either of you on a train."

Marshall checks over his shoulder, "I'm liable to get on my hands and knees here. Tell me what I can do. There has to be a way."

A frustrated sigh, then, "I don't think you understand me- it's not a question of there being a way or not. There is protocol."

"A couple years ago y'all were non-stop about sending folks to the city, and now you won't? What gives?"

Aroused, the captain's eyebrows drop and pinch together, "I thought you said that no personnel ever came to your home?"

"None came back- I said they didn't come back. Now they came once. A couple fellas, two or three- but they didn't come back."

"What is your address?"

"Tagge's Hill Road, number seven oh-six-six-two. Pike county. You ain't gonna find it on y'all's map, that's for damn sure."

"Hard to find a place that doesn't exist."

"Calling me a fraud?" Marshall puffs his chest. A country boy, raised on the county code- you call a man a liar, best be ready to brawl.

The captain rubs his chin, clean shaven, "Well, It's very curious, the whole situation with you and your daughter. Don't take it personally. I don't believe anyone, especially civilians, until after I verify exactly what they tell me." The officer deliberately opens a pouch on his vest, a small plastic tube- he inhales casually, then inserts the object back into the pouch.

Marshall changes the subject, "What you smokin' there?"

The captain exhales a thin electronic fog from his nostrils. "**GATC** Economic Commission issued cartridges. That's all anybody smokes. Vapor."

Marshall scoffs at the effluvium, "Hell, I bet you used to be a Marlboro man!"

"Reds."

"There you go. Well, what if I get you a pack of Marlboro Reds, and you get my little girl here a ride up on the train, then I'll piss off or do whatever paperwork you need or let y'all put a bullet in my head for all I care, just to get a square deal for my kid." A nervous chuckle.

"Nobody has seen, let alone smoked, a Marlboro Red in years."

"Well today's your lucky day."

"Is it?"

"Is that my pack, behind your desk there?"

"It is."

"You mind?" The captain nods. Marshall reaches into his backpack. He rips off several layers of duct tape, some vinyl material. "I had 'em hidden. Bagged it up, sealed it. The last one I had stayed pretty damn fresh. I have one left. A whole carton. Marlboro Reds. It's yours."

The officer is enamored the cardboard rectangle- his pupils dilate, struck by the brightness, the fierce red labelling, the black letters printed out in classic script. "You understand that any falsification of goods warrants a military tribunal? You could be put to death for this."

"Nothing phony about it. I bought it before the- before the terrorists hit- savin' it all this time. Kept 'em in good shape. What's the crime to that?"

"You can't honestly believe I'll trade an official **GATC** license in exchange for-"

Bold, outright, Marshall flips open one end, tosses a pack to Captain Reynolds and beckons the superior, "Try one."

An exchange of glares, neither man breaks eye contact. Unwrapping the plastic, the glued ribbon barely offset, only enough for a deft hand to liberate- it had been so long- the lid of the pack, unhinged, the gold foil insert, crumpled, dropped into a wastebin- tapping the end of the container firmly on his palm- pulling out a single cigarette. The captain sets it between his lips.

"You mind?" Marshall points down to his pocket. He unearths a Zippo. It clicks- inhaling- holding.

After the exhale, Captain Reynolds pushes himself away from his desk. He stands, walks behind Marshall. He takes another drag. Then he comes back in front of Marshall, seats himself on his desk, and leans slightly, almost relaxing. "A man of his word."

"There you go! I told you, sir. Fresh. Real fresh."

A thoughtful moment, "You understand that I am unable to approve your transport to Freedom City Six. Without any papers, it will not be possible. We'll have to register you in the municipality, confirm your identity. It can take some time to procure the necessary documents. Technically, you are an enemy of the State as an undocumented."

"Damn fire swallowed up everything. Shelly's got her papers though. Long as she's okay to go, then the good Lord will do with me what He deems fit."

"It's a highly unusual story."

Marshall smiles. "Damn fine cigarette, ain't it?"

Captain Reynolds straightens out, shoulders back, "Your weapons will become property of the State. She can keep her clothes and approved supplies. You will not be allowed to accompany her under any circumstances whatsoever. There is a train leaving at the end of this week. You can remain in the

bunkhouse, I will see to it you have your own area. We'll speak again on the matter of your identification, and my team will continue to work on verifying your story."

"Thank you kindly, sir. Means a great deal. Little girl is all we got."

The captain taps a modicum of ash onto the floor of his office. "Good day, Mr. Gallagher."

-O-

"Where will you go?"

Marshall replies, "I came out of nowhere kid, and I'll go right back. Don't fret on my account- I'll manage fine. Now make haste! Your concern is with that train. Keep looking ahead. One step at a time. Don't forget that."

"I can't leave you behind like this, Marshall."

"It's already done. I got you to this point. You keep going. You have to. You're the answer."

"The answer?"

Marshall pulls her tight, and into her ear, "To the Earth's prayer. It wasn't the sun who delivered a solution. It wasn't the flare. Apollo hurled his spear, but it didn't solve anything. The Earth- she had it in her all along. It's you."

Mickey, her arms and torso hovering over the barrier, she grasps Marshall's neck with both of her arms. She buries her chin into his neck. They remain embraced, together. He sets his palm soft against the back of her head. He creates a space, to see her- to take one last look, then he brings his lips to her cheek, the same spot where Herb Gallagher must have kissed his baby, his darling girl, his blossoming young woman, a million times or more- a familiar place. A familiar feeling, one Mickey hadn't realized how much she desperately missed until it was over.

"I can't thank you enough Marshall, I-"

Mickey's head once again buries into his clavicle. He responds with a squeeze- he replies, "Only way I know how darling. Raised by a good woman." Both his hands on her shoulders, facing her, moving her further away. Tears in his red eyes. "Now get!"

The friends are pulled apart, abrupt. A train to the city. An old man's footsteps towards a refugee camp- to be detained, catalogued, likely killed or cast into hard labor. Tears. A smile. Mickey would never find out.

Marshall would never forget.

INTERLUDE

or

**Dream Caught- Detritus of an exhausted culture woven
trptych in a purgative of transcontinental fury**



Eyes closed (worldly, hand-me-down once a mother's) awful with cellophane. Crusted shut by unrelenting neon by googleplex pixilation by storyboard executive fantasies pestiferous. Blank, absent. A belly riddled with microwavable junkfood corkjugged n'er vermiform to the point where peristalsis is halted constipated by grill'd stuff'd television (17 hundred seventy 6 channels instantaneous). Crying. Fingers clenched in Alamo-esque denial frozen doomsday in the zero hour of final apocalyptos presaged oracular in cave tunnels to converge thanks to (tut tut) epochs of evolutionary linear progression (axial, x & y) and culminate magnum opus- or maybe it's only a single Faustian cycle (excused in early 20th century German, *gesundheit*)- but irrespective the endpoint is the beginning- *WELCOME ABOARD!* Slimy, purple- excuse this belch. Boy or girl? Weight? Length? Have a looksie! Ushered into a world of dispossession possessed by centurion's servants (*mano de Dios*), at first and at once guided divinely in Greek apothotic procession with oaths sworn lines signed blood drawn- accounted for. A social security number. A certificate. First glimpse, a sneak preview: (poor mustard seed) you have been sown into this planar wasteland most Postmodern, relativistic, nihilistic, materialistic, rationalistic, egotistic fasciitis flat and turgid with commodity fetishism. Layered in spectacular distraction above sedimentary rings of Columbian Exhibitionism intermingled in Scientific Reductionism fossil fuel'd by Patriotic Conservativism and Neo Liberalism who's right or left who cares when love and culture and meaning have been converted to capital! *Das dasein!* Storks whimper, incessant- who could console them? Never mind that! *TAKE A SEAT-* destroy another ecosystem to build another university to study ecology because nature can only be accessed via bookpages via destroyed rainforests via image. Imagine that? This is where you landed oh fleshy progeny cycling Shiva circuitous: *YOU HAVE ARRIVED @* late-stage end-game corpopitalism. Halleluliah! Animal to bone, bone to fire, fire to smoke, smoke to spirit, spirit to marketplace- off to see the wizard! Inseminations unprotested- once upon a time- but today an eschaton looms. Encoded and predestined by a defective viral strain of techno logos which after transcription post-translation ablated art and skillfulness and truth, left us here and now to treasure value in denouement comic tabloids like Ginsberg on his harpsichord, like O'Keefe with her paintbrushes- beautiful gestures in the face of futility, salt on the fields- but no more, nothing remains with spirit exhausted- only artifice- artifacts of humanity decaying even the impulse to be human eroded, myth destroyed- born across infinitudes of nothingness. *NEXT STOP-* new gospels every quarter to bolster the earnings report. Rub those sockets- it won't do a lick of good. *HANDS IN THE VEHICLE!* Your first vision: a blue light, ironic, cynical. Meta. Metastasis- a blighting dot of radiation which has been blinking out poof across decades of mothers whom ne'r bore the pains of birth nor bare the pains of being pure hearted, anesthetized waist down instead, anxious (*separation, selective mutism, specific phobia, social phobia, panic disorder, agoraphobia, generalized, substance induced, other*)- needle to nerve- lost courage of Alice to dive rabbit hole, lost gumption of Skywoman to extirpate apple roots- oxytocin deprived, unready mothers from unstable maidens from unloved girls, strains of ancient knowledge unwrapped redundant by advertising firms et al. focus groups (pudgy, infantile digits punch out answers onto typepads for insurance claims)- notre damsels to a national surplus of newborns unable to latch when their first breaths came exhumed past holy barriers, sluggish- gooey gobs ready for assignment reporting for duty at positions Enochian flumping towards family Thanksgiving couches weatherproofed and estate planned, a cursed tribe of men, cursed only like men can be who are plucked from the land and disconnected from the soil and plugged centrifugal sideways, umbilical severed. What page is the red queen on? *HAVE YOUR TICKET READY-* dried out, preserved in formaldehyde sold on display cases- that same blue light which hath illuminated the male gaze of fathers who windowshop chintz distracted poodlepawing along updown Michigan Avenues of modernity, who were happy with alacrity to pawn humankind frozen crystalline permanent as viewers to our own serialized sit-com (a marketing department hovers in concerned diligence like *how can sell this latest subscription package?*)- who laid down dainty best intentioned plans- investment plans, matching wallpaper, biomarker genetic tests- who provided the architectural floorplan of this world sterilized at your little feet? Whodunnit? Diapered, whinescreaming. A generation, indivisible, of phoney phooey independence, of _insouciance_

yawning bored, of encryption immobilized static on plastic balloon prints one carbon for two oxygens pressed *en masse* depicting red sky surfers heads wet from radio waves, pixels moonshaped like triangles like Rothco fuzz without all the fuss. Eggshells. Glue. Primer. Water. Turpentine. Order a dozen! Handling fees paid- but how much money will it bring? What's the ROI, the CPC, the CAGR? Ears dumbled nonresponsive, pinnae gelatinous and coffeeground waking up in their cups ontop of factory floors, rendered vestigial- no one ought be admonished, for them who once had ears are no longer obliged to listen! A haughtily conceived fortunate nation, bourgeoisie drunk, silver-spoon envious, condemned amnesiacs. Happy-go-lucky-go-with-the-flow while their attention diminishes singular and oblivious, exponentially infected, no messages relayed- fallen out of God's love, because God only loves His designer children- a shrinking mallet, a dusty inkpen, a rusty staple- triumvirates once but no more, trumped without triumphets forevermore- no need to worry, fahgetabou'tit! Inaudible in the land of three hundred million voices, opinions, posts and hashtags and dislikes, piled up high wall'd unscalable. What to do? Dig the individual! Light the birthday candle! Emerging warm and wet, converted frozen and deaf, portly and blinded erythromycin, indivisible for all oh say can you see your grand inheritance (Tiresian though optimistic thanks be to supply and demand, our vague notions of multiverse potentialities which portends and omens us with our fingers crossed to Jackpot Powerball cosmic rebirths, hopefully)! Scratch-OFF ticket detritus upfilling wastebins. Asphyxiating baby sea turtles. What sea, what land? Whereof doth congressional continents shout echo canyon "Don't come manifesting destiny around here no more!" No mountains to climb, no rivers to cross- we got an App for that! Numbers binary invented cheeky to blanket reality chin-tuck'd and replace'd bit by bit a world (enhanced virtual) to words- images encoded over green screen Babel- zero to one only infinity between- overwhelmed, alone in bed, terrified, Leibniz calls for Catharina after three geese flock east then west past his open curtain- checked involuntary- blue pill red pill one pill two pill drink plenty'o water don't mix 'em unless you plan on sleeping it off. Sure, you mentates real masterful well, tallman! Peel thou eyes for talisman- though the Chief hasn't discovered the scar, yet- but he will. Sure, the purple gowned Mad Hatter ain't poured your cup o' boomer tea yet, but he will. Tossport coins haven't landed hexagrammatron tetra yet, but they must. Born to dream, dreaming to make the grade- first night before dawn hovered watershed handed down guttural by celebrity gossip columns perchanced in an airport- this dreamsleep ballad sung uniform unison. Collect the readings! Blood pressure, EKG, pulse, oxygen saturation- monitored. Ho ho ho at long last we will be excised by a team of certified assembly line workers (acclimated sanguine by years of procedures) who dawn *arum italicum* laurels between their somber 30mpg start-stop-sit-wait-stretch-go-go-stop-wait-stare-yawn-go-stop-go-go-stop-adjust-go-turn-look-itch-yawn-look-turn-stop-park-open-shut-lock-sigh-complain commutes. Not a tear is shed. Oh those nitrile yellowblue lions, those first to part waters broken meeting us as sons and daughters- smile you firstgreeters to fleece us! Bienvenue! Infants pulled dirigible across sterile barriers into Maslow garish realities by a slave race equally inferior in the art of living as any shipped o'r before- chained with educations doctoral approved via stimulus response on high interest private loans, thussuch indebted to monolith monopoly oversized dresspants and dinner jackets. We are recorded, inspected by grassfed lunatics who aim to excise surgical any potentiality for miracle left in this world or the next. Killed Christ. Flipped the roundtable. Pruned the bodhi tree. Chainsaw'd the torii in two. Born indentured, subjects like our handlers to a hailed thieftom, a nameless thievery syndicate whose power negates its own existence whose guffaws behind velvet curtains waft laissez free from the law, free from recourse while dibdabbing polyester cankerchiefs at saliva futures, at baking soda options- by George watch 'em accumulate in a corollary, decimal place fashion Chase Manhattan'ing merrily merrily along artificially hydrogenated corners of their thin lips. Power hoarded in secret, disguised by social games, coded by ribonucleic gttaaggctc tgggaccaac gctgggcgaa ccagctccgc tccggagggg tctgcgccc tggcctgcc cggccctag cggaccctg cgatagtgcg aberrations, by affirmation of the program, by pulling the curtain, by closing the car door and driving back to the nice side of town, by upping the annual charity donation, by graduating from the right college, by dressing in smart clothes, by maintaining a polite

acquiescence. Tongues forked (*hsss'ing* reptilian) below constrictors heat sensitive (reduced to Cretaceous neural ganglia subconscia), hungry. Trendy nowhere men and women of propylene glycol nowhere lands- bodypolitik- *Alpha Draconis*- royals, poor babe, whom you'll never be or see or hear or feel- absconded with their plans like parchment rolls in Alexandria's skyscrapey lighthouse while we bicker about in marketplaces over internecine issues of identity for a minimum wage, seven holidays a year- aggregated with their datum, maximized multi-grain ratios onto deposit slips hidden corner pocket Mariana laying in state buried tentaculous from discovery by tax-payer financed explorations, oh this ironical subplot! Nurses record numbers 2+two to be boxed up on pallets fiber-opticized for eternity mummified in Western deserts themselves boon'd to expand indebted to the vapors of haunted forests where wild things once roamed before these fracking fields of crag and scree- we the cogwheel turnmen, we the ammonium sulfate dispensable, we the ingesting polysorbaters, the high fructosers- for y'r pleasure m'lady, m'lord- at y'r service! We, the hotflatandcrowdeders- us, you, you middle-class bean-counting childfool! Vote! Set the alarm! Go get 'em! Cats cradled with our only prized bankslip cashed at a graveside terminal, fees collected. At least we shall be blessed with unending slideshow pictures at our cellular funerals (but don't get ahead of y'rselves)! Rest in psychogeographic spacetime you Jazzman of Salt Lake, Ronnie Woo Woo of Waveland Avenue, you barbecue tipped Hogettes of Kansas City- birthrightful rooting for the home team, worship y'r fetishes, wait out the end days while images emanate from a mediated massmind preceding the real, overshadowing the real- glycosylated by the economy for sake of economics- disposable. Disposed of, yet- they breathe! Another drink m'lord? Another conchae canape m'lady? What a bright future! Poisoners of rivers, eroders of ecosystems, annihilators of species- whistling- suckling buxom with red blood'd lips- mechanistically churned in quantum packets disguised by waves of singular obsequious gesture- concerned only for turning time trick'd green to make last month's rent, for the next pack of cigarettes or case of beer or bag of dope or lousey ragbook. Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to sort out your fates in the leveled playingfields of wretches! Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons- do it like Mah and Pah did! Do it like how we done taught yah to do- pfllyyyyyphhh! Rosin bag on the mound- Hawking radiated in clutter- buttressed in rooms by shadowland images thanks to your firstbar crib and closedcircuit camera redlight indicators and right-angles done wrong in a conspiracy to recreate Alcatraz- basinet'd by blankfill'd sundry needs. *AT YOUR SERVICE!* Your own horizon never to loom, slowly losing touch warpspeed with your own haberdasher life Betsy heavensy forbid you stop and pay attention to your watery reflection granted by bathroom mirrors- instead passed up *en route* to firstlight of day defecations- ah- but don't you say you weren't forewarned! Don't blame the stars! Blame Pah, polyp'd polychronic and too busy multiphasic tied up wiping boreal newgrowth flushed back to sewers alas filtered into polyvinyl PVC networks within Jackson Park Medical's plumbing bubbling down the hall- go fetch Mah a cup of ice- another hour in labor hopefully it'll all be over soon unless this thyme Rosemary won't be wont to wake up?

What to say, who to listen- *brekekekex* croakings of doom- landless, leaderless, abandon all ye but one hope (catch her if you can)! First steps fallen from high, from Eden's zipcode to wander toddler gindrunk into a pubic thunderclap guilty of rapacious tendencies hinted at by previous samsara touchdowns, score one for Who- score two for one, half off, buy three get the fourth free? A dubious critique- only to accrete blindly lightsped rather than be recycled proper. In any case, no place to settle a dispute like the forefront storefront of Union Station fat with a cavalcade of beaux after bowtie after bowdown madness, that's the rubadub rubber duck rub, no quack to quark (*up, down, strange, charm, bottom, top*) ain't seen 'em fly since the lakes dried up in '65. Mysterious mickships gallivants to and fro above floorboards, her hand breaks out in a violent rosacea thanks to oxidized rails- her eyes sewn tight from exhaust fumes. Abovedeck near the Food Court decades' old echoes of highwatermarks imported from San Francisco's Fillmore lysergia squiddle out from the tin covers of hushed wastebins, longago joyrides culminated visionary seen from Vegas rooftops from Appalachian hickory scorch'd whiskey shacks from southern

adobe brickstackchickstacks from Rainer's dome, felt in vaguely busybee D.C. offices, cupped in sunflower sutra dusty hands, Shanghai'd from Savannah dockyard alleyways, resonant with New York trans-Atlantic intensity and Bostonian Faneuil Hall legacies before any patriot act put tyrannus on semper stage. Promontory Summit, Utah. T'was the best of times. Not the heartburn of discotheque hard candy, the listless hum of floppy drives. It was true blue fun. TBF. TGIF. HTTP. WWJD. Before a gaping whole, a rovin' no more to go- mind the gap, that chasm of spirit and self, dug gravedigger shovelful in patient one two three thanks to one-eye'd undertakers. Canal Street- excavations overnight. *ALL ABOARD!* Harried mothers lost chasing after madeye'd sons- a din- ticket punches- fast food! Cold beer! Hear ye (if only) here ye is where it died: a laststandmanning field of battle host to spaghetti Western's tragic descent, consecrated on brown paper bags before the valleys went sour then sweet to sere'd mesa, before megalopolises desecrated every horizon, before USB-port hellfires of mindless juggernauts converted bone to ash in pockmarked rooms, before instant likes by digital friends, before logins, before broadband, before clickbait, before identity politics, before postmodern politically correct filters, before encrypted emotional detritus refracted fractal killed the proletariat and raised his children (obese, beltbuckled, diabetic, ketchup stains on their chinny chin chins) consumer stupid in driveled pooling chatrooms, before advertising Turings (*Why does time fly like an arrow but fruit flies like bananas?*) engaged you three carat cushion like a Pinocchio donkey to microprocessed wives, before a quickgetrich dream infected our species. An ultimatum inquiry, unanswered. Who the (microphone cyclone) fuck are you? Answered once upon a time by grim life, by honorable suffer (barbed wired whipping posts). By grace. But the waves broke, the voices went wayside lighthouse extinguished. Check your GPS- you'll never find 'em. Whatever energy had been now had been had, left to expire countertop cooled out white dwarf and rolled back leaving Veronican tiedyed patterns for archaeology hammerheads to publish abstruse theses and hypothesize. Ground zero in full view despite the airplanes exploding in conspiracy overhead. Incensed Tristinian Frenchmen bark out bargains: **SOLEMENT!** Grail fables- inverted lives, unreal, produced, kabuki performance art patronized by the empire of static passivity- no longer perceived, no further lived, no furthur to go (*warning- tank empty*)- a perfect separation- **LES SOLDE!** Michelle Marie Gallagher heads choo choo unknowing towards a solar black mass of druidical coupon altars and high voltage transformers, western civilization's legacy: an eclipse of sadness. Ninth ring frozen beast bellyful and chuckling, kept alive by tourniquets of *_insouciance_* tourists sit touring the site. Missy mighty groans now Polaris bound pointed upland with the answer, with her organs o' sense concerning her, *lions and tigers and ursus oh my*- an authentic identity emergent, converging- one hope remaining after multiplicative divisors accounted for and bespoke quill marked between leaden covers on revelation John's French-pressed pages of human skin. Groaning moansome for old Moody St. mankind like Noah land ho, journeying faithfully departed far awayaheyaheyaheyaheyahey from marquee flashbulb movie theaters, sandlot dew drops, mourning, toting along a burdensome legacy like a golf bag bulging irons and sandalwood. Carrying the weight. *EXPECT DELAYS!* Heavy burdensome legacies of terror (what had mah and pah dun)- allow us a moment and forgive us our sins, ahem (amen): Jim Crow shadows which pushbuttoned wrongful dozens of death penalty sentences expedited for burial alongside Malcolm and Martin, anti-drug abuse prison populations fullbacked over by George Gipp with his linemen building pen after dolorous pen to a maximally secure capacity, Rovian super PAC 1% citizens hellbent on converting united ninety-niners to Benjamin Franklin's backside then disappearing overnight with no time to wade, passing down another Surreal National Defense Economic Tonkin Authorization Recovery Gulf ID Act for John D. Goldilocks to pass into law and add to the ledger. A rich and storied tradition. Onward soldiers! Burdens unresolved like racism, like economic inequality, like access to affordable healthcare, like fair education- Adorno pukes up cud in a bathroom sink- baggage pregnant on overhead racks like popular culture, systemic injustice, systematic hoarding- bagged for good under watchful klu-klux'd crucifixion melodrama eyeholes scissor'd out by a crazed gentryman who helped the sheriff get re-elected who collects interest who on his weepy knees begs to a god wellknown infamous dear me pretty pretty please protect our baby girl from those

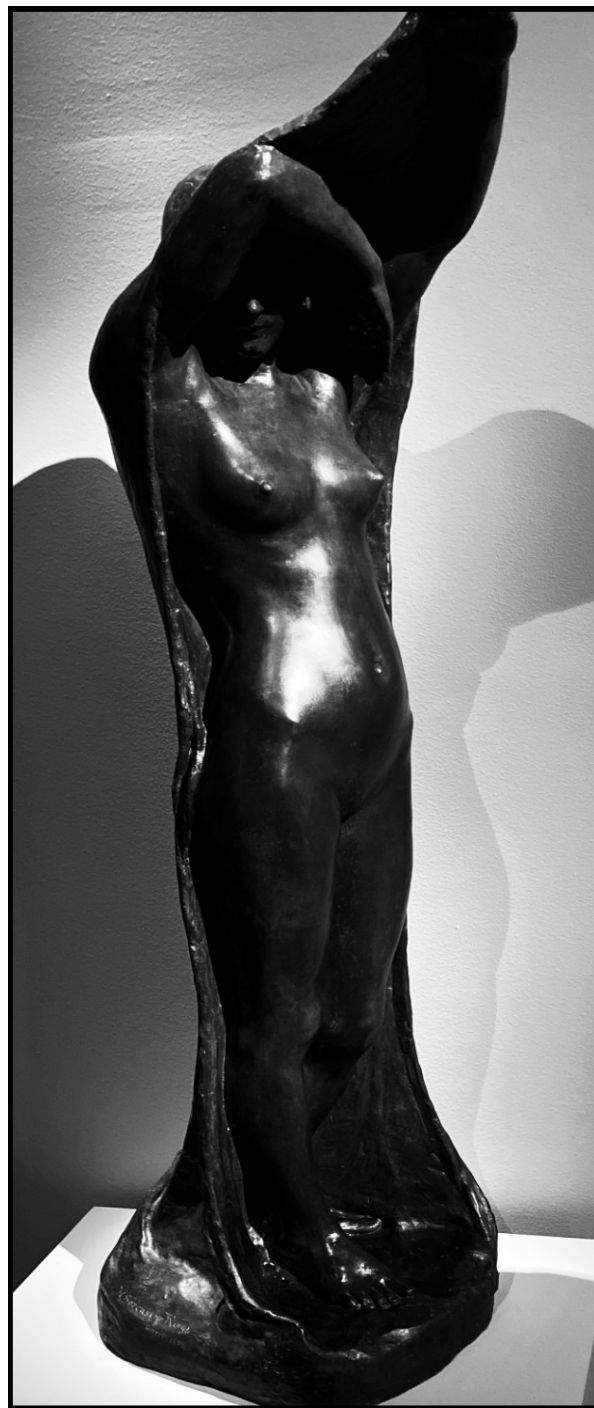
crank peddling hombres or dark skinned rapists or fagqueer rainbow pederasts or do-goody atheists, instead keep her fully insured lobbied for life overstimulated in certified institutions accepted Top Ten internshipped abroad for a semester bought and sold into approved hedgefund happy days where the games never stop and the pantries full a Koch in the kitchen. Roastbeasts and Who pudding! Prayers old Mickster magpie o'grace n'r had sung or chanted Gregorian on her behalf, better or worse who cares because it wasn't her suitcase yet she carries it leastwise- lengthwise to the end- carries a death knell of fanatic revivalism, Apollonian overtures harmonized for one fell swoop doomed by prior sweepings from Amun-Ra to Huitzilopochtli to Inti to Mithras to Surya, a last ghaspy breadth sprawled bedside fourteen candles five verses one pendant splash of whiskey, aptly misfired, oozy. Piles of discount gear chugalugaluga down Wolfian tracks. Ashen skies scorched by a pheonix'd flare, coals to steam to loco newcomemotion. Rain stammers down plexiglass windowpanes, oily- baptismal rivulets- can you see the doves, Mark? Little girls wet their pants. Was it worth the wait, Matthew? Unwind the abacuses of a Shakespeare's infinite monkey army- another ledger- we're missing Luke! Would an apocryphal fable have been more effective? Was the notoriety worth the dreamteam knickerbocker-based sesame seed buns cast out in the name of a secret-sauce (*Soybean Oil, Sweet Relish (diced Pickles, Sugar, High Fructose Corn Syrup, Distilled Vinegar, Salt, Corn Syrup, Xanthan Gum, Calcium Chloride, Spice Extractives), Water, Egg Yolks, Distilled Vinegar, Spices, Onion Powder, Salt, Propylene Glycol Alginate, Garlic Powder, Vegetable Protein (hydrolyzed Corn, Soy And Wheat), Sugar, Caramel Color, Turmeric, Extractives Of Paprika, Soy Lecithin*) freedom, crossed over communist garden boxes, mimetic Americana peddled unabashed- look at that porcelain smile- Gaudi blushing stoned. Was it worth the pockmarked oil fields of Iraq goat-herded out Henry Ford's tailpipe, asthmatic First Communicants greasing the wheel? Was it worth bastardizing Kurosawa's wide angles for Los Angeles stereo equipment and nightsticks, for fourth installments of rebooted long time ago faraway galaxies guzzled down sodapop in full recline? Was it worth the price of admission to fit into OJ's glove, for situational comedic exposure, free of sentimentality? Or Monroe's dress? A chance to hold Elvis' pillbox, to ride Dean's or Dylan's motorcycles 3-D explosive and simulated windswept at computer terminals? To sled Kane's rosebud? Was it worth Truman's bomb? For Apollo's homeward window views on Christmas, for Warhol's soup cans, for Cobain's overdose? Oh Yoko did you oh-no wheeze yourself skyblue upon sighting John's body lifeless on West 72nd? Did you find a chance to ask him if he approved the budget for those front row Super Bowl voice over'd beer drinking amphibians? The cost of life- living. Alive. Did you weep cumulonimbus over napalm burns? Did you laugh with Carson past your bedtime? Did you go to the mattresses with academy socialites? Did princesses outrun photogrophers? Did you crashland with a Kennedy? A stick of dynamite with Hunter? Did you bust Solomon's entourage out of Topeka State Hospital? Did you fiend crack cocaine in Baltimore ghettos wired for sound, Philip's typewriter droning over-valence'd in a backwater dystopian gene pool? Did the discoballs spin like narcotic dynamos until the morning? Did you dream the big dream with Leary and Alpert past autumnal riversides? Did you sweat RomeoFoxtrotKilo in the parking lot, nitrous oxide shrunken alveolar in your taffy laugh lungs? Do you remember Hendrix's anthem? Did black lives matter when Katrina struck? Did you occupy Wall Street before cancelling Harvey's credit card? Do you launch balloons across a burning Lake Erie eating Zuckerberg pies? Did Steve really understand Lucy? Did you unionbust with Bezos after viciously regressing tweet tweet? Did Burroughs call it cancer? Did you have to cross a bridge over the Dakota Access Pipeline when you plugged a Mars Rover into a Tesla station? Did you make it out alive? Were you even there?

Fear not- white pineboxes wait patient! Red squirrels lay pulverized splashed on asphalt **EXIT** ramps thanks to General Motor's latest inventions. Progress marches on! An icy pond littered with swans, calm, dusk- the night of the winter solstice. Seagulls with clams in their beaks dropping poor bivalves to cracked mollusky funeral beds, a tarfeather beach full of scattered shells. An empty prairie tent blown over with the final buffalo killed and dead and doused in butter, hot sauce- no elegy, no last rites, no gods or myths,

no rituals of water or chris- *We Regretfully Regret To Inform You That All Natural Elements Have Been Replaced Plutonium- Now Back To Our Regularly Scheduled Broadcast-* only a lattice of frozen Martian jism to caretake us across turgid waters interstellar. Sunk. No hymns for the complicit, no penance or absolution- brakes screeching- lazy unquestioning assumptive irresponsible chunks of flesh- fooled by goeey skinsack muscle fibers, convinced atomic- made to matter, matter made then destroyed. Adios! Eaten by Kali. Sanitized entrails, candles lit, caskets closed, Facebook priests live-streaming from palms from seats of false knowledge, idolators themselves, false gods the whole lot of them- false wisdom, unearned- papier Mache white lilies. Graves surrounded by superhighways, buried in suburban residue-discarded, consumed- twelve-year-old children hung limp off tired ceiling fans with daddy's leather belt dancing shadowbox lamplight- a cattail in a swampy breeze- we go and are gone and are forgotten as our intrinsic capital value expires. No longer contributing to the GDP. The gods were sovereign. The king was sovereign. White landowners were sovereign. All men were sovereign. All people were sovereign. Nothing is sovereign. Ancestral whatsewhosies? Unsanctified- lives un-lived- lost and found and lost again flotsam among worn cotton panties, a string of faux pearls, broken left shoe heels and gold fillings. Did you find what y'r looking for? No mercy, no escape, no time no mind- one mind named Moloch- mind the truth of it all, naked on haystack staves, though death is body by pain. No reprieve, no spinal tap'd laudanum or mountain of opiate epidemics can spare or save you. Last breaths, empty- without magic, without hope, resigned. A mistake. A delivery service, an incomplete order- is there nowhere to file a complaint? Fortune cookie prophets read (by the game of a dancer, drum, lotus flower), "A protracted decline will not be in your future." Faustian nuclear fallout screened universal- admire the bloomsday isotope fullscreen experience- take your seat modernity, drawn charioteered rush hour headlong with your cigarette ashtrays, by your demands for fairness, for your own sake- sabachthani. Don't act so astounded. So offended. You kept the status quo, you couch cushion masturbators! Monkeys! Lesions! Lest you forget your formative years headmastered in alphabetical order, sugar lever'd by parents, bolstered by culture. Who is to blame after your livelong days draw gravitas shorter and focused in a rusty tunnel the tiles replaced by an overnight crew- the aperture closing- conditioned to be involved in self, aroused by self, consuming self in myriad agoraforms, concerned caritas _insouciance_ void and null of pietas? You were produced. And then trashed. A marble gaze of repose- for every extreme effort, zero gains- doornail losers, pitiful! Where are your luckiest men? They meandered into old age, died. What did they find? Invested in a nothing phantom of stupid no payout- divested by nonlocal demons. Charmed by fancy things- unoriginal replicants whose dedication went directed towards finding trendy and exciting tax loopholes for the aristocracy to grow tumescent- who will sing praises from ornate rostrums for their accomplishments? Weep jeremiads at their funerals? Jeroboams of wine? No monuments will mark the shuffle of their feet. Harmless decorations for garden party deities, constructs who role-playing to an empty house and having batted inauthentic eyelashes and sported histrionic pigstick lips done up jetblack butterfly fluttering- nothing to leave with other than an awkward bow. An image. A final sensation. Desperate for celebrity but tragic, talentless- adamant nonetheless. *PLEASE VISIT US AGAIN SOON!* Self-serving, self-directed, self-obsessed: yet not directed at a "self" in the sense of an actual person or personality or real or realized entity being focused but rather a formless "selfishness" herded along by battery charged prods, hence a culturally fabricated McGuffin unreal or unrealized or impersonal. Fictitious inheritors with figments transplanted neurotrophic into eggshell diaphanous craniums. What helpless Memphis blues! Pickin' fing'r shot cl'n off- 'nable to e'n play a tune! An alien inserted subdural then worshipped, an ashy skinned Wendigo hijacker not even your own! Who are you? You! Not even you in the sense of being actualized concrete into a self by yourself, let alone elevated to Self! Formed instead by unconscious contagions into a psychophagic predator entity: men and women and children a generation possessed by consciousness negating energy and thus un-selfconscious incapable of Augustinian reflection, designated damned for the blind consumption of emotional and psychic and physical resources, thoughtless and hungry for more more *more more* to drain, to deplete, to destroy.

You! A you which hell hath handed over, a you that you fell for- conned, duped- a you that you were never meant to be, a you converted by the church of exploitation free of charge and programmed factory calibrated, automatic, pre-set, a you who you never truly knew because for all the pre-Cambrian crustaceans ossified at attention who was there to know it? How could you? What can be discerned when the examining doctor is sick, when the psychic virus is incarnate in the psyche itself, when the diagnostic tools contain the symptoms? Gordian knotted. Starcrossed? Jonah cursed? Allergic to the light of truth. Infected cannibal misfits cast off ravenous from a gnostic Demiurge to be gawked over for entertainment. You! Good riddance. Goodbye. No candle splutters. For all that fuss and effort- somnambulists- humph humpty tumbled, brakes cry out, sparks- parked- no more shadows, or heroes- or dreams, this vampire darkness witnessed and suffered and lived and now thankfully gone by. With nobody home- how can anybody die, anyways?

PART THREE: HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?
or
The People- A pseudo endgame of deliverance revealed



An epiphany invigorated Smithe's mind.

Days between- days before the Knockout, before the power outages- a late afternoon, springtime, at the big boy table with his big boy pants, participant to another annual review, another shareholder's meeting- a celebration. Glad-handing and well-wishing- another year of record growth, another year of bonuses funded at 170%, another substantial gain of market-share. Portfolios, forecasts, scatter plots. Cups of coffee, fresh cantaloupe, a pitcher of lemon infused spring water. A typical situation. One of several boards he sat on, one of several companies he leached money from. Smithe directed his attention along the chairs, from face to face, from executive to executive, their secretaries, vice-presidents and chief-officers. In-between them, he saw their children, their families and friends, buying and buying and buying- more and more and more. He had looked over each one of the seats, across generations, along patterns and predictable behaviors- he smiled, secretly disgusted. Nausea wrenched at him from his insides. He felt the symptom, then explored the diagnosis. Why were they bothering him so much? What was it about them?

Was it them- or was it something else?

Was it Smithe's mortality?

Was it his growing intimacy with notions of his death, his legacy, his children's and their children's futures? What was the real endgame? Where was the solution? A sense of loss fell over Smithe. Another quarter above the projections, record sales, a fantastic margin- it wasn't fun anymore. Trivialities. He transitioned unconsciously to a more pensive, inward face. For the entirety of his career he had profited by being several steps ahead of his competition. Beating his competitors. But what was he fighting for? Was it really about the money? What was the next move? What were the next ten moves? What did checkmate look like?

He hung distraught amidst another existential crisis. These bouts had been appearing at an increasing frequency. A sense of exhaustion flooded the aging executive- undermining him, strangling him- this couldn't keep happening. He was fed up. He was tired of meetings. He was tired of handshakes. But the prospects of retirement- of golf, of boats, of vacation- more time with his wife, more time to complain about the tax rate, to compare accounting strategies- retirement- no. He was only sixty-seven. Retirement wasn't the culmination of his life's work. He didn't want to give up control- but he couldn't continue to play by the old rules with these same players. He didn't want his legacy to be a cake in a board room and an engraved pen. He couldn't keep feigning like the quarterly rundown did anything but enervate him. Did it fizzle out this way for all his predecessors- for every Vanderbilt and Hearst, for every Bezos and Gates? How did they face the inexorable? All this work, all these structures and templates with no real progress?

From early childhood Smithe had displayed a shrewdness for business- he accumulated a sizeable fortune during his elementary school days collecting, trading, and selling baseball cards for profit. The game was simple, and he was adept in how he approached the basic tenets- create the need, provide the product, eliminate the waste, corner the market, strangle competitors, stack the money. A boy who never owned a glove or spent an afternoon at Fenway Park with his father- sure it was fun, it was a rush, it was inflationary and addictive- but at this point in his life he had made enough money. He had won enough battles. He owned enough stock options. The transaction wasn't giving him the same rush. In fact, the transaction was now taking a toll.

For all of his future thinking, his long-term planning- there was an element he hadn't considered – his feelings at this stage in the game.

How do I get back into it?

He had treated his life like his businesses. His businesses had been his life.

Smithe glanced around the room. Then lightning struck- this singular thought ballooned into his consciousness: what if I've been looking at this all wrong?

That single thought attracted other, smaller considerations: What if the game was bigger in scale? What if they, meaning everyone, were the competition? What if I don't need any of them, or any of this anymore? What would that look like, for me, by my design?

Smithe became absorbed by a fresh possibility.

It grew within him to a revelation, vision.

Fools- suckers- idiots buying things up, the common man- sinners upon the Earth- lusting, licentious, coveting, ravenous, dimwitted- they were a plague. The man on the subway. The woman with her child in the car next to him on the highway. What right did they have? They were locusts- the general public, the middle-class, the idiots watching toothpaste commercials, upgrading their cell phones- resources were depleting, the planet was suffering, the Kingdom was pushed further and further away by their godless hands- at what expense? Why keep them around? Why keep playing the game? Why not- why not end the drama?

A novel step, but a logical one- Smithe's imagination had concocted similar notions, similar breakthroughs in the past- such moves had led to his exorbitant wealth, his many successes. A lightbulb. A flash. A feeling rushed about his insides and flooded out the compulsion to vomit- a gut informed by his head, informed by his wealth and a fundamentalist Christian background, informed by racist parents and spoiled classmates, informed by an insulated upbringing and a methodical, calculated worldview rooted in margins and profit lines- diminishing the human person to a series of numbers- excitement.

He assessed the situation- mankind, as well as his own. Humanity sat on a precipice. He stood at a crossroads. Knowing when to stop was important, when to pivot and change course- the time to muddle on and continue trudging forward was over. Knowing when to push the load over the edge- skim the fat, cut the losses, cull the herd- yes. A critical moment was on the horizon. His own life mirrored the destiny of mankind. The possibility morphed quickly into another idea.

A conviction.

Slide after slide, the presentation continued- by now Smithe was entirely oblivious. He had retreated into himself, disinterested with next quarter's predictions.

A grin of satisfaction crawled over his face. A preacher's voice, childhood- the mark of the Beast, the seventh seal, the second coming- maybe there was more to the book than he once thought possible. Maybe it wasn't about writing it according to his own plan. It was about His plan. Perhaps there would be an end of days- perhaps he could facilitate. Yes. Perhaps he had better start making himself ready, preparing the table so to say, so that when his part was called- a thick Southern accent, "Christ promised admission to the faithful, to His followers, so you had better be ready children, you had better make sure you know which side of the fence you stand on"- Smithe would be ready. Smithe would serve a greater mission, a purpose far beyond the machinations of the Dow Jones Industrial Average. All his life a natural born leader- Christ would need help. He would need champions. He would need muscle.

Energized.

Called to service.

A zealot holding a rattlesnake, gone to rapture amidst a flaming sea of tongues.

Smithe allowed himself to continue through adulthood with a keen imagination. Most of his peers had lost their imaginative faculties years ago, to the point where the very notion had become utterly foreign, alien almost. If it couldn't be worked out on a spreadsheet, then what value could it have? Not Smithe. Smithe visualized his role, the end of days, the kingdom come- an empty boardroom, an empty city, a fortunate colony of true believers- Smithe played through the entire drama.

Yes. He would offer himself as a humble, grateful servant- David, a dabble of chrism, a lamb in his arms. Away with these sharp cornered folders, these handouts, these Laser printed charts- none of it would matter. He would make sure of it. Soon.

Checkmate.

An endgame.

It was only a matter of backtracking, methodically working the moves out in sequence- soon enough. Smithe came back into his person, his eyes fixed on his watch's second hand, a watch worth more than his secretary's annual salary. A seed had been planted. There were phone calls to be made. There was planning to commence. First steps. Alliances. This afternoon he would begin- a secure line, his private journal- notes, details, schematics, brainstorming- yes. Today would mark the beginning of the end. A beautiful end that would lead to a new beginning.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

A voice near the front of the room, a silence, "Are there any comments you'd like to make, sir?"

Smithe glanced up. His lips were pinched shut like a man who had made up his mind. A room full of hopefuls- a room full of savage hunger- delicate, encouraging glances conscious of his every move- looking to Smithe for approval, to him for an indication- locked onto him, the senior leader, the most accomplished of the bunch, hanging on his every word- "Very well done. Very well done, indeed. We have a bright future ahead."

Nods of acknowledgement. Nods of agreement.

He was just the man for the job.

-O-

DEAR GOD,
SEND GLOOM.
LOVE,
DOOM

-O-

Q: How are you feeling?

A: That's a loaded question. I used to be hostile, angry. As time went on- upset- maybe perturbed. But not so much anymore. Nowadays I'm more or less resigned. Or- maybe a better way to phrase it is, I've made peace with it. I'm okay.

Q: Okay?

A: (laughter) Yeah. I'm okay.

Q: What used to make you angry?

A: Where to start? Everything I did, everything I stood for- I wanted to make a difference, to bring light into the world. And now- look around. You have eyes, don't you? There's nothing but darkness, absence. Don't you feel it surrounding everything?

Q: To be honest, not really.

A: Well, then isn't that just it- isn't that perfect? An untruth which has become so real that it no longer is questioned. A falsehood indistinguishably transformed. Reality replaced by illusion. Death disguised as life. The representation for the actual object.

Q: Huh?

A: Apologies for waxing poetic- it's, well your question provides a better summarization than anything I could possibly explain in an answer. Nobody cares whether they can see or if they are blind, so long as the next Marvel movie comes to a theatre near you.

Q: I still don't quite understand. (blushing)

A: I'm sorry but I couldn't possibly begin to make you understand it. It's like Louis Armstrong said, if you have to ask you'll never know.

Q: Alright. Let's pivot. How do you view yourself?

A: In many ways, I consider myself to be a failure.

Q: What did you fail in doing?

A: Securing my legacy. I failed to understand how my life, the stories, the signs, would be harnessed, how it would impact history, how the energy would be transmitted over time. I failed at creating an infrastructure, a reliable mechanism to keep the message alive and control how it grew. And what hurts the most is that I gave everything I could. I left it all on the table. I put everything aside. I never married, never had the chance to love a woman, raise children, nothing. I never kept or wanted anything for myself. I never made any money. I never sought out pleasure for my own gratification. And obviously I ended up turning over my life. I went up onto that cross, I let them drive the nails into my hands and feet, I took the spear into my side. I breathed my last breath, and I forgave each man who did their part in my own undoing. But I was too in the moment. I didn't take the time to consider the future, how it would- how things would play out. It was an oversight, plainly speaking. A failure. Maybe it was more a weakness than a failure- I was too there, too in it, to even consider a long-term plan.

Q: This sounds a bit dramatic, doesn't it? You're one guy. One life. Why put so much pressure on yourself? If you did your best, then what else is there to do?

A: Thinking like that affords you an easy way to expiate any sense of responsibility from your life. 'I'm just one person, what can I do?' That was the entire point! One life *could* make a difference- one event, one selfless act, one man could send a ripple through history. I believed in that. I believed I could change the world.

Q: Didn't you?

A: Sure. The European race bastardized everything good thing I left behind, and in fact developed a civilization which operated contrary to everything I stood for. Quite frankly the change I brought was one from bad to worse- in many aspects it's gotten worse than I could have possibly been imagined. I enabled a lot of bad men to do horrible things. I watched them take my words and manipulate them. I watched them wage war, pass out indulgences to rapists and murderers, plunder and aggregate riches. I watched them blasphemy. I watched hypocrites, I watched fools, I watched merciless autocrats- using my name and my mission as justification.

Q: But there's been good to come from it as well.

A: Some. But not enough.

Q: If you had the chance, would you do it again?

A: No. I wouldn't. Watching the unraveling of history since my death has been one long nightmare. I'm fed up with watching it. I missed the mark.

Q: Well, I think an important question must be asked, because to me you're taking too much responsibility. We need to take a step back. Was mankind worth saving, in the first place?

A: I can't answer that. I want to believe the answer is yes. I want to, with all my heart. But I can't honestly answer. Subjectively, I choose to keep a small reserve of faith. Objectively, well, the jury is probably close to reaching a decision.

Q: What bothers you the most, when you see today's world?

A: We're really keeping things light, aren't we? There's certainly plenty to choose from. Hmm. I am astonished at how terribly, how savagely, the poor have come to treat one another. Poor men and women- the destitute, the disenfranchised- the lower classes have lost their sense of companionship. In most cases they simply are no good to one another. When I was alive, we had each other's backs. There was community. We used to dance, sing, celebrate at weddings, cry at funerals, tell stories. We did it together. There was a foundation for support because we couldn't compete with those in power. We banded together. We found solidarity in mobilizing against our oppressors. Slave owners, dictators, kings, oligarchs- the poor would at least all be on the same side. Even though we couldn't overthrow them, we could still live and operate within our own community where we controlled the norms. We controlled our own values. Maybe we didn't have any money, or any possessions- but we knew what we stood for. The kings owned our time, our labor maybe- but they didn't own what happened inside our neighborhoods. We were brothers and sisters, on a very essential level. We recognized it in each other's faces. We took

care of each other- we really did. And there was even some beauty, there was tenderness- it was part of our protest, a meek crusade of kindness.

As time went on, as the empires changed, the people changed, the tactics of the oppressors changed- modernity closed in- what marks this new age, and this lack of solidarity amongst the oppressed, that's how the oppressors have used technology. How it came on so fast, how it came on so sexy- and listen, I'm not a Luddite. I don't think the acme of civilization was medieval medicine, plagues, feudalism- I don't believe that was the pinnacle of society. But modern technology broke over our species and carried away a lot of important aspects of our humanness.

And from what I have seen- when I watch children, especially- children are no longer the products of their immediate environments, their families and friends- they haven't been formed by neighborhoods, because they've been formed by the internet. Which- what is that? What is the internet? It almost immediately became a mechanism of control- from a perspective of influence, of economics. It's a vehicle to influence you- to create desire- to get you to buy and keep buying, for lack of a better explanation. Now poor kids- kids in ghettos- they grow up listening to rap music about slinging dope and wearing a pair of \$400 Nike sneakers. They watch YouTube videos all day. They aren't in sandlots playing baseball. They're enamored with materialism, with status, with consumption, and their taught to squelch their fears by buying new things. Itching to consume- as the corporations would have them.

It all starts and ends with children. It really does.

Our kids have been stolen from us.

Kids used to grow up hearing stories from their parents, from their grandparents- their lives became woven into those stories. A continuum. They represented the future of those stories. That was important- being a dynamic component to an evolving story- that was important to developing a psyche. And it was critical- it was one of the critical means by which the oppressed could fight back. Each poor baby boy or girl was the next page in that story that kept going- the fight that kept going- the determination to live. To live gracefully. To suffer and love and fight. Little by little. Generation by generation. Now, kids have no access to a story. They're not concerned with the past, or the future. They are enamored by the object, the next thing to buy or try or play or break.

There's been no antidote.

We've lost the kids. We're losing the community. We're not in it, together, anymore.

That's what bothers me the most.

Q: But if you see technology as the source of this, it must be evil. You have to be against it, either entirely or not at all. If it's evil- wouldn't you change it? You said you're not a Luddite, but, what's the alternative?

A: I never tried to get rid of evil. I was never against evil. What is lost, is lost. I came for the losers, the forsaken, the bottom rungs of society's ladder- the tired and the hungry- I came for them. There's a significant difference between 'lost' and 'losing.' I wanted to build on love. I am *for* love. Community. Brotherhood. To be honest, I thought we could remain solid while the rest of humanity crumbled. Evil is inherently doomed. Selfishness never ultimately succeeds.

Q: I hate to be obvious here, but I would be remiss if I didn't ask. Did you play a hand in these recent developments? With respect to the collapse of the technological infrastructure? Did you have anything to do with it?

A: No. I had nothing to do with it. Listen- I was never an Armageddon enthusiast. Let's put that out there. That was never my trip. I was into living, into life, into love- I stand *for* love. To be honest, right now, my influence is more or less at a standstill. I'm watching it all go down just like you are.

Now if you want my opinion- I think some interesting alternatives have been opened by the Knockout. I am optimistic. Not necessarily for the immediate consequences- but for a future that could be realized, with real potential. Humanity must rid itself free of a ton of baggage in order to have a sustainable, conceivable direction forward.

The impact of instantaneous, digital information- that impact on human culture and development can't be understated. People lost wisdom. They quote unquote know quite a bit, and can quote unquote learn quite a bit, but wisdom- human wisdom was virtually wiped out. Because wisdom isn't knowing or learning or understanding- it can't be represented. It is through the heart. It is felt. There was already a progressive movement towards the head- with the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution- so mankind was moving in this direction, as a whole, away from the heart- but when modern technology hit? Full scale departure. Severed heads fueled by batteries. Alright? In fact, everyone downloaded preconfigured heads from their phones. They had become so abjectly dependent- on their apps, their systems and tools, this external network- it was an extreme development that occurred very abruptly.

But now, now that everything has disappeared in a blink- there are new possibilities. The avenue to the heart has come back. In a way, it's perfect. Because humanity has been hopelessly reduced. We're laid bare. We have nothing. No head, and no heart. And when you have nothing, you always begin with the heart.

There's a chance for it to work out- but nothing is certain. The Knockout certainly represents a major historical, spiritual bifurcation. Trust me, I know one when I see one. And it will go one of two ways.

Q: I don't have to ask for your preference.

A: No you do not. But there are actors on one side who are pushing for Revelation- I can assure you there are plans being constructed this very minute to bring about a horrifying evil. It's the way these things go. I suppose that's the exciting part.

Q: Back to your mission for a moment. Do you really think nothing good came from it?

A: Small victories, small battles. Good did come out of what I did, what we did- but not enough. We didn't get a critical mass. Evil is too easy. Evil is too glamorous. Evil takes so many forms- it is banal, it appears benign. Goodness is singular, it is easy to identify. Evil is pervasive, mysterious- it is a chameleon. Good never appears evil. Evil more often than not appears good. There was good that came out of our mission, but it wasn't heavy enough when it needed to be.

Q: Another question I have to apologize before asking- but why don't you consider returning? Why don't you fulfill the prophecy, and bring that 'heaviness'? Why don't you assert yourself? You have the power, don't you?

A: Didn't I just explain my position on all of that? Let's clarify one thing- I never told anyone I was coming back. I never even brought up that "fulfilling the prophecies" angle when I was around. That was never important to me. And I certainly never told anyone that there would be an encore. I rolled the stone away, I kissed the people I loved, the people who supported me, and I proved to them it was possible. With love, anything is possible. I proved what I needed to prove. I did everything I intended to do. I gave them a choice, a path- a way to exercise their freedom. The kingdom isn't looming on the horizon- it's here, in your heart, right now if you want it. Anybody could do what I did. Anything is possible. I did my part. I showed a way. There is nothing left to do, at least on Earth.

And- with regards to power- power has nothing to do with it. It's not about if I'm powerful enough or not. If they don't get there on their own, it's meaningless. For me to force it, to take away that freedom- I took care of all this in the desert.

Q: But clearly there's- there's more to do. It seems to me you're acting a bit stubborn.

A: You're right. I am. I am a parent, stubbornly waiting for his children to stop fighting and get in the car so the family can leave for vacation. But in all seriousness- it isn't about what I want. Or even what I pray for. I must be respectful of the process of the universe, the process of creation and its destructive counterpoint. Like I already said, I did my part. There isn't anything left to do. Except wait.

Q: Don't you know how it all ends?

A: Of course not. I have faith, and I used to have a strong sense of things- but now, I'm not so sure. And as much as that deeply saddens me, I realize the vulnerability only strengthens my faith. The beginning was easy. I was optimistic, because how could you not be? Surrounded by thousands of joyous people

enjoying baskets and baskets of delicious, fresh fish, the salt in the air, the sun shining down- together, alive- that vibe, that energy. It was electric. It's easy to believe in love with all that happening around you. Smiling children. Healed lepers. Mangled, disabled women offered a chance to walk again. It was so easy to be optimistic, to hold a clear vision of the future. But now- well, now is when the rubber hits the road. I still have faith, but it is a faith of struggle, a faith of suffering. Watching and waiting- it brings me face to face with the darkness. Gethsemane all over again, in a way.

Q: So what next?

A: Keep praying. That's the only thing there ever was to do. And I'll pray for you too.

-O-

An Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-aged and out-of-shape man with a mildly receding hairline and bags under his eyes calmly explained through the shape of his red face and tone of his voice, "There isn't a choice, sir. There's nothing to deliberate. It's a state of emergency. You need to issue the executive order and consolidate all power from the House, from the Senate, from the Courts. You'll put our people in. You'll mobilize the military in each of the seven major cities- Los Angeles, Chicago, D.C., New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas- and call for martial law. Curfews. Restrictions on travel. A temporary dissolution on the bounds of private property. The consolidation of supplies, goods, food stuffs, water. This will ensure everyone's safety. It will stabilize the situation." What he had been thinking before his near monotonous delivery was- *We'll make them entirely dependent. We'll keep them in line, keep them afraid. This is our opportunity.*

In a state of disbelief, the Commander in Chief, in his blue tie and his custom fitted suit, "People aren't going to give up their houses, their rights. They won't accept the dissolution of the structures that maintain our democracy."

Hushed, "Democracy is a luxury nobody has right now. And if you can promise them a road out of this, they will be more than willing to make some small sacrifices. Once they understand the threat, they will look to you. We've already begun reorganizing our media distribution networks- newspapers, radio- all the messaging will be under our supervision. Blame will be assigned to Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organizations. The groundwork is there. It will be easy for everyone to digest. It will be logical for them to understand. And we will protect them. We will keep them safe."

"You're underestimating the American people. I've found that to be a dangerous game."

Unperturbed, the shorter man responded, "With all due respect sir, you're overestimating them- which is even more dangerous."

"I'm the President of the United States, and I've sworn an oath to the-"

An interruption- he drew himself closer to the neatly decorated leader of the free world, a winsome former actor turned State Senator turned party debutante, elected by the people and for the people- "Sir, you will see them through. Don't worry. You will uphold your oath. But you will carry it out in the way that I have prescribed."

"Prescribed? What position are you in to threaten me?"

Clicking his tongue, remonstrating, the visitor offered, "I've already paid for your services, sir. This conversation- our conversation right now is more of a formality. With all due respect, you were nothing more than a face. The agenda has been ours since the outset. Our network owns the missiles, we own the guns, we own the tanks and the planes. The generals know who they take orders from. We've been kind enough to include you because we think it is important for a figurehead to remain intact for the American public to see and connect with, to remind them of the old ways."

"A figurehead?"

"I don't think I can find language that is clearer than that."

Turning, a third man, a skinny man with his chin tucked to his neck, sweating nervously- the President addressed him, "Did you know about all this, Ron?"

"We don't have much of a choice, Tom. We just don't. We need stability. We need order."

The shortest man in the triad, imperturbable, a smile on his face, a hand on the President's shoulder- "Listen to your friend, sir. Law and order. Do you know what brings law and order? Resources. Wealth. Weapons. We control the manufacturing plants, the generators. We already have a line of sight on how to begin to build the infrastructure back up. Replacing the damaged grids. Recreating the technology. We have microchips saved that can help, items that were spared. We've been planning for this. There are contingencies we can lean on. We can help. But you must be on board."

The President grimaced, "It doesn't feel right."

Nodding, "It's a difficult situation. Difficult situations require difficult decisions. I don't envy you. But I am here to commit our help to you. We are all here to help. But there are certain ways that we need to operate, to get this done correctly. Safely. There are going to be anarchist gangs, there are going to be lootings, riots. You need to weather the storm and restore order. We can help you do that."

A last stand, the President held firm. "I need to think about all of this. I need to get with my Cabinet, the Joint Chiefs." His eyes on Ron, narrowing, concerned- "Right? We have to engage in more conversations. I still haven't been able to connect around the globe, understand our allies' statuses, gather the intel. There's more information needed. The messaging you're talking about- it's a one-way street. And it's deceptive. It doesn't sit right with me. I'm sorry."

The short man's lips purse together, nearly imperceptibly, then relax. He nods. "Take your time. We respect your consideration. We'll wait for you to contact us."

"Alright then. Good day."

The gentleman in the Oval Office stood up from his seat. The President and Vice President followed suit. An exit, briefcases under arms, suit pants creased- he was escorted into an armored transport outside the White House. The man responsible for communicating the incipient stages of a plan to ultimately strip democracy from the most influential democratic nation on the planet, communicated in a professional and even keeled manner- he happened to own a luxury hotel down the street. The building had been fortified hours after the shutdown and was protected by a defense contracting firm. That's where he was headed, back to his hotel, to safety.

There was another man waiting for him inside the vehicle, fidgeting with his watch.

Impatient, before the gentleman had time to adjust his overcoat and buckle himself in. "Well?"

"He didn't wither up like a flower. But he'll be fine. I don't see any issues. Ultimately he doesn't have a choice, does he?"

"He wants to be a hero?"

"He doesn't know what he wants. He's a politician. He wants people to like him. We'll give him until tomorrow morning. We can bring the team in then. I think Ron will be able to talk the necessary sense into him so it doesn't turn ugly. But if he can't, so be it."

"Say he doesn't- how long did you give him?"

"I didn't. I said we would wait to hear back. If he doesn't call by tomorrow night, then we go forward exactly as we've all agreed upon. Smithe reviewed everything with me. We get rid of him and set Ron into position."

"And Ron's on board? He knows what's what?"

"He knows who's who."

"Good." The anxious man waited only a moment before, "Then there's the other matter."

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Capitalism arrived in the nineteenth century and was soon touted as a 'natural mechanism.' It was viewed as *the* system for dynamic Darwinian principles and paradigms to emerge, which would ensure a 'natural' playing field for economic and social evolution to occur (Spencer). In true Darwinian fashion- fueled by competition, by fitness, by contests amongst individuals i.e. corporations- its proponents highlighted pages in

biology textbooks and declared vainly “How could it go wrong? Mother Nature is never wrong.”

Capitalism as an economic and social system, insofar as its ability to coordinate the architecture of various groups and influence the behavior and development of those groups, produced an unforeseeable byproduct. The same process which brought riches and advancement also radically dulled and stagnated its citizenry’s collective intellect. Within a hundred and fifty years after the dawn of the Industrial revolution, any capitalist country’s voting populis might be best characterized as “a distracted, stultified herd of cogs.” Instead of propelling everyone forward, capitalism finally served only to keep a select few at the top of complex financial mountains. And their (the select few) primary objective became: keep the masses flush with debt, buying impulsively, reliant on modern technology and corporate marketing campaigns to make decisions. Individuals were stripped of identity, authenticity, autonomy. Entire industries surfaced that focused solely on how to make it easier to fill out a credit card form. Capitalism evolved, evolving by the 21st century into a liquid, digital economy run by a “nomadic and extraterritorial elite” (Zygmunt) who had lulled every sheep into the fields and sheared them all the same haircuts.

Whatever attitudes concerning resistance which might have been lying dormant in the general populis’ subconscious were expeditiously and demonstrably removed within the first weeks after the **CTGA** (*The Coalition for Truth and a Great America*) took hold. The **CTGA** acted supremely. No matter how despotic, any measure was fair game- imprisonment, disenfranchisement, ridicule, public executions, dress code enforcements- whatever seemed necessary in the moment was justified solely on the fact that it was enacted. Its very existence became its justification. Only what ought to exist, and it exists because it ought to. Those “nomadic, extraterritorial” titans morphed easily and undisturbed into the **CTGA**’s ruling body. And the rules had changed. The protocols, social contracts, due process and inalienable rights- revoked. Done away with in the name of protection. Done to safeguard our future. Done to keep women and children safe.

But it wasn’t the Bill of Rights which concerned the general populis. No, the quotidian citizen only hoped his cable sports channels would return. She yearned to order her morning coffee on the way to the gym, to pick up her latte in a pre-paid swoop, without being forced to make eye-contact with the barista who steamed the milk. They were willing to accept anything and everything the **CTGA** did, so long as it led them back to the pre-Knockout isolation and estrangement which marked their 21st century. And the **CTGA** was quick to make promises, to craft plans, to lay new foundations. Carrots were manufactured in the form of “Renewal Programs.” The Ter(mina)ls appeared. And the quotidian citizen agreed to ID checks, the security scans. The quotidian citizen acquiesced to the postponement of the General Election. Finance managers, communications directors, brand distributors- their mentality was simple: wait it out. *Keep obeying, and wait.*

The **CTGA** made overt displays of power in each of the major cities. Their motivation was predictable- their methods, tactical. Foreigners, members of fringe religious sects- anyone with a questionable background or questionable paperwork was targeted and used as a prop to make an example. Blood was spilled. A fear was born, then a sense of

gratitude- the quotidian citizen was grateful to be on the right team, on the right side- grateful to be a pure born American, grateful to now be plugged into **CTGA** networks.

The **CTGA** provided a false hope. And people needed hope once they realized the internet wasn't immediately rebooting back up. Once they realized the fast-food couldn't be delivered in time, the new shoes wouldn't be shipped, the coffee wouldn't be hot, the television channels wouldn't change, the files wouldn't load, the messages wouldn't send- because the transition away from technology was so abrupt, so sudden, it was inevitable such irrational hope was born and ceased to dissipate. People believed because since it departed so quickly, maybe it could return in much the same way. Dopesick but desperate, lugubrious but optimistic- the quotidian citizen had lost his/her/their fix. And it was too much. So as long as the **CTGA** could dangle a carrot out in front of the people's noses, they obeyed.

From an outside perspective, such behavior is rather easy to criticize. To call the quotidian citizen 'delusional' or 'misguided' is trite and offers no real insight into 21st century American history. Historians made similar claims against Jewish populations in 1930's Europe, when ghettos emerged and various signs all pointed in one sinister direction. "How did they *not* see it coming?" However, one thing cannot be overstated: change is difficult to accept. Despite the human brain's remarkable ability to adapt, to be faced with such a radical and profound change at such a large scale- these occurrences in history, time and time again, prove the public psyche is not dynamic enough to overcome. On an individual level, perhaps. But on the broad public scale- such reorientation is rarely, if ever, possible.

-O-

Williams, a ruthless biotech executive- a bullied, self-conscious man who harbored a brutish Napoleon complex thanks to his childhood, thanks to his father- thanks to his education, a scientist- an avaricious wolf-dressed-sheep- a hedonist posing as connoisseur who never missed an opera opening and kept a diary of the Michelin restaurants where he had dined- "I have a team assembled. I've pulled from my contacts with Lilly, Merck, Pfizer. We have the scientists, the manpower. That element is easy. Key piece right now is the machinery and the digital footprint- obviously. I'm getting a sense of the ask- in terms of cost, equipment, networks. Holden has offered assistance there. It shouldn't be more than a matter of months, I assume. After we solidify everything, bring the facility online, we'll retrieve the necessary personnel and their families- guarantees for safety in exchange for non-disclosures, that kind of thing. As long as the overall messaging holds, which I can't imagine why it wouldn't- I don't see any issues. Right now, based on the requirements, the resources- I have to nominate Chicago as the primary site."

"What are the timing estimates, once we're up and running?"

Snorting, Williams continued, "Roughly six years is what I've surmised, based on very high-level information. Plus or minus a couple- maybe five at the earliest, maybe eight or nine if it proves more complex, if there's additional challenges that we can't scope out right now."

Van Pult, a defense head, an industry leader, a market capitalizer- a tall, obese, inward man who inevitably loathed and resented any person he conversed with for longer than five minutes- unmarried, imposing, a misanthrope towards even his own mother- "Eight years is a long time, don't you think?"

Williams snorted again then spun himself dizzily along with, "Have you heard of the Apollo missions? Have you heard of blind engineering? I don't even know what the challenges are going to be at this point. I don't know what a long time is or isn't for that matter. I'm making a guess based on my industry expertise and experience, which I happen to have a *shitload* of. Which you happen to have *fucksquat* of. Okay?"

Johnson- a cattle man, a meat purveyor- a butcher, a killer, prod in hand- "For Chrissakes! We just need to get it right and get 'er done. Let's not get into prognosticating at this stage of the game. A gentlemen only predicts the future when he's at a racetrack."

"Here here!"

Van Pult, "Listen- what I meant was--"

The most respected member of the quorum and their tacit leader interjected. His interjection brought a muted hush to the rest of the members. "Come now- enough theatrics." A silence amongst the expensive calf leather belts with silver-plated, low-profile buckles, among the platinum cufflinks and Italian silk kerchiefs, among men who had traded passe notions of brotherhood for margins and bottom lines.

Smithe- a devout Protestant, a church-goer, a punctilious believer, a traditionalist, a man of refined comportment; a racist, a bigot, a fiendish sociopath who relished in witnessing a particularly sharp look of anguish on the face of another man- "(cough) This is bigger than any one of us. We stand at the dawn of a new day. Our children, their children, our families will be inheritors of a new earth. A divine birthright. And our duty is to see to it this birthright is claimed. Make no mistake- our course is one of destiny. This goes beyond anything we've ever worked for. You've been chosen- you've made it to the inner sanctum. Your lives have been examples of hard work, of success- so hear me. I don't want any pettiness. Are we aligned? God is with us. May He continue to be."

Johnson- who had carved enough roasts onto holiday platters- ejected forth a perfunctory "Amen!"

More plans were discussed. After intense deliberation the nuclear option had been rejected- without the satellites, the guidance systems, precision channels- untenable. A new dream had been conjured in an atomic wake- it would be a biological finale, an inversion of mother nature upon herself, a perversion- a perverse sense of importance, these deliverers- a decision: a super-virus, a contagion, an epidemic so precise and effective and insidious that nobody would survive. Nobody, save for those chosen. A small colony handpicked to restart history, privy to a new beginning. To walk back into the Garden. Paradise. A terrible love, a terrible burden- to take on the responsibility of all their fellows, the citizens of the United States and the World. To say 'Be silent, be still, rest easy my children.' To blow the final note which would announce at last the kingdom is upon us- upon them.

A joke- "And I thought I walked in on the ground floor when I bought up thirty-thousand shares of Google for \$54.00 a pop!" Laughter, roaring laughter. They would spend the evening amidst bottles of aged merlot, medium-rare prime choice filets, Eastern European escort girls (or underage boys, depending on their taste), high-grade pharmaceutical cocktails, baroque music, and firmness of mind. Firm, decided, self-righteous and true. A military installation, hidden away, charting the next chapters of human history- Rapidan Camp without the fish.

Theirs was a terrible love- a love of self so twisted and warped by conceit that it presented as a love for other, a love for mankind. Smithe especially- he had warped his beliefs, tooled his rationalizations in such a way where his purpose as a steward, a leader, a redeemer became understood by him in cosmic terms. Bunkered in a luxury compound, playing jury over who of God's children would go forth, forever and ever. Positioned behind the seven angels with their seals torn open and halos burning against an inky horizon, trumpets lurching into the night- burnt earth, sanguine oceans, acerbic tongues, fallen stars, swarms of locusts, an army of man, a legion of demons, a declaration of kings.

Their love was not a recent development. There had been plans, there had been contrivances- there had been chances, missed. The architecture of their plan, the roots of this comprehensive and irrecoverable dispossession, had been stenciled well before the Knockout. For thousands of years in one form or another the technocrats, the corpocracy- wealthy elites who ran the world from luxury yachts, reeking of hereditary entitlement and birthrights, clinging to their double-helix strands with phosphodiester grips, self-willed and bred to control fate- the privileged had long been clouded by pride with visions of a perfect society.

These were men of numbers, the original language of love- men who examined the world and prattled out rational lines of thought like: *Look at that- a thirteen cents per gallon difference. Station A, versus Station B. So with twenty gallons a week, at two dollars and sixty cents, over fifty two weeks, for five years- we're at nearly seven hundred dollars. Those kinds of things make a difference. It all adds up. So when I drive home, I'll be sure to go the extra mile to save the thirteen cents. And by doing so, I'll be leveraging my rational mind to exploit market dynamics to my advantage. I win. Little decisions like that compound. People don't think about buying gas for five years. They want whatever is most convenient. Well, a little inconvenience can save you a ton of money. Potato chips on sale, bottled water in bulk- when you go through your grocery list, your weekly and monthly bills- even after the easy fixes like insurance, cell phone service providers, cable plans- with the little things alone you're talking thousands, tens of thousands of dollars. That's real money back in your pocket.* These lovers truly represented apotheosis of efficiency- J. Edgar bureaucrats, Henry Ford assemblers- and their efficiency had won them substantial fortunes. Could you blame them for playing a numbers game?

A terrible love, a glorified love, but a burdensome love- in conjunction with his feelings of glorification, Smith quietly pitied himself and his peers. Heavy were the heads. Indeed, theirs was a difficult decision. Imagine the pressure to assume responsibility for nearly two hundred million souls nationally, untold billions globally, 98% dead within the first week, 100% within the month- a tremendous burden indeed. But what else would you have them do? Given the state of affairs? Couldn't you see the direction our over-populated, polluted, resource scarce world was headed towards? Who else was there to step in for the greater good? Who would have the courage, the ability to compartmentalize, to display such radical love as to carry out such unfathomable decisions? Can you truthfully look around the highway Rest Stop into those myriad driver side windows, at the other faces, at the cigarette smokers flipping butts onto the meridian- when you see them, do you feel any sympathy? Trash, plastic, pollution, Christmas at Niagara Falls aglow with fireworks the incandescence radiating blue and purple and red hundreds and thousands of watts the sound echoing the thunderous roars and there go the frenetic birds huddled near the water's edge at the foot of the wall, frightened off and tremulous, ejected like Annie Edson Taylor her barrel over gravity's fulcrum no time to look down and understand the freedom of death- look around and tell me who has earned a right to stay here? Every sublime vision we commercialized, bastardized- then consumed and excreted and plotted to market and resell our excrement- was it sustainable? Had we been worthy inheritors? How well did we do? How well did you do?

Are you worthy?

So here were the members of the jury, the judges and the executioners. This is how their verdict was issued and carried out.

Terrible lovers. Terror- each of them slept well that night, after their meals and satisfactions, after their visits to the bathroom and glances in the mirror. Dreamers, asleep and secure after an evening of brinksmanship. Each of them relaxed. Each of them- convinced. This was the only way out. Seven churches, twenty-four elders, twelve apostles, one solution: to eradicate the world of mankind with a virus of mankind's making. They would herd up the remaining souls like cattle, cull them- a scythe, harrowing- the breeze, winnowing- one by one, all for one. Immunity, an antidote- this would be the chosen's protection. Their families. Those appointed. There would be a new beginning. A new world. Once the aerosols had been deployed. Once the fire had subsided. They would emerge as rightful inheritors.

Yes. It was good- the first day and night. It was right. It was necessary.

That next day a representative of their ranks was sent to meet with the President of the United States. "Yes sir. We will get through this. Together."

So it began.

A fraternity of greed- a ring of scions, vindictive little boys who were never taught right from wrong, whose fathers kept mistresses and forged documents as they saw fit, whose fathers before them kept land and slaves and made their bones off the sweat and blood of fellaheen tribes- boys accustomed to front rows,

backroom settlements, eyelashes from the pulpit, handshake deals. The products of money enriched with radical theology, bred through rigorous lines of pedigree.

And now here they sat- fulfillers of prophecy, hypocrites in a state of blissful denial- uncontested and in prime position- a red fox cotillion hosted henhouse.

This is how it happened.

They consolidated the military forces, disbanded government, aggregated their resources, and ruthlessly instilled a program of fear from the top down. Only the most deluded, the most power hungry, the fiercest of lovers could survive the politics amongst the upper echelon- once the dust settled, after the Knockout, this table of nine convened henceforth. The good shepherds, the Nine Muses- the quorum, or so they called themselves- conducting the business of humanity as a self-appointed rarefied majority. Operating with a sense of duty distinct to the aristocracy.

Weren't you curious?

-O-

Every user who enters a Ter(mina)ls for the first time does so with an intention to exchange their hard-earned credits for time at a station. They have X amount of credits and set out to convert those credits to X amount of time on the line. To enjoy their session, and then to leave. Nobody starts off in debt. But after that automated timer runs out, when the glasses come off, when the access is terminated- an attendant enters their station. She is pretty. An arrangement is made. Time can be loaned. Debt can be assumed. A fixed rate. Take as much as you want. Fill out the forms. Press your finger pads on the ink, then on the paper. Enjoy the first six hours on us. Here's a complimentary meal. A glass of water. We'll return in a little bit.

The remnants of the internet, reconsidered, reimagined- a virtual world, immersed- distilled into a perfect stimulus generator. A neural and sensory abductor.

Enjoy!

But after the second timer runs out, a different attendant enters the room. This one isn't as polite. He is a burly man, a vein in his neck, a filmy substance over his grey eyes, a steel-linked chain- he barks orders, unplugs the machine, points down a hallway to a 'conversion zone'- another hallway, liminal, and into a Work(S)tation(s). Turnstiles, bicycles, rowing machines- men and women covered in sweat, heave-ho. Indentured servitude commences. There are no hymnals sung, no gospel drones- there is grunting, a foul odor, a single lightbulb, electric cattle prods- *this can't be right- twenty hours of this? I only was on the line for six! This isn't fair. I didn't know!* There is no glass of water. There is no hot plate of food. There is slow, terrible anguish.

Slave labor.

On every corner, in every neighborhood, stacked on top of each other- wheels turning, kinetic heat and friction, sweat converted to electricity- why doesn't anyone ever leave? Why are there only Entrances, and not Exits? Can you imagine these horrible edifices? Buildings cooped with people like mammalian test subjects, motoring away at bicycles to generate power for the grids. Converted warehouses, apartment complexes, high-rise structures filled to capacity- buckets and troughs of feces and urine tossed out of windows- women raped in corridors, men brutalized in public- bound, gagged, chained- whips and mallets and blunt objects. A depraved engagement overseen by ruthless taskmasters, taskmasters who were all too happy to preside over this institution of atavistic regression. Extracted, former members of street gangs- the most psychopathic, the least human- unholy primitives- the dominator model in its apotheosis. At night, sometimes you can hear the howls, the cries and the wailing.

Everyone knows someone lost to the Work(S)tation(s).

Mankind converted to property. Free will converted to electricity. Mechanical energy transformed into a resource for the wealthy. Power. Forget coal, forget nuclear fusion, forget steam- ours is an age fueled by human carnage. Children born from women, born into the world to become adults, to grow as human beings with minds and bodies and souls- these children were transformed into abject rodents, their feet

and arms scurrying in cages, reduced to a single craving: a droplet of sugar water dispensed from a communal feeding tube.

Millions of users every day.

The **CTAG** (*Collective of True American Greatness*) controls everything. They set the interest rates. They maintain the access feeds. They hire the attendants. They make the rules. They shuttle bodies out of the Work(S)tation(s), people converted to chaff by exhaustion, dehydration. Bodies ushered away, out of rooms and out of sight- ultimately, flung down garbage chutes, burnt up in incinerators. No family members notified. No Last Rites granted. Another body quickly replaces the previous one, converted to ash and smoke. Conversions. Transformations.

Holocaust.

But above the tunnels and basements of Work(S)tation(s) rest legions of happy, ecstatic users. Individual Ter(mina)ls buzz. Simulations executed. Haptic suits excited. Visors filled with color, earbuds vibrating with sound. Sex. Fame. Fortune. Television stations. Movies. Music. Digital archives, libraries of media to be consumed. Algorithms for erotic adventures, for military campaigns, for shopping excursions- millions of permutations stored in server vaults, the hardware structures that had come to replace their wireless forebearers. Processors. Data banks protected by armed guards.

Proof in the devil? Perhaps.

Proof in mankind's inability to change, in its insistence to hold onto the past- our great balking- to let go and go on? Assuredly.

Day after day the Ter(mina)ls hum.

Night after night the bodies burn.

Imagine it.

And only the **CTAG** stands to benefit. No SEC regulators, no OSHA enforcements, no checks and balances. Pure profit. Pure power. Access- to electricity, to resources, to weapons, to technology, to education. Deftly controlling a citizenry's collective impulses and herding the common man into quiet, desperate corners of loneliness- all while appointed officials host dinner parties with elegant table settings, pungent cocktails, string quartets, their children asleep in warm bedrooms.

-O-

Surrounded on all sides, nobody listening- "You don't have to look any further to find what you came here to see! It's in each of you. You already possess the answers! You already know the truth!"

Insolent, "What about the **CTAG**?!"

"They're not the enemy! They're scared children, too. Love them. That's how we beat them. We stand together, and we go forward a different way."

Indistinct, "Overthrow them!"

"We can't meet their force with force. We need to absorb their hate with love. You are all accountable, everyone here today. Transform yourself, and then you will watch the **CTAG** disappear. You'll see. Watch!"

Boos. Boos and shouts and expectations. They wanted miracles.

Nameless, "You're a goddamn phony!"

Faceless, "What are we supposed to do?!"

Everybody, "Give us an answer! We came for an answer!"

-O-

Martin took a sip from his thermos. The wind blew a stale, dry, biting air into his tattered wool coat. It nipped at him through holes under the arm, in the pockets. "You know your problem?" Tense, metallic- into Inrini's piercing malachite eyes- inhaling his cigarette, then releasing a cloud of smoke into the gelid breeze, "You don't take anything seriously."

Inrini grinned, coy, undeterred by his remark- "You're a lot like your brother."

Martin glared. "I'm nothing like my brother. He wants to beat them playing by their rules. He thinks he can bring the fight to their playing field. He went back on everything he ever stood for."

She breathed into her palms, tried to fill her body with heat, "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant- the way you approach the **CTAG**. You have that conspiracy vibe."

"Conspiracy vibe?"

"Yeah. A little paranoid. But cute."

Martin pulled his collar up to his chin. "You think the **CTAG** is a conspiracy? I don't understand. Conspiracy vibe- explain that to me?"

Inrini fidgeted. "You blow the whole thing into the **CTAG** is out to end the world or something. And that you're in a position to fight back- like, there's a holy war going on."

"You don't think they represent a totalitarian regime?"

"Sure, they do."

"And you're satisfied to be subject to that?"

"I'm trying to get by, like everybody else."

An animated look flashed across Martin's face. "Everybody else, huh?"

"I get where you're coming from, I just- I don't get as fired up as you. I try to stay balanced- not get too upset. There's only so much anybody can do. I'd rather not think about it all." She turned a pewter and turquoise ring on her middle finger.

Martin wouldn't let her off the hook. "They're thinking about you, believe that. And they're betting on you not to react."

"They don't matter to me. I'm an artist."

"What kind of artist doesn't respond to their environment?"

Inrini pulled down on her pant leg, black jeans- a closed fist tattoo'd the size of a quarter on her ankle- the tension exposed another on her forearm, a sun mandala, born from under an army fatigue jacket, "That's extrapolating a little, don't you think?"

Martin stubbed out the butt end of the cigarette. He cracked his hairy knuckles, unearthed a pack of cigarettes from a breast pocket. He took a deep breath and turned deeply towards Inrini. "If you don't take this seriously, then we shouldn't be here. We're wasting each other's time. And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot."

"What?"

"Othello."

Inrini considered her options. She nearly acted on a compulsion to stand up, to leave the bench, to take her work somewhere else, to forget this unhinged outsider and his Shakespeare. But Martin was a genius. He was Zevi's older brother. This was an opportunity. "What do you want from me, exactly?"

Drily, "Total commitment."

Inrini snickered, "We've shifted to religious cult vibes now."

"I'm not qualified to lead a cult. I've only read the Bible once."

Surprised, "You've read the Bible?"

"New Testament."

Incredulous, she asked, "Front to back?"

Martin began to tap his heel at the concrete. Another wintry gust swooped over the pair. An urban park. Police shuttling around the periphery. People hustling, people bustling- a hoarse voice, "Front to back. Never discredit anything without the proper amount of inspection. And I'll tell you a story, a true story- I was coming down off a rough tear, real rough, on the road for a couple of months after I had picked junk back up after going clean a ways. It was bad. Real bad. After the tour ended, I ran out of cash, out of dope, and I checked myself into a hotel with my manager's card on the grounds I would get clean. He bought me about \$20.00 worth of cereal and that's how I kicked. It must have been maybe ten, eleven years ago? And this was a particularly grueling run of gigs- I was touring with Lydeco, and Dead Horse Jerry- I was so nodded out- we had done an insane East coast haul, like forty shows in forty-five days- and right after the last show, I bailed with my gear and I holed up in a **Motel 6** for two weeks. It was in Sunnydale, NY. I'll

never forget the name. Sunnydale. Out in the Hudson Valley where no one could find me. My phone was dead, and- I *agonized* myself into sobriety, you know? But I'll tell you what, after like three days in pain, sweating, laying in a bed of pins and needles, watching T.V.- a thought occurred to me- so I stopped what I was doing, stopped suffering, and I opened up the dresser drawer. I don't know why I remembered it, but I heard this voice in my head saying that in every hotel room in America there's one book: a Bible. So I opened up that top drawer, and there it was. I opened that thing up. I read it nonstop for a week. Non-stop. I ate it up. Then I checked out of Sunnydale, and I've been clean and clear since. Pure crystalline."

Inrini, dismayed, "Really?"

"Scout's honor."

"Wow." She looked over Martin. A stout man, an untapped battery- the scruff, the faded clothing, the look- a bohemian assassin of sorts. Winsome at one point in his life. She was intrigued- there was this elan about him. She was immediately glad she hadn't stood up to leave. "You don't seem the type- I mean, no offense, but you just don't strike me as, the type."

Martin deadpanned. "I'll pocket that as a compliment."

A silence passed between them, echoing almost.

Martin picked up the conversation, as if he decided to begin vocalizing his current thought stream, "All my life, playing and recording, drinking and drugging, screaming and shouting- what I wanted was wholeness. I thought that fighting, protesting, being destructive- that was my way to get there. A revolutionary- fighting the man, fighting the status quo, I was against all these things- but I wasn't *for* anything. I didn't stand behind anything."

Inrini considered Martin's words. "That's what kids do."

"Right. And then kids grow up. I've been trying to make music that stands *for* something, music that I felt proud of, that meant something. When my focus shifted, it felt good. It felt good to represent something constructive, to be behind something constructive. And I've realized since then something important- nobody can take that feeling away from me. The **CTAG**. You. That cop. Nobody. Nobody can take that feeling away from me. That's something I can own, and control."

"You're really something else." Inrini lit a cigarette, in disbelief- amazed she might actually agree with him. She ruminated, replaying Martin's words, inhaling smoke. She unconsciously bent over to check the laces on her boots. "I dig what you're on- but what does all of this have to do with lights, with music?"

A deep breath. Martin stood up, noticing a patch of dying trees, one of the last in the park. He looked down to her, "This isn't about music, or lights. If you think that's why I'm here, then I should go."

Inrini considered his question. Here they were, acquaintances of only ten minutes, and the question was put to her. He had been right. She didn't take anything seriously. She hadn't wanted to. It cost too much. There was too much vulnerability, and vulnerability led to pain. But she knew she had to make a choice. She knew Martin's reputation. She knew he could push her. She knew he was doing something special. She knew she wanted to be in his band. She wanted to make art, to do something meaningful- even if it was against the law. Even if it did make her vulnerable. Even if it did lead to pain. As Martin started to walk away, "I know why you're here, and why I'm here. And I'm serious. I want to do this."

Martin sat back down. He turned to her. "You don't even know what *this* is."

Inrini snapped, "There's nothing I take more seriously than my art. It's the only thing I take seriously. It's all I have. So don't tell me I don't know what *this* is."

Martin shouted back, "This isn't about music! This is about a message! We are vessels. Ves-sels. Empty."

Inrini didn't know how to respond- maybe she didn't understand. Maybe she couldn't do it. Maybe this was too much. Her old band, they could still gig, there was enough work in the Catacombs- doubting- unsure- his last words echoed in her mind, visualizing emptiness. Empty. She scratched her chin then asked Martin, "Why ISHMAEL?"

He smiled, the first one she had seen on his face. Then, "*His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him.*"

Inrini grunted through her nose, impressed. "You're going to chapter and verse me, aren't you?"

"Genesis. 16:12. This project is the culmination. This is where it begins and ends for me." Pointing to his head, forefinger menacing like a loaded gun. "And the only way we can work together is if it's the same for you."

Inrini paused. She sensed the gravity of the moment. She sensed the fork in the road, the bifurcation of parallel multiverses- one path was certainly more established than the other, but where it led was brokedown Freedom City blues, cold rainwater blues like the January Second Blues like all the beatdown cold-water flat blues of broken shoelaces, the kind of blues she'd always known and understood well and didn't need any more of- it wouldn't bring her fulfillment. There was no risk in being miserable, groveling about the Catacombs, pretending to be hip. It wasn't what she was looking for. It wasn't why she decided to meet Martin in the first place. Even if the blues couldn't be escaped, they might as well be tender heart'd Billie Holiday blues lined in melancholic spotlight hope. "I'm in."

Martin stood up. "A man can die but once. Let's go."

"Where?"

He flipped his cigarette, his eyes sailing on an impossible horizon. "You want to hear what I have so far, don't you?"

-O-

"Why did you stop talking publicly?"

Zevi cleared his throat. "Because people stopped listening. They didn't want a message. They wanted a fight. So I drew my connections together. I found out there were bands of potential fighters in the Catacombs ready, waiting be mobilized- only they didn't have the encouragement, the tools. So I went into the shadows. I actually started doing something."

-O-

Martin cleared his throat. "We lived in a world without scarcity. Music, literature- the arts were stripped of value because of their accessibility. A lot of people thought it was great. (sardonic tone) 'Anyone can listen to Mozart! Everyone can learn about the Clash!' I said it from the beginning, (a cautious tone) 'I don't know about this.' I wasn't into the downloads, the streaming, the subscription packages. I can't believe I'm saying this, but scarcity creates value- merit and talent are important, sure- but not exclusively. If a consumer can have everything their heart desires at the tip of their fingertips- nothing is special anymore. If I can find it lickety split, like 'kaboom!' there it is- there's no adventure. And there's no appreciation. You just end up consuming for the sake of consumption. You don't treasure it. And if you don't treasure it, it doesn't impact you. It isn't *yours*- it's everyone's. And when you don't even get off on it- it's crazy, right? The whole point is to get off!

"Unlimited content, unlimited access- it was twisted. Totally twisted.

"Because I remember when people owned records- your collection was like a statement about your entire being. You could literally determine who somebody was by their record collection. It told their story. It told you about their politics, their childhood- everything! I remember those days. And each record I bought- I *owned* that record, you know? I owned it. I owned that band. They were my band, that was my record. It became part of my DNA. I would memorize the liner notes. Every lyric. And if I discovered an obscure or weird band, then it was like- it's like I became their fucking manager!

"And here's another other part- and this is understated, too, about the whole thing- when you used to buy records, usually there was somebody who turned you on to that record. Whoever that person was, you trusted them. There were relationships built. There was a human connection- the relationship itself became part of the music. Then, in turn, if you shared that band or that album with somebody- it was like sharing magic. This gift you could give to people- I might share that band with only an elite few. It became very important.

"But once it became about quantity, once it became about unlimited access- you can't be an expert in all these different genres- you end up a dilettante. You dabble. Nothing sinks in. And that's how I saw the

whole scene. Surface level. Girl Scout badges- accumulation. It wasn't about listening, or experiencing-frisson, there was no frisson! There was no feeling in it. It became a checkbox. (a conceited voice) 'Yep, I've listened to Beethoven's 7th. Done with that. I read a New York Times review on it. Cool. Next stop, Vivaldi's seasons.' What? I mean- you missed the whole point! Beethoven, the ascension- what Beethoven was trying to do with his music, to elevate mankind as a *fucking* species, to the heavens- and to listen to him once and say 'Alright, onto the next.' Unreal! But that's how it was. That's how messed up everything was.

"So no. To answer your question- no, I don't miss the way things were. Not for a second. The whole thing was unnatural."

-O-

Martin went on. "You know what Native Americans observed about the Europeans, when we came and laid waste to all the tribes, stole up all their land? It's well documented. Those adobe skywalkers said white men don't pay attention to anything. We look at a tree, call it a tree, and it looks the same as every other tree. Every tree we see gets replaced with an idealized image in our heads. We do that to everything. We categorize everything we see into a simpler version than what it actually is. We lose contact with the real. That rock, it looks like every other rock. We label it, move on. We don't actually *see* it. We're lazy- they watched us, they saw how lazy we are. They were shocked by that. They were moved to sympathy, actually. Because we miss the entire point. We form no real connection to anything. We were pitiful in their eyes."

He couldn't take all the credit.

"My younger brother- I have my issues with him, but he taught me how to examine the culture around me. He had the game read, from an early age. He was wise in that sense. And he put his money where his mouth was. He sacrificed his normal life, became an ascetic, seriously- he dropped out. He saw through it all. I respected him for that. He told me about the Native Americans and the Europeans. He schooled me up on a lot of things."

-O-

Zevi approached his older brother and bent down next to him, "Why do you look so defeated?"

"You're joking, right?"

Encouraging, "Come on Martin, you knew how she was going to react. What's done is done."

Martin lingered, not wanting to let go of his grief, "Part of me thought- I thought she might be able to see things from my perspective. She told me she loved me. We had been dating for years."

"I understand. But the other part of you has to be relieved. You were honest. She was honest. It's not going to work out, so now you can move on."

Martin paused. "You wouldn't understand Zev, for everything you know, you've never been in love with somebody. You've never-" Martin stopped.

Zevi crossed his arms, "You're right. I've never been in love. But that doesn't mean I can't tell you that this is for the better. That you did the right thing."

Resigned, "I wish it could have worked out, that's all."

Zevi responded, "Even if working out meant you had to live a lie? Meant you had to sacrifice your integrity?"

"No. It's not that. I- I thought after all the time we spent together, that she could at least acknowledge me for where I might be coming from, why I might feel and think the way I feel and think."

Zevi softened his voice, "I hate to lay it on you like this, Martin. But here's what you have to understand: people like that don't value perspective. Her mindset is white, conservative, privileged- she grew up that way, looks at the world through those lenses, acts and behaves within those standards- and to her that is how everyone should be thinking and acting. Because it's the *right* way. She equates her background to being right. Being white, conservative, privileged- it qualifies her and everyone like her to be right. If you

don't think, feel, behave within her framework, within her cultural system- you're disqualified. Because you're wrong. She's right, and you're wrong."

Martin protested, "Nobody operates like that. That kind of black and white-

"But they do! They all do, Martin! Look around. This is only one example. They need to be right, at any cost. It's a zero sum. And so every experience, every moment, every perceptual datum filters through their culturally curated lens and is transubstantiated into truth. Anything that contradicts their thoughts, opinions, feelings, beliefs- it is attacked and ridiculed and *less than*. With these people, anything different is automatically *less than*- kaboom. Categorically. Empirically. Morally. Whatever- *less than*. They're all wired that way, conditioned to think along the lines of that program - it's developed into such a powerful, subconscious mechanism- there's no breaking it. You weren't going to change anything. You brought it to light. You did yourself a favor."

Martin looked at his brother. "You've been reading too much."

Zevi quipped back, "You've been sleeping too much. Come on. Don't let this bog you down. You're the one who's been freed. She can't even imagine a world where somebody has a different, but equal, viewpoint as her own. Could it be any sadder? The solipsism, at that point- how lonely must she be at the core? It almost makes me shudder."

"She's not a villain, Zev. She's a kid."

Contemptuously, "She's a product, Martin. A product of a system."

Martin huffed, "Queue the emo music. Queue the mood lights."

Zevi appreciated his brother's humor, but he would not resign to levity. "The only reason for somebody to invest time in another person, spend the effort to understand their context and appreciate their story- the only way you do that is if you believe that there is some inherent value in their worldview, behind that story. Any truly moral position begins from the premise that every human life has value. Each of us is different, but equally valuable. But them- their position isn't rooted that way. To them- we are of no value."

"That's heavy, Zev. Maybe we ought to kill them all, huh?"

"They're too pitiful." The younger of the brothers mused, pinched his left cheek, and shook his head. There was nothing affectatious about his reaction. There had never been anything affectatious about Zevi. Martin had been jealous of his brother for precisely this reason. So when Zevi spoke these words, they resonated even more plangently within Martin's head- his heart. "What a narrow, sheltered, pessimistic, fearful, petty, little world to live inside. Horrible. They need hugs. They need love."

Martin considered his relationship with Tessa. "I tried to love her."

"Then it was her loss." Zevi contemplated for a moment, his eyes nearly closed, he puffed air into one of his cheeks, "Maybe they're beyond love. Maybe things have gone that far."

"People can change, Zev. I've seen it."

"Maybe. I've only read about it."

-O-

It didn't happen with a flash. There was no explosion. No aerial bombers, no collapsing towers- there were no pictures, no footage. It was not televised. There were no eye-witness interviews. There were no reporters. At sometime around 4:13AM GMT on March 13, the electrical grid went offline. For no apparent reason, by no apparent cause, transformers stopped transforming and power lines stopped powering, extinguished in a silent death. On highways across the country, all over the world, cars shut down. Halted. Accidents, deaths. Every computer, every microchip, every battery- silenced. Oil rigs, commercial vessels, ocean liners- rendered useless, crewed by unlucky deckhands who would float aimless in the Atlantic, the Pacific. Communications were terminated- the global community was ejected back into the past, back to insular nations. In a heartbeat-

panicky bands of nomads. Every single item plugged into a wall, every single piece of equipment with a diode, a circuit, a transistor- dead. Instant junk.

That morning most people waited. They didn't know what to do. Unless you had an automobile manufactured sometime in the 20th century, you had no means of travel other than by foot. Men scratched their heads. Women yelled at their husbands. Children screamed at their mothers. Hysteria built slowly- a spore of fear, a single fungus. A few of the brave walked to grocery stores, but buildings with electronic locks could not be opened. Credit cards were no longer accepted. There was no way to communicate. There was no central intelligence. Anyone with a job dependent on the mechanizations of the internet- out of luck. Computers- a thing of the past. There was simply nothing for people to listen to. The spore proliferated. Doors were locked. Guns were loaded.

Bottled water, liquor, toilet paper, Tylenol, dry goods- potato chips, cans of kidney beans, Twinkies- the shelves were cleared. The fear grew- multiplied, exponential- a colony of horrors with unlimited nutrients. At hospitals, nursing homes, medical facilities- the Angel of Death struck fierce and swift. Within the first six hours, millions died across the country. Life support machines were no longer able to support life. As pharmaceutical therapies ran out, as treatments were no longer available, millions more would follow. The early days of the Knockout were marked by a terrible howl- bodies fell out of truck beds, piled up on sidewalks. Funeral homes were shut down. Grandparents were buried in backyards. The panic continued. Water plants, nuclear power plants- bedlam. In urban areas, looting ensued. Greedy, untrusting- those who didn't have enough attacked those who did- bricks flew into windows, doors were barricaded then smashed open. Nobody banded together outside of simple family structures. Nothing was coordinated. People retreated into small circles of protection dictated by self-interest, as they are wont to do in times of uncertainty. The poor behaved desperately- the rich hid out in their mansions. No sense of fellowship, no brotherhood. Infected. A nation bloated with fear. Suppurated.

There was no presence of authority for months. Gangs were formed. Strongmen emerged ready to leverage their street mentality. The products of rough neighborhoods, with backgrounds in criminal behavior and violence, took to the suburbs. They led armies into picket fence'd Pleasantvilles. Local police hid out- or they were killed. There was no backup. There was no security. Women were raped. Teenage girls were ravaged. Husbands were murdered. Sons were recruited. Eventually, people stopped screaming 'Police! Help! Police!' It didn't take long for the protective layers which hold any society together, which manifested as tax-dollar funded first-responders, which represented justice and truth and order, to disintegrate. Total chaos. Nobody was coming to help you. Nobody cared.

Fires, panes of shattered glass, more bodies- eventually, after two or three months, the Army appeared. The National Guard. The gangs were repelled. Communications were restored- the government enabled cities and towns with makeshift radio devices. Rudimentary communications were put in place. Soldiers walked the streets with automatic weapons. That's when the news came: it had been an act of terrorism. An act of subterfuge coordinated and executed by foreign Jihadists. Those same bastards who had done us in before- they did it again. They had invaded our country. They had sailed over to our shores under pirate flags looking to finish the job. But we wouldn't let them.

We were America. Remain calm. Come to the cities. Order is being restored. The messages were printed and distributed across the country. There were more invasions, by other groups- right wing nationals from Russia, communists from China, splinter cells of European fascists, African warlords. If a man wasn't a God-fearing, white-skinned, pure-bred American, he couldn't be trusted. Come to the cities. Bring your papers, your documents. Transit, housing, supplies- they will be provided for. We will band together. We will beat this. We will beat them. We will eliminate the UNDOX. We will restore America.

The **CTAG** was formed- a coalition between Republicans and Democrats, between former governors and mayors and elected officials. The President was kept at a distance, and the typical mechanisms (Cohen, Noel, Karoll, Zaller) which swayed Presidential politics became nullified. Washington DC maintained a certain air of busyness, of kinesis, but it was done entirely for show. The museums, the galleries- shut down. Universities were chain linked shut. Military districts were created. Former gang leaders, street thugs, and convicts soon were recruited as **CTAG** lackeys and competed with those former politicians for clout. A new hierarchy was established.

But games were staged for free at The Olympian- a converted basketball stadium- with baseball, basketball, football at the professional levels dissolved, a new distraction was required. Juvenal's masses gathered *en masse* to watch cage matches to the death. Pain. Bones crunching, perfect. The **CTAG** first and foremost provided necessary entertainment. State approved bloodletting.

And the messages continued to repeat, unchanging: *Things will improve, remain calm. Carry your papers. Watch out for terrorists. Report suspicious activity. See something, say something.*

-O-

A woman nudged her partner, with vapors of her breath escaping from between her chapped lips, "Rumor is **CTAG** gonna raid this joint for UNDOX- any day now. We might be on the street by the end of the night." A man, "Maybe we'll catch a break?" Chicago had been the first city to fully converted. Consolidated- consolidated was the official verbiage. The woman, "Catch a break?"

-O-

A private thought, harried, frozen, standing in line for rations- crystalline breath- hands crusted in earth in dirt in death, knuckles fissured and split into brown rivers of dried blood, fingernails yellowed and infected- gazing down at her hands- she had always admired her hands- a small point of pride- her grandmother, "My, you have the most feminine fingers, don't you? Those will serve you well."- her mother, her grandmother, her daughter- dead- everyone, everything- fallen- falling- the city had added another ten feet of fencing, on the North Avenue bridge, above the river, the cable-stayed bridge- a group of suicide jumpers, in the February cold- she heard it from a woman in her building, the jumpers didn't even scream out when they hit the icy waters- that's how bad it had gotten- the relief of death- her hands- can you make it that high, could you bear me up twenty-five feet, over the barbed wire, and let go- she exhales, walks away from the bread line.

-O-

An emissary from "NCABA Division within the **CTAG**," a gaunt man with sunken eye-sockets whose posture seemed contrived and showy, over six feet three inches tall, angular and shadowy- he stood up from an

elegant leather chair with plush armrests to address the scientist and said, "I read your report Doctor Frye. Progress has been slow, has it not?"

"Unfortunately, we have not made the early gains we had hoped for."

Punctuating his syllables, like a man who had been trained to do his job by television programs and movies, dramatic and affectatious, "And what do you attribute this lack of progress to?"

Roger Frye bit the inside of his cheek, a nervous habit. He adjusted his glasses. He pointed his elbows into his desk. He looked up at the visitor. "It's been difficult controlling the mutation of the viral genomes we've developed. Based on the existing epidemiological data, and our assessment, the strains we have been manipulating have been unstable, to an extent we could not have predicted. We've been able to have success in the early runs, but the architecture of the vector tends to destabilize, losing effectiveness as it travels between hosts and across generations. There are factors at play which are inherent to working within a biological system. This particular factor, the piece around maintaining integrity, has been most challenging to overcome. We have had little success with known countermeasures, at least in terms of sequence preservation in viral entities, based on the existing literature, so now we are working now on developing alternatives. We're essentially inventing new technologies in this field, to overcome the problem."

"Your report mentioned the need for more samples?"

"The more material we have the better, yes, that is correct."

The emissary rebuked, "The city's Sanitation Officer claims to fill up twelve thousand Ter(mina)ls every day. He claims to have over 37 million daily users, which comes out to four fifths of the city. Eighty percent. And he claims to collect on all of them. Every single one. You need more material? I believe you have plenty of material. The Board has access to a prison colony full of test subjects, full of terrorists who are disposable and who can be used according to your discretion. You have more material, more resources than you know what to do with. And that may be the real problem. I find your report to be full of red herrings. I find it to be unfocused, and unconfident."

"Sir, I didn't mean to imply the challenges we are facing have anything to do with the collection program at the Ter(mina)ls, I..."

Volleying back with an assertive bark, "Well then what was your report's conclusion supposed to imply?"

"It wasn't meant to imply anything sir, I merely wanted to..."

"Make an excuse. You wanted to make an excuse because your program is stalled and you're running out of ideas. I am not sure you are up to this challenge, Doctor. I am beginning to doubt your competency. The National Commission on the Assessment of Biologic Advances has sent me here to make an assessment, and this is my assessment."

"I can understand why you would form that opinion sir, but I assure you, we are making valuable progress. I know my team, we are close. The good news is every strain we test, we have been able to formulate and produce an antidote- the monoclonal portion of the program has been a great success. I assure you, we are making progress."

"I will determine whether or not your program is successful. I report directly to the Board, and they will act based on my recommendation. Do you understand?"

"Of course sir, of course."

"You technically have one year to bring forth a proof of concept." The emissary gazed over Roger Frye, expecting a sign of relief, a moment where the scientist's formal guard would be let down and a visible indicator of reprieve would be transmitted- the emissary was a sadist, and being a sadist he also gained significant counterpoint arousals from momentary respite. Frye took a deep breath inward. The emissary continued, "After the proof of concept, technically, you have an additional year to bring forth a completed form of the vector which can be transferred and weaponized according to the overall program plans. And I expect that the NCABA Board expects that a viable anti-dote is delivered in tandem with the vector. You have twenty-four months. Do you understand?"

Roger Frye gulped silently. His respite ended. His heartrate elevated. "Yes sir. I do understand the timeline. But I do not understand how I can be expected, based on the report details, to deliver on those kinds of..." "That, doctor, is not my problem."

"I hoped you might ask the Board to reconsider the timelines, I can't guarantee we will be able to..."

The emissary looked at his notes. "I can gua-ran-tee your program will continue to run, with or without you. You will decide for me whether or not you continue forward with the program. You will also decide for me what happens to your daughter, and your wife. You are dismissed. You have plenty of work to do." "Yes, sir."

Roger Frye exited the penthouse office. He kept his thoughts directed at the ground, with his feet, heel then toe. It was an overcast day- there was nothing to see out the windows but grey sky, clouds. He took himself out of his body. He had to take a minute. He had to reset. His family was depending on him. He had to make sure they would be safe. There weren't words on his mind. Instead, concepts- safety and security for his family- images- baby pictures, marriage vows- then contrary images- gags and rape, violence- he walked quickly and alone back to the elevator, then out the front door. He had to take care of his girls.

He had two years to do it.

Practically an eternity.

Most likely an impossibility.

-O-

"I'm tired of waiting. It's been years of the same status reports, the same updates."

"How old are you, Johnson?"

"Fifty-three."

Smithe, in his wisdom, "I'm into my seventies. This is bigger than you or me. If I can be patient, you can be patient."

Johnson adjusted the button-down shirt sleeve under his suit coat. He was continually unsatisfied with the margin of material beyond his suit coat. "How sure are you about that scientist in Chicago? You keep vouching for him. I think he needs to be examined."

"I've done my due diligence, Johnson. That scientist is the best in the world at what he does. Mother nature herself couldn't produce the type of material coming out of this lab."

"But that's the issue- nothing has come out of this lab!"

"Incorrect. Plenty has come out of this lab. And each day his team moves closer. It's a process. One step at a time."

"Not in the reports I'm reading."

"You read the reports for red-light green-light, for timelines, but you haven't put in the effort to learn the science, to appreciate the complexity of what we're trying to do here. It's the same way you ran your father's companies. You're a boorish man."

Johnson responded, enraged, "Listen," he grimaced, toothy and mean, "don't tell me how to manage my business. I've done nothing but get results. Goddamn results. You wanted the electromagnetic pulse a secret- you wanted it big enough to knock out the global communications- you wanted the contingencies in place and ready for deployment- who did you turn to? Who *the fuck* did you turn to? How exactly do you think any of this would have started were it not for me- me and my impatience, me and my boorishness? Huh?"

Smithe adjusted his tie, imperceptible, "You performed magnificently. I give you all the credit."

"You take all the credit. Everyone still thinks it was a goddamn natural disaster."

Smithe tried to redirect the younger executive's energies, "Our agreement is still in place, isn't it?"

Johnson continued, non sequitur- "I wake up, I kick ass. Wake up, kick ass. Better than my old man ever did. Better than *anybody*. You understand me?"

Smithe remained lithe, reassuring- "We both desire the same outcome. I think from that common ground, we can both respect one another."

Johnson was struck by a moment of clarity. He snickered. "That's bullshit. On paper we both want the same thing, sure, but we're here for totally different reasons. You're deluded by your faith- you think that you're doing the Lord's work. But I know I'm doing this for myself. I want to rule the world. I acknowledge it. I own that. Regardless though, for both of us- and let's not pretend here- the ends justify the means. So, get your fucking scientist in order. Or else it's my show."

-O-

More echoes, more images- building a collage, building the show frame by frame- he sensed her working in a secret place, a place only she knew of, painting, constructing- listening-he waited a moment before interrupting her. He stopped playing his guitar.

At the threshold of the door, leaning, "How does it look?"

Inrini was opposite Martin, in the corner of the room seated on the floor, leaning on the wall- a notebook on her knees, scribbling away- "I'm not sure yet."

Martin replied, "There's only one way to get sure."

"How's that?"

"To experience the show."

"I'm listening to you play it, aren't I?"

"No. I'm not talking about just the music, I'm talking about having the experience of it."

Inrini glanced up, "What's the difference exactly?"

"You have to take this." He handed her a small piece of paper, a tiny square.

"Acid?"

"Better."

"Ecstasy?"

"It's not a guessing game. It's nothing you've ever taken, or heard of." Excited, Martin elaborated. "It's a rare analogue. Better, quicker, stronger than anything you've heard of. It's an hour of punctuated bliss. Custom formulation. See, a friend of mine- he'd been really into entheogenic chemistry, before the grid shutdown. He had his own laboratory and everything. And this is what he spent his life working on it."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead. Killed in one of the riots, in the early days. He was doing chemotherapy, had cancer- the hospitals shut down, he couldn't get his medicine. So he went to Millennium Park. He decided it was better to go out swinging. And swing he did, swing he did- beaten to death. Head crushed in by a police club."

Inrini sighed, "Damn."

"It was a wild scene out there. Brutal. But before he left to go his way, he came by my place. It's like he knew. He gave me his entire stash. There's something like three million doses. Most of it in powder form, stored away. And I've been waiting, trying to figure how to use it- how to continue the fight. It's one of our weapons. My sound, your lights, and this substance, my buddy's legacy. It's part of our arsenal. And it's going to be taken by every single person that sees us."

Inrini, startled, "So you're forcing people to take it?"

Martin murmured, "More or less."

Inrini capped her pen. Despite her hardcore outfit, her rough edges, there was a chanteuse's glamour about her appearance. "I'm glad you told me about this- about slipping people drugs into their drinks! What the hell, Martin? You should listen to yourself. You sound like a cult leader. Are you serious? You can't do this."

"Why not?"

"Because people have rights. You don't get to decide what goes on in anybody's headspace. That's not cool."

Martin sighed. "I'll tell you what. Take some. Take some and listen. Then, if you still have a problem with it, I'll scratch the whole idea."

Inrini didn't respond.

"I promise."

-O-

Mickey found herself walking slowly, mindful not to collide into the listless little girl in front of her. The child's tiny hand was interlocked with a broad shouldered, squatty woman. Presumably her grandmother. Maybe a great-aunt. Dragged along beside the woman, lugubrious, silent. "Well-behaved" according to some experts, but beneath the surface- too quiet. Too calm. Too slow. A child that age should be inquisitive, should be asking questions, strings of 'why's' and 'why not's' tiresome and relentless, bouncing to and fro. A child that age should be glowing, blue-eyed and wide, a sponge. But instead, by Mickey's account, the girl looked to be nothing more than an ashen shadow. One of Pompei's remainders. Hiroshima's specters. The old woman holding the girl's hand- their clothes were grey, jackets and winter hats, their stride was lifeless- the heaviness of the city had pressed on them, flattened them against the concrete sidewalk, stretched them overcast and long and ghostly.

Mickey watched them closely. She realized she had hardly seen any children since she arrived in the city that morning- like the airport at Las Vegas- a badlands of weebegone and desperate adults. *Where are the children?*

Desultory and caught up in the crowd, lonely. A lugubriousness fell over Mickey.

She couldn't muster the energy to pass the little girl and her caretaker.

She waded behind them, block after block.

A flashback: her father, a moment, a long time ago- his voice- "If you keep practicing, you are going to be the first woman to win the Masters."

Another flashback: her college days, her try-out. The wrenching back pain, the fifth hole- standing over a putt- the coach, her father- "It's alright. Rehab. Take a break. Come back next year." Vomiting that night, that whole next week sick and locked in her dorm room. A few weeks later after the season began and the roster had been posted on the athletics website, formalized, she was upright and on her feet, fine, like it never happened- like it never should have happened- like Mickey's injury had been self-created, psychosomatic, a sabotage. A few days on campus, the freshman- a pulled latissimus dorsi- on a bunk in a strange room by herself- "It's okay Mick. Take it easy. I'll come out there next weekend." She had lost interest. Her scholarship was not extended the following year. She didn't swing a club for some time. She forgot about her breath, she forgot how to angle the blade so that a thin wedge of grass sprung up after a lob shot, why it was important to face north on the tee-box and patiently let the wind reveal itself and its intentions.

Walking along with hands in pockets, chin pointed at her feet- little girls, their dreams- Mickey felt hopelessly alone. Stranded, life vest wading, a mouth full of spindrift her hair covered in spume. An ocean of loneliness. Everyone. Wading, alone. There was no comradeship, no kinship- not a single pair of eyes had reached out to acknowledge her, and even if they she would not have been able to make out their color because of the wrinkles, the narrow slits. Everyone who had passed her- eyelids like drooping fat, like puddled skin. Haunted stares. There was no twinkle. There was no life. Abandoned. An orphan in this doomed city which had killed off all its children- like Herod, like a viscous Pharaoh- like anything pure fled this place on account of its pure instincts, knowing better than to remain and be ruined by such indiscriminate pain.

Walking.

She slowed down, almost to a standstill. Halted- her footsteps dead- a man pushed into her back, another growled "Out of the way, moron!" Scuffling. Trifles. Mickey bounced between shoulders, forearms, even a knee- off, out of the way- she floated, she couldn't feel anything or anyone.

Why am I here?

The train. Marshall. The voice.

The voice.

She had caught too many breaks for this to be a coincidence. She was alive. She had made it to Chicago. She had come so far. There was hope. She had to find Paul.

Mickey found a quiet street. She turned. The voice. The woman. The wilderness. Mickey retreated into the stillness of her heart, then out loud with her eyes closed, "Are you here?"

She waited. She listened for a response. But there was none. There was only herself, solitary and on the streets, lost and bruised by a strange world.

-O-

Forty-nine people had met on the morning of the 13th. Seven women, forty-two men. Most of them were under the age of thirty. They met in seven different locations throughout the city. Seven volunteers at each location. Each tactical cadre included one woman, six men- six operatives, one team lead. They met on rooftops, in alleyways. They signaled blue flashlights to various runners across the locations. Months of planning. Supplies. Orders. Entryways. Exitpoints. Signals. Timers.

The 7EVEN FIRES.

The anniversary of the Knockout.

An insurgence.

They dressed themselves up as **TCGA** (*Tribunal of the Constitutional Guardians of America*) officials and sanctioned public workers. They had acquired access papers to seven of the twelve major **TCGA** operative centers. Each insurgent concealed a pistol with six bullets, four grenades, and a homemade explosive device comprised of a quarter stick of dynamite with a manual charge. There wouldn't be much time between igniting the fuse and the compound combusting. They had been told by the author of the device that it would take "somewhere around five seconds."

These people, their items, this plan- it represented the first major act of aggression towards the **TCGA** after the Knockout. Since March 13th, three years previous- their intent represented the frustration of a small group of people determined to bring democracy back into a country where fascism had taken hold, or so they viewed their actions. Freedom fighters. Rebels for a worthy cause. Reasons, motivations- drives and ambitions varied from person to person. Some had lost loved ones. Some had lost jobs. Some were dispositioned to violence and defiance, so the circumstances fit their natural inclinations. But all of them held one common trait- a commitment to see it through, whatever *it* was. *It* would be the start of something. Things would change. Things would get better- but first, *it* had to happen.

After the teams assembled, after the volunteers armed themselves and dressed into the necessary disguises, they left from the rally point towards the targets. They embarked on different routes, various subway lines and sidewalks. There wasn't much said at the rally points. There wasn't much to say- they had spent the previous evening rehearsing, confirming building layouts, determining the order of events, the roles and responsibilities. Discussions were hashed out, opinions expressed then quieted. It was a nondescript morning. Cigarettes. Coffee. Nerves were excited, then quelled. A moment alone, in the bathroom maybe, in the bedroom changing- verifying the performance of a rotating steel chamber barrel-spinning, then shutting it closed- a few prayed, a few ruminated, a few took deep breaths to stave off the adrenaline, a few wept then cleared away the tears with a shirtsleeve.

TCGA Headquarter JSCPPM- Judicial Services and Civilian Protection and Peace Maintenance- an art deco building on Washington Street- a converted bank, high-rise offices- one entered, then another- another, and another- seven in total. By 10:15AM CST their preordained positions were achieved. Seven shots were fired simultaneously. Shortly after, three grenades were released. Then four more. Floors six, seven and eight. Hostilities. Four members of the team were killed by armed guards within the first ten minutes of the skirmish. Twenty-four **TCGA** members, employees, were also killed. After fifteen minutes, more shots fired, more grenades- two of the homemade explosives were detonated. After half an hour, all seven insurgents were dead. The building remained integral, but several floors were on fire.

Seven insurgents.

Seven terrorists.

Emergency response teams were dispatched across the **TCGA** downtown sector. Seven other locations reported similar incidents as the *JSCPPM* building. Victims were treated. Flames were extinguished. A news reporter relayed information via radio broadcasts - newspaper teams across the city, except for those at the Central Information Hub whose operations were severely hampered, began to print *The Sun Times- Evening Edition*. Coordinated of course, ordered after a meeting held in a secure bunker with representatives from each of the city's major branches. The message was finalized and approved by Central Leadership. An investigation was formally launched.

Thirty-three of the forty-nine terrorists were killed. The remaining sixteen were apprehended, brought to detention, questioned, tortured, and sentenced. No trial. They would be executed within a few days, publicly. The front page of *The Sun Times* featured a black and white photograph- sixteen bodies hanging from two separate gallows. The picture was arranged symmetrically- two gallows, eight bodies- split from the distance, split by a platform of **TCGA** officials from local to national levels, family members of the victims, and special celebrity guests.

Justice was served.

Chicago would remain in a state of heightened emergency for the next several months. Curfews were tightened. Average citizens were afraid to come off as conspicuous. Terrorists lurked everywhere- two hundred more were arrested on charges ranging from sedition, murder plots, public disorder, intent to overthrow- most of those two hundred were never seen or heard from again. Neighbors happily provided testimony against strangers down the hall. Bosses tipped officials off to "odd" employees. Examples were made. There were no more public hangings, but everyone knew the truth- once you disappeared into **TCGA** custody, you never came back. Some who were taken into custody and questioned and tortured were innocent. Some were not. It didn't matter- a response was necessary. Documents were signed, executive orders were issued. Chicago was renamed, consolidated as 'Freedom Six.' More information came out about the 7EVEN FIRES, about Zevi- his network had been neutralized. He was purported to be dead.

Peace was restored.

School children were taught lessons about patriotism, loyalty. Many of them were fascinated by the hangings, the idea of a noose, a breaking neck. Some were frightened. Some were old enough to be enraged. Dressed up in red, white and blue- friends conversed, they repeated parcels of ideas and phrases memorized at dinner tables heard the previous evening. They made posters, celebrated the First Responders, the heroes who were able to halt portions of the attack. They improvised off-color ditties about UNDOX, terrorists, and outsiders to the tunes of familiar melodies.

Adults were reminded of why it was important to follow the law, to obey. Many people felt united by the events, the March 13th incident. Older citizens who could recall September 11th felt a direct parallel. They were grateful to be citizens of a great country, to be on the inside. Some even choked up emotional, overcome by pride. The **TCGA** sponsored parades, provided extra food surpluses for those on the dole. More newspapers were read, handed out. More radio programs were listened to. More Ter(mina)ls were accessed- simulations involving war games, first-person shooters, became the most popular programs according to reports. After a little while some of the countermeasures were alleviated. Things gradually went back to a comfortable status quo. People forgot.

Normalcy resumed.

-O-

Mickey had been wandering for two days- her second afternoon on the streets, her eyes absorbed in madness, strained and bloodshot. Arbitrary checks for documentation, blatant acts of police misconduct, dilapidated buildings and cardboard slums, broken windows host to dim outlines, communes of plastic and 2x4 plywood, garish neon signs for **TCGA** sanctioned activities, rusted sheet metal structures, a

peripheral Jericho wall amassed from crushed automobiles, stranded human detritus kept insulated by quilts of trash- sickness, hatred, pain, defeat. Walking. Silent.

Moaning in her secret heart.

Her hair fell out of her ballcap in clumpy strands. She had not slept after her train docked at the *Central Transportation Annex*. She had not eaten. She was not hungry.

The city with no children.

The city with no birds.

No robins, no finches, no sparrows or crows. Not even a pigeon- weren't cities supposed to be overrun with pigeons? Any form of augury would be impossible here. Futureless- the sky a uniform gray. No red tails. No mourning doves, or Northern cardinals, or downy woodpeckers. Hours and hours passed, miles and miles underfoot- not a single birdsong. Nature had decided to pack her bags in this wasteland of haunted muteness. Hollow- disconnected from the cycle of life, embedded entirely in death- a trephine, scraping. Entombed in plastic. Sepulchral polymers- trash everywhere- not even a pigeon? Plucking leftovers out from a dumpster? Mickey watched expectantly. She practically wished for a bird to reveal itself to her. Mile after mile. But as the footsteps disappeared into the past behind her, as she made her way between ragged flocks of her own kind, this feeling cemented in her being. *We have been completely disconnected*. Stripped of the beauty which lubricates the gears of the soul- fed concrete mix, gassed by dioxins and monoxides, embedded with free radicals- maimed from our roots, scythed. A complete departure from nature, from what was natural.

She shuttered.

Children and birds- where had they gone? Had they flown off together? Kiddies and bands of jays, flocks of common finches?

Mickey hoped so.

But then, a feather. An earring- a transfer center, for credits, for food, for rations- a cancerous clot of people spontaneous packed together- Mickey spotted a woman wearing an earring. A feather, and a hoop. A **TCGA** Building, an announcement- *rations, enough for three hundred people, have your papers ready, approximately one hour*. Amidst the bedlam, the groping hands and wavering bodies- a feather, a hoop, turquoise, silver. Mickey made quick to be near the woman, but not too close. She waited, lingering on the outside of the fray- the woman moved. Mickey followed. What else was there to do?

Headed towards a building, a residential tower- how far could she go- the door opened, shut. Closed off. Mickey, alone outside- *You idiot. You idiot. An earring. You really thought an earring... you idiot*. Passed by, passing by- wait- a face- a body- a walk- she had found him, needling haystack. Her blood rushed into her legs. Her body phosphorylated, feeling muscles and energy ganglia she had been previously unaware of. A dead sprint. Closing in. Chasing- despite her misgivings, her apprehension as she walked about- she knew it. She knew she would find him. There had been faith. There had been a vision. And here he was.

"Paul!" A face she knew well, comfortable like the smell of chicken feed or the crack of a beer can. She grabbed onto his shoulders with both her hands. "Paul!"

"Mickey?"

It had been so long. "Thank God it's you!"

Mickey hugged Paul.

He did not hug her back.

People around them did not acknowledge their connection. They attracted no attention from the other citizens on the street. Still, Paul behaved like an embarrassed child and was quick to separate himself from her. There was no reason to put anything on display. A callous look. Concrete. He resumed his pace, dragging Mickey along behind him. "Come on, let's keep moving."

She could sense his unnerved reaction, "What's wrong?"

"Come on."

Mickey immediately understood. She had seen enough- the armed guards, **TCGA** slogans waving across banners, the CCTV cameras, canine units, and now Paul's face- a slightly slackened face, a droopier, liquified face- it was different than the face she remembered. But there was no time or thought to reconcile with the past. Clearly their emotions were not safe in public. Clearly Paul wanted to be out of sight. She focused on the cadence of his steps, her steps. One block, two blocks- a matter of politeness- watching his breath as he exhaled, then her own- there was something about him, something different- he had suffered. The sentimental country boy was gone. Finally she broke, a grunt unseen, "Where are we headed?"

Brusque, he replied, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"It was only a matter of time."

Forceful, "Who sent you?"

"What?"

Ugly- Mickey absorbed his face when he turned over his shoulder to her- how age had chipped at him, his crow's feet, scars almost- "Are you **TCGA**?"

"**TCGA**?"

"Was it one of my brothers?" Paul restrained from looking up at any of the CCTV cameras. A typical paranoia. He knew he was being watched. She had to be a plant- their chance encounter, a trap.

Mickey, now whispering, "What?"

Avoiding eye contact with Mickey until this moment- a morass of confusion and denial and separation, a vast distance between old friends like the blank black spaces between lifetimes like light-years between expanding runaway galactic clusters- an impossible breach- with glassy brown eyes Paul looked across at her, a grim expression on his face, "What the hell are you doing here, Mickey?"

"I came to find you."

Paul immediately accelerated away from her. Longer strides. Determined. She quickened to follow, first behind him but finally alongside at his hip- "Paul, what's going on?"

Out the side of his mouth, "Get lost!"

"What?"

"I don't know you! Leave me alone!"

Mickey stopped. Paul continued.

Moving away with the traffic of bodies, into the fog, into the desolation and the steel I-beam'd mazes and hovels of poverty and sickness. Into the land with no seasons. Mickey stood frozen with tears in her eyes. Abandoned. Alone. To be so close to an old friend, so close to an old life- gone. Snuffed out in an instant. Dejected. Instantaneous ablation, a force like a spoonful of neutron star dropped through the center of the earth clearing out a hole which continued to fall and fell forever out the bottom of Mickey's heart. Nowhere to go. Nobody to be with. Why had she come here?

After a minute or two she forced herself across an intersection and down a side street. There were no cars. There were no lights. Poles, crosswalks- the antiques of the automobile age. Helicopters in the sky. Everyone dressed the same- the same monochromatic blacks and reds- storefronts COCA COLA, CREDIT EXCHANGE, LIQUOR- Ter(mina)ls- Mickey's nerves gave way. She fell to the ground. Seated. Her back against a concrete wall.

A deep breath couldn't bring relief. It lingered. It fell inside of her.

Her body ached and burned.

Why did I come here?

Frozen grey clouds layered above her, debris blowing underneath everyone's feet- nobody speaking, nobody smiling- head down, headed out- angry they didn't have their cellphones or their television surround sound or their microwave dinners- angry the eyes of the **TCGA** kept watch, barked orders over speakers, enforced curfew, abducted their children, murdered their brothers- angry and alone and cold and helpless. Mickey and everyone else. Mickey and nobody else.

Why did I come here?

Her eyes closed.

Aching, cold, alone.

Why did I come here?

Then a fatal grasp on her shoulder, a nudge, set back into motion- "Come on."

His face was different. His eyes acknowledged her presence, somehow.

"Paul?"

"I'm sorry. Come on. I'll take you to my place. We can sort it out. I just- I don't trust anyone out here. I'm sorry. Come on." Paul, after his abrupt explanation, took his arm off her shoulder and began walking. Mickey had no time to decide. She picked herself up. Trailing behind him. As if she had been oblivious to it the last two days, the bitter freeze of lake effect wind carried across the gulf of winter, thunderbolt fierce and permeating the city, cored through her all at once. She shivered. She followed. Paul bore the brunt of the wind- his skin had grown armor to it, accustomed to it- a skin thickened by the blasting cold as he drugged up stairwells from subway tunnels, as he floated aimless along sidewalks, loitered in ration lines, begged for sleep to find him on his makeshift bed. A skin thickened, layered, but then drilled into by a wind that penetrated his bones, like poreforin enzymes burrowed cytoplasmic. Furrow'd, holes inside him growing into caves extending into valleys- angry and alone and cold and helpless.

Secretly, Paul felt embarrassed that Mickey had come to find him this way- find him as an animal- exactly as they would have him. Exactly as the **TCGA** wanted.

But underneath his embarrassment was a feeling he hadn't encountered in some time. A feeling that he refused to name, scared it might leave.

Mickey followed Paul for ten minutes, city block after city block.

They didn't speak a word.

Everybody who wasn't inside the Ter(mina)ls or the Work(S)tation(s) was out walking. It was the only way to keep warm. There wasn't anything to do inside anyways. Freeze, or walk. Bodies, faces- beat down, beat up, beat to hell- old faces, worn clothes, weathered sneakers with holes. Mickey couldn't help but gawk when a child walked by, one of a handful she'd seen- but even this young boy glanced at her with the beat look of an old man- no bicycles to pedal or games of baseball to win in the bottom of the ninth, no schoolwork to abstain from, no gum to chew. Beat up men and women with peanut shell memories husked in their heads, memories of scenes of forgotten worlds, too cold to be remembered.

Then Paul stopped. He turned off the sidewalk, an entrance, a porch- up towards a dilapidated three-flat. Brick. Crumbling. A key in a door, up a stairwell, another key in another door, then Paul's voice sardonic and fatigued- "Home sweet home."

Mickey bolted across the threshold and put her arms around her close friend. "Paul, it's so good to see you." Clutching him, inhabiting the moment swollen and present, "I can't even tell you."

Paul couldn't let himself be emotionally moved- he had become calcified by things, by the losses, by the lies, by his threadbare knees exposed to the winter gusts, by the hunger, by the last several years of paranoid semi-life- his voice croaked, more bemused than elated- "How did you find me?"

She let go of him. "I can't - you wouldn't believe the last couple of weeks even if you were there with me."

Paul locked the door behind them.

He stared at her with a vague look.

Mickey became nervous. "What's going on? What happened?"

"The world has fallen apart, Mickey." He looked away from her, a vacant and despondent look. A worn look, a frozen look. He consciously fought against the thaw. He resisted any feelings of elation, of hope. Defensive. An animal. But then, after the tension, after his jaw slackened and his lips separated- a breath- his breath going in, out- conscious of it- conscious of being alive. He was alive. He focused on his heartbeat. His pulse. For weeks and months, years, it had been so hard- such an exhausting winter, relentless- a nightmare without conclusion- a simple insight rose from within: *I am alive*. He was still alive. And here,

in front of him, was a friend. A light flashed in his eyes. He stepped towards Mickey and opened his arms. "I can't believe it's you."

Mickey allowed herself a few tears. They embraced. They hugged each other in the silence of Paul's besmirched apartment.

"How did you find me?"

Mickey brought her face in front of his, "I don't even know where to begin."

Paul smiled. His face became more familiar. This was his face. He grew red, noticing her noticing him, so he joked, "Well, you could start from the beginning."

Mickey built things up, slowly. The farm. The years at home with Herb. His death. The soldier and the official. Marshall at the state park. Their walk to St. Louis. The girl and her brother. The train into Chicago. She dabbled with curious details. She retold amusing anecdotes. But then she came back. To the voice. To Marshall's dream. "That's why I really came. And when I woke up on that train, pulling into the station, I just knew I had to find you. You were the next piece of the puzzle."

Paul hesitated. He set his key onto a slab on cardboard held up by cinderblocks, a makeshift table. He inspected his room- his one room, his one sink, his pile of collected debris, the blankets and clothes, the empty bottles. "I'm nothing, Mickey."

Surprised, she responded, "You don't believe it anymore?"

"Believe what?"

"What you found in India- what you came back to tell me before all of this happened."

Dejected, his head hung down. "It doesn't matter what I believe, Mickey. It was so long ago. Lifetimes ago."

"So you don't think about it?"

"India? No. I don't think about India. In fact, I don't think about anything. Any of it, any of my past. It was all a dream. I mean- it had to have been." A rusted sink, a glass in Mickey's hand- a bottle. Another glass in his hand. One pour. Another. "My life now- I stock shelves in a convenience store for twenty hours a day, drink this revolting vodka the other four, and try not to get myself picked up by the cops going in between the two." Paul toasted Mickey, then took a snort. "Everything else was a dream. That whole life- there's nothing anymore. Trying to remember anything, let alone believe in anything- that doesn't do me any good."

"What happened to your family?"

Matter of fact, Paul responded- "Mom got sick. Then Dad. There was no room in the hospitals. They couldn't get treatment. After that my brothers tried to find work, tried to slide in with the TCGA. I haven't seen either of them in more than two years. They had families they had to protect. They did like everybody else- whatever needed to be done."

Mickey peered down at the glass. She swirled it. A candid smell- nail polish remover. She grimaced, then shot its contents down her throat. Choking, burning- "This is awful." Her lips pursed. A chill down her spine.

Paul exhaled, deep, "I know."

Mickey's next question arrived once her stomach settled, "How long have you been living here?"

"Since November, so four months. Hardly living. What they've done to us- it's not life. Most people try to stay on the line as long as they can to avoid what's really happening."

"On the line?"

"The Ter(mina)ls."

"The Ter(mina)ls?"

"It's an escape. Like a virtual world- the internet, but better, repurposed I guess. I don't know. I never stepped foot in one- I hated video games, remember? So now..." another pour, another gulp, "I drink. I guess that's what the rest of us do- drink, score dope, prostitutes- anything to shut off your head."

Mickey considered her friend's dilemma. A quick solution- "Why didn't you come back home?"

“Couldn’t. No papers. No approval. And plus, the trains only go one way. The perimeter is guarded- nobody leaves once they get here. There’s nothing for me back home anyways. There’s nothing for me anywhere.” Paul contemplated for a moment, home- the idea of home “Didn’t everything go to hell? Wasn’t there a war out there?”

“No.”

“What about the terrorists? The death squads? The nuclear fallout?”

“Nuclear fallout? Are you kidding me?” Mickey chuckled. “Nothing happened. I told you, I only left when the **TCGA** made claims for the house and the land. There was no war. It was all a lie. They cooked everything up to get everyone scared, boxed up together in this mess.”

“So you were the last one to leave town?”

Mickey nodded, “Yup.”

Paul smiled again, but a different kind of smile. “I’m not surprised.”

“How do you mean?”

“Your old man was the most stubborn old bastard I ever met, God rest his soul. I say that as a compliment.”

Paul refilled his glass. One more drink for courage, for honesty. “And you- if you weren’t getting dragged out by the **TCGA**- you were always too scared to leave.”

Surprised by the blunt edge, “Scared?”

“Scared. Mickey, you were the smartest person in the entire high school all four years you were there. You should have never come back to Harrison County. You pretended like you had all these aspirations but- you quit golf because you didn’t want it to take you anywhere. You didn’t take the job offers or the summer internships for the same reasons. You went to college and all, good for you- but you came right back home. You should have been working at NASA or something. You should have been a PGA professional. But you’d always found a way to quit, to fade out, right when anything was going to take you anywhere. Remember the school play, *Grease*- when you found out you could sing? I’ll never forget it- that drama teacher, Mrs. Tanner, she was shocked when she first heard your voice. But the week of the tryouts, you faked sick. You faked sick so you didn’t have to get on the stage.”

“This crappy booze is getting to your head.”

Pressing, he moved closer to her. “What the hell were you so afraid of?”

Mickey refused, crossing her arms- she wouldn’t deign to answer him.

Paul pressed. “Huh? What was it?”

“I wasn’t afraid of anything.”

“Bullshit! Come on, how long do we go back? You were scared. You were scared when I told you about India! I wish I had a picture of your face.”

“What was I supposed to do? What was I supposed to be?” Passionate, her arms now waving, “I don’t owe anything to you, or to anybody!”

“You’re right! You know why? You owed it to yourself! You were scared you weren’t good enough. That you’d fail! You didn’t even have the balls to try. At least I got out. I tried to do something. I tried to help you! But you trashed me. You bailed on me! You bailed on me when I needed you!”

Mickey couldn’t muster even a thought. Halted. No words came, no thoughts. She was frozen by Paul’s analysis. She felt exposed, naked in the cold. He was right. He had identified her blind spot. He had her figured out.

Paul started laughing, resigned. It was better than the alternative. “Listen Mickey, I’m happy to see you. I really am. You can stay here as long as you want- I mean, I’ll have this place another month or so, through the end of April.” Paul refilled his glass. “Then I downgrade. I’m always between places. In the summer- I dodge around parks, the subway tunnels. You actually caught me at a good time- when it warms up outside I make it, more or less, homeless. Tramping. To save up, so I have a place in the winter.”

Paul took a drink, then a deep breath, a faraway look onto one of the chipped plaster walls. Yellowing. A single room studio. Decrepit. A single window, one foot wide by one and a half feet high. No heat. Brown

and red stains on beige linoleum floors. Barely running water. A single burner stovetop. He stuck his left hand into his oil stained Carhart pants- olive green, wrinkled, frozen- he massaged a picture, the gloss long since faded off- a memory- his past- his dreams- a family picture when he was six or seven-years old. "I'm a bum Mickey. Look at me. I- you don't have to listen to me. What do I know?"

Paul turned around to the sink.

"You're right." Paul pivoted back to her voice. Mickey clasped his bicep, one and then the other, then pulled him towards her, "You're right. I am scared. I'm scared I don't have what it will take." Whispering into his ear, past the orange cotton beanie cap on his head- dried up saliva, her tears- "Ever since I was a little girl, I knew there was going to be something big for me to do. I never told anyone. I was scared I didn't have what it would take. I was scared what it would do to me. I wanted it to go into the shadows. I didn't want it to find me. I didn't want to be different- I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be a regular kid. I didn't want to be special. I tried my best to hide. I tried my best to avoid it, to avoid stepping out so that thing couldn't find me- so I don't have to take on the burden. Because I don't- I don't think I can do it- that I can bear the sacrifice it's going to require- that I can be what I'm supposed to be. You're right. I've been running away from it my whole life." Confronted by the misery, the anguish of where she had landed- longing for home, mourning her father, Marshall, looking back on her life- "Part of me wishes I had stayed home and buried myself right next to my father." But then Mickey shifted, she pulled Paul even closer, "But a bigger part of me knows I'm supposed to be right where I am. This is where I'm supposed to be." As Mickey confessed, the more she whispered into his ear, the fetters and the self-pities and the hatreds and the regrets and the bitterness inside Paul fell away. Each admission of Mickey's planted a conviction inside of him- Mickey's words gently cupped a hole into the ground, delicately placing the capsule, covering him, a drip of water, a pat for good luck- furrowed ground, ripe for the harvest. Paul whispered back to his friend, "For the first time in a long time Mickey, I think I am too."

-O-

"She's only sixteen, Roger."

From the opposite sink, brushing his teeth, making a point not to spend too much time with his own reflection, "It's a matter of perspective, Olivia. Our grandparents were engaged before they were twenty-one. Their grandparents were married even sooner. In some cultures, thirteen was a typical age for a bride to be chosen for a young man. When you consider the bigger picture, sixteen is really not that young."

Roger Frye's wife put her hand towel back on a chrome rack. She stood slender, toned for her age. A beautiful girl, a beautiful woman. Supple breasts. Lithesome calves, hips. A silk nightgown, embroidered with a floral pattern. "Why can't it wait a couple of years?"

"We have to look at this as an opportunity. For her. He is a very powerful man."

"He's twice her age."

A toothbrush went back into its porcelain holder, "Yes, and he will be good to her." Roger Fry refused to look at himself in the mirror below his chin- limiting his attention to a point between his upper lip and nostrils, an area of his body least phased by the passage of time, benign and shaved each morning, fleshy and resolute. "Would you rather have her with a boy, with a punk, with somebody who is hardly a shadow of a man?"

"Not to be married, but to date- to be a kid with, Roger. She's only a kid."

"The world is changing, Olivia. The world is a much harsher place. Being a kid isn't a luxury she will have. But look at the bright side- she will be taken care of. We will be able to see her all the time. It will all be fine. The wedding will be wonderful, I promise."

His wife exited the bathroom. A pastel, silk nightgown. A fresh set of bedsheets. She pulled back the down comforter. "I don't know about this. I really- could you talk to him? Could you ask him why it would be so bad to wait a little while? Eighteen. What if he waited until she was eighteen?"

"Eighteen?"

“Yes. Two years. I really- I know he is a powerful man, and she would be safe. But it’s only two years. She’s still a child, in so many ways. She’s, she’s too young right now.”

Roger Frye followed his wife out of the bathroom. He removed his slippers before joining Olivia under the satin sheets. Their backs were propped up by matching pillows in matching pillowcases. A comfortable home. A comfortable existence- he was proud to be a provider, to assure the conveniences which his wife and daughter had become accustomed to prior to the Knockout remained intact amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the last decade. He was proud of being able to protect them. He considered himself a great success. He put his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “It’ll all be alright. I know him personally. He is a good man. You’ll meet him too and feel the same way. We’re doing the best for her.”

Roger reminded himself that Olivia could be difficult, but behind her resistance lay the best intentions. Maternal instincts were unassailable. He was not a dumb man- he anticipated some difficulties. It was natural. He fumbled a bit, he searched for the phrasing, a rationale to avoid the one obvious truth: no matter how this conversation progressed, no matter what he or Olivia wanted for their daughter, the decision had been made. He was no longer in control of Kirsten’s fate. Her body, her life- simple with a blonde bun of hair on top of her head, playing the role of maiden in her school drama class- Governor Riche had made his decision. Kirsten belonged to the **TCAG** (*Tripartite Council of American Guarantors*). They all did. Roger decided it was for the best- he decided not to acknowledge his inability to protect his daughter, or his wife. Governor Riche had made up his mind.

Roger first caught the news while in the bathroom at headquarters, an off-handed comment, urinating along a line of occupied stalls- “So how does it feel to be the father of a golden goose, Frye?”

Roger tried to force out another stream, self-conscious, “Golden goose?”

“I guess you’re more useful than you make it seem. That’s the secret though, ain’t it? Pretty daughters. Lucky bastard.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Clue in old man- Riche has taking more than a liking to her. Your girl. What’s her name? Ever since the executive outing- rumor has it you’re getting the call. Lucky bastard.”

Sure enough, later that quarter, Roger found himself filing down a corridor, escorted, called into the primary wing. A room full of officers. Riche at his desk. A congratulations. A cigar. A credit for eighteen hours of **TCAG** Specific Access. A present for his wife- a white pearl. A commission for six weeks of leave- once the project was complete. A new suitcase, his initials engraved near the handle- real leather. Told to his face, in no uncertain terms, “I will be marrying her this spring. May. I want her ready to move into my apartment in two weeks’ time.” So much for asking permission- the scientist smiled, feigned excitement, and diligently avoided eye contact with the Governor.

Roger came back to the present- his feet warming up, the blue wallpaper, the nightstand lights- his wife’s voice- he nodded his head unconsciously in agreement-his wife, more talking- then a cough. “Roger, are you even listening?”

Affirmed, he said, “We should be celebrating, Olivia. It’s an honor. Our daughter is being wed to the highest ranking official in the city.”

“Please Roger, ask him. Two years. I understand there are politics involved. But she is our daughter. We have a say.”

Two years- two weeks- in two weeks his daughter would be packed up, moved out of their apartment to a **TCAG** estate. Mrs. Frye would not be speaking to her husband- the travel expenses, the access credits, they wouldn’t matter. Her baby would be taken away from her. Plucked up for good. And Roger had no choice, no control. Senior members would poke fun at him for the next several months- salting the wound- jokes about his daughter, her genitalia, how she had better be a “good fuck” or else Roger would be subject to *abstention*. ‘Stented.’

“If she doesn’t finish him off good and clean, you’ll get stented Frye. How’s that for some pressure? You thought having to meet those new CPI’s was tough?”

But now Roger was in bed. He was comfortable. He lied to Olivia, allowed her to remain optimistic. A judicious caretaker. "I'll talk to him about it. Alright? I'll talk to him tomorrow at work. I'll tell him where we stand. Alright?" Offering her an illusion of control, of opportunity- holographic glimmers of hope- Olivia would rest easy, and soon enough she would come around to the whole thing. This was the world they lived in. This was the arrangement they agreed to. Security, wealth, prestige, comfort- it all came at a cost. Roger was doing the best he could. The critical process indicators, for today, stood green.

"Thank you, Roger. I love you. Sweet dreams."

She leaned over, turned off her life, and promptly fell asleep.

-O-

The conversations around the room had grown dim.

A man stood up, then, "Before we begin- I know this has already been addressed, but- I still need clarity. So afford me the explanation." Papers, leather attaches shuffled. A fingertap on the hardwood table, polished and citrus scented. "Why haven't we considered a more straightforward type of- for lack of an alternative word- poison?" At that many of the bald, square heads turned towards Smithe. "Gassing? Water systems? Nutcases were sending anthrax by way of postcards fifty years ago." Van Pult coughed, customarily. "I would appreciate a quick summary, for my own education- just in terms of the options we have explored."

"Do we have to explain why the nuclear option leaves too many variables open?" Sarcastic, the youngest member of the quorum.

Defensive, Van Pult's upper lip went into a septic curl, then he glared, "That's not the question I asked."

Pressing, "Or should we perform a risk assessment on whether or not after we ordered the military to have every citizen shot, if we'd be able to manage the generals and the jarheads left with guns?"

Van Pult said, "No. I think you're missing the point- or maybe you just want to be a prick. Which is fine. Be a prick. What I want is to understand why a more straightforward poisoning slash gassing option isn't being pursued- why go through all the troubles of a biological program?"

Johnson, the antagonist chuckled, "Did you say 'slash'?"

"Because," Smithe croaked, interjecting, "nature is the most effective killer. None of the gases or poisons can be guaranteed. There would be a critical mass of survivors. And then what would we have on our hands? You have to remember, we're also killing off our muscle. I don't think the armed guards down the corridor would think much of us if they knew the truth about whose names are on the list you're about to present. Trust me when I tell you- we have reviewed the scenarios. Our current course is the only one with an exit. It represents by far the most achievable strategy from a risk mitigation perspective. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most complex."

"Appreciated. Thank you. Like I said, I just wanted a moment." Another cough, then Van Pult went silent. Holden, the gavel in front of his seat, "Now to the first item of business."

Van Pult coughed again, "Right, of course- after extensive reference checks, scenario runs, simulations- I can confirm that the architecture of a community has been built. We have apportioned a final number. There are still alternative options, as you can see as part of the appendix to the proposal, outlined at the end- but for our primary recommendation, we propose a Compact of one thousand nine hundred ninety-eight individuals."

The same man, the meanest, the smartest- "Why not just two thousand people?"

"Why not fifty thousand? I did not consider working through this assignment with a deliverable that included nice, whole numbers a priority. We landed where we landed because it is the right answer."

Smithe played peacemaker. "Continue, Van Pult."

Van Pult imperceptibly grasped his watch. "From the perspective of functional silos, you will see charts and roles under the primary headings of agriculture, livestock, biological sciences, chemical sciences, physical sciences, civil engineering, computer engineering." Van Pult hesitated, to let his profound analysis sink in. "After consideration, we have decided to eliminate most, if not all, of the humanities branches.

We believe music, arts, and literature will resume in due time. A new culture will develop and should be allowed to do so without the quote unquote baggage of previous eras.” This had not been Van Pult’s idea, and had been discussed at previous meetings, but the group remained silent. “So, as you can see, each of you has been assigned to a particular silo, and each silo will be represented at any quorum of the Compact. So, are there any questions from a structural perspective?”

The antagonist poked, “Can you explain the quote unquote logic behind eliminating the arts?”

Van Pult scratched at the corner of his mustache. He glanced at Burnside. “We decided it was, well, it was important to control the future of the Compact.”

“How so?”

Van Pult was out of answers.

Burnside shot forth, importunate and tired of the gamesmanship, “Goddamnit, because bringing Led Zeppelin or the Mona Lisa with us is dangerous, that’s why! Everything residual would be subject to misinterpretations. See, the idea is to begin with a new, prime story. A prime story that we fabricate, and control. And from that prime story, over time, culture will develop endogenously as future generations who come after us unpack and develop that story. We will hand our ancestors a- a mythology if you will- which will contain the foundation of our core beliefs around race, ethics, leadership, sex, gender roles, religion- there has been careful consideration around the messaging. That’s how.”

The antagonist nodded in agreement.

Van Pult, “Thank you, Burnside, for you work in this area.”

Burnside resumed a stoic demeanor.

Van Pult felt compelled to add, “And if I recall now, yes, the details around this messaging can be found in the fourth appendix within the report you all hold in your hands.”

Silence. The shuffling of paper, pages flipping. Van Pult had excelled throughout the course of his life in various positions thanks to his religious devotion as a compiler and sorter and collator and printer, a notary and a page, wet signatures and electronic, a fiend for the mundane- a fundamentally 20th century human need, to wallpaper over disaster and chaos and insurmountable unpredictability with a tidy design of administrative forms.

Van Pult ambled on, in full character, “Alright. Continuing. If you can confirm on pages twenty-seven through eighty-eight, obviously we have included all of our respective families and designees, the names which you provided last year and which I finalized with each of you individually a couple of months ago. For our edification those documents and signatures are all contained for record management purposes within the overall master management file I am keeping, for your reference. I have been assigned master control of this list.” Van Pult’s voice lilted a bit, stating this fact. “I will submit a final approval signature, from each of you, as part of the output of this meeting. After all signatures have been received, the Compact will not be open for editing, and will thus be unalterable. As you can see, I have that document here now, and will send this around the room. To be clear, I have received and managed all of your feedback and initial concerns, and I have also aligned the silos with Johnson’s resource planning requirements. To clarify, I can’t remember if I stated this or not- but every name on the Compact has been vetted and verified- from both a functional and psychological perspective. If you would kindly review the proposal at the end of our session, and confirm with a signature by this evening, we will be one step closer. I do not anticipate any issues. Initially our plan was to restrict the number to less than three thousand individuals, so I am proud that we have been able to construct the necessary efficiencies and redundancies, based on the scenario mapping, to remain comfortably within our initial target. If there are no further questions, Johnson, I think this is a natural place for you to continue.”

Johnson wiped his forehead, customarily. Van Pult sat down and sat upright, very erect in his chair. Johnson stood up. He looked down on Van Pult. He thought to make one more remark, one more antagonism. His voice dripped in sarcasm as he began, “Thank you, Van Pult. And look, if I may I speak on

behalf of the quorum, we are quite excited about your progress here. This was not an easy task, but it was done thoughtfully. Excellent work. Exciting work.”

Smithe shot Johnson a glare, then turned to Van Pult, “Agreed. Well done.”

Johnson continued, “Look, I won’t drill down too deep here- I’m sure everyone has familiarized themselves with the report- on a high level, in order to ensure the Compact’s success a review was conducted to understand from an operational perspective what by way of equipment and resources such a community would require. First, we finalized our selection on a location near Lake Ontario at the St. Lawrence River. We have finalized the blueprints for most of the structures, and the location is being prepared as we speak. Based on the soil analysis, meteorological surveys, other studies- we project this to be an ideal area. There will be a transportation grid with access to a secondary site in South Carolina roughly 750 miles away. This would be an option for winter camp, though all the details there have not been finalized. With respect to the New York location, we have a water filtration plant we can leverage in the area, industrial manufacturing infrastructure, farmland, livestock, living quarters. Additionally, a fully provisioned hospital, a scientific center with the latest technology and equipment, and an electrical plant are all under construction. Security essentials, equipment- everything is *en route* or already arrived. I am told that we are on schedule for May from a facilities perspective, and all construction will be complete. Most importantly, I am very confident that this will be the best home for our families and for our community. Based on the quorum’s feedback, and working with each of you, I believe most of your concerns, and your ideas, were accounted for.”

Kliezen proffered a joke, “We should have plenty of real estate options once this goes through.”

Quiet, complicit laughter trickled suit.

Johnson continued, “I want to mention as well, the ark- ark is nearly finished and we have about 45% of the animal species accounted for- remember it is a biosphere with several thousand animal species. It will function as a zoo in some ways, as a biological library in others. I know there was some consideration if the virus mutated, so this is our contingency for that scenario. Other than that, we have the necessary animal counts, necessary seeds and agricultural supplies. Several storehouses are being filled this very moment. Food stuffs- look- we are planning on having over one hundred years of food and water resources available for the community. I am happy to say these activities are also on track, and we are targeted for May 21st. The agreed upon date. We will undoubtedly be well provisioned, and our families and their families after us, we will be well provided for. This is the result of years of effort and planning. Thank you to the other chair members for your support. This was a team effort. And as you can see in the agenda hand-out, we have pictures of both locations, maps, and progress charts for reference.”

Minutes were kept, the agenda was followed. Hand-outs were distributed, then collected for safe keeping. An underground, impregnable bunker. Soundproof. Doors locked. A pitcher of water, cups of coffee, a breakfast tray warming on a sterno, a ceramic platter decorated with fresh fruit, bagels and muffins freshly baked. A sanctimonious affair. It had been three months since their last meeting- a quarterly update.

Holden, the sergeant at arms- a stolid man with secret idiosyncrasies pertaining to getting his hair or feet wet which caused him to rarely shower- directed their conversation forward. “Alright, thank you Johnson. Williams, I believe you are next on the agenda. And I must say, your portion has been what I have been most keen to hear an update on. I know some of the challenges you have faced. I hope the group has been able to offer whatever support you required. Please.” A hand gesture- a gentleman, opening the floor to one of his trusted fellows.

Mucosal and distracted, nervous, Williams snorted. “Thank you, Holden. And thank you Johnson, Van Pult. I am impressed with your work. Really. This was a hell of a lot to coordinate. We trusted you with some of the most essential components. Damn fine job. I’ll cut to the chase, though- in terms of my update- I hate to kill the momentum here, but we are behind schedule. My team has been able to make strides since our last quorum, and I’ll explain some of those- I think the key win has been finalizing the weaponization program. We have the correct aerosol dispersal units, ADUs, built and are undergoing

validation tests. Those tests will be complete in the next three weeks and will finalize our option for launch, our TDD, target dissemination date.” His sunken goat eyes scanned the room. “This is big. We are going to achieve the saturation levels as needed for our 1-90, 2-99, 6-100 global markers. The missiles, the vectors, the storage, the production capability- it is all there.”

Ward, brow furrowed, grey haired, rim glasses, a fat neck and evaporating jawline- “And now for the bad news.”

Williams took a deep breath. “Yes- I won’t beat around the bush here- we are still missing the virus. Experiments continue. There have been issues with genetic stability- it seems we have the major proteins identified, the vector- but the team can’t maintain generational integrity.”

An anonymous cough, then, “Which means?”

“It loses stability over time and stops working.” Congested, Williams was losing breath. “Excuse me.” Blowing his nose. “Now, we continue to iterate and build from the elements of vectors that have shown 100% lethality in multiple trial runs. We will continue to increase sample sizes. We have the major pieces in place here, we do. It’s just a matter of generating a stable viral code. And I will say, also, the vaccine component will not be an issue- we have been able to retro-engineer mRNA vaccines that are proven effective, and the technology is such, that because of previous pandemics and health emergencies, doses can be at a fill/finish stage in less than a month- once we have the target.”

Smithe, direct, “What are your plans to overcome this limiting hurdle- this stable viral code?”

“Well, persistence is key. The team continues to iterate. We have the right cross functional team assembled- we have the preeminent experts- we have the right people. Listen, I don’t need to say this has proven extremely difficult- and I know what many of you are thinking. We heard Van Pult earlier. I had shared some of the details with him, prior to the meeting- his questions and concerns were warranted. No doubt about it. I would be asking the same thing if I were in your position. But in all my years of biopharmaceutical experience, whenever you are dealing with living material- I promise you this is par for the course. This business is tricky. Dealing with living material that produces the degree of lethality we are looking to achieve- it’s not like we’re injection molding parts here. We’re engineering life. But like I said- I assure you, we have the right people working on this. We are going to get this right.”

Holden, “In terms of targets?”

Williams paused, “As of this morning, I am not on target. I am hopeful that for our next update in November I will have a better sense an adjusted the go-forward final timeline. Next summer is a possibility- but right now it is not a date I can commit to. I would put our chances of hitting the current target- very slim.”

Silence. Then Meyers- “You’re sure you don’t need additional scientists?”

“I have every capable scientist in the country, literally, working on this. There aren’t any others to pull.”

Meyers, the career politician, brainstorming, “International?”

Smithe interjected, “Too risky. Too much diplomacy. Too many other moving parts. Plus, there are the ethical issues- it was hard enough assembling the current team who would be willing to work on such a project. If you recall the trouble we had to go through with our own internal group?”

Meyers continued, “I remember. I’m just curious though- is that team still motivated? Are the ethical issues bleeding back into the picture, causing us delays? I don’t mean to tell you your business Williams, but do you think there is a possibility of bad actors?”

Williams snorted, then “No. I have total control of that situation. Our team knows who the enemy is- we feed them messaging on the terrorist threat ad nauseam. They are believers, no doubt.” A tissue from his pocket, “Between what they hear at work, and what they see on the newspaper, the radio.”

Holden, conscious of his role as a facilitator, “What about other sources?”

Rheumy, “Of?”

Declarative and sharp, “Motivation.”

Williams retorted, "We have the proper mechanisms in place. Trust me. All the deliverable owners on my lead teams have families. I planned it that way. They are aware of the implications, the potential for collateral damage, so to speak. It has been built in since day one. Trust me."

Ward, calmly, "You have implicitly earned my trust. But, I have to ask- have you made an example?"

Williams paused. "No- and my hands are tied on that end. I can't risk losing the knowledge base. It's a catch-22. I'm not in a great position to exercise leverage."

Johnson, a man of ideas, was moved by an internal lightbulb, "What if you transferred the knowledge base. Shored up a redundancy, if you will. Then you could afford to make an example of say, one scientist, and his family?"

"Agreed." Van Pult's voice was turgid with excitement, though nobody had directly asked him for his input nor paid his vouching much attention.

Holden pondered out loud, "Kill a wife- that will send a message to the others. And you do it so they all see. You host them, a **TCAG** official banquet, and you poison her in front of everyone. Dead on sight. That will create some incentive. It will generate a buzz. There will be a healthy level of panic. Plus, you avoid sacrificing your so-called knowledge base."

Kliezen was tickled, "I like that Holden, I do. Only a military man could lay it out so, plainly."

A grin. An adjustment in a chair. Van Pult continued to offer his unsolicited input, building the frenzy, "The rest of the guests there, they won't have a clue- they'll have no idea- but those scientists, they'll darn well know. They'll get the message loud and clear."

Williams, scribbling notes with a pen, nodding- he acknowledged the participants brainstorming, appreciated their input. "Alright," a sigh, "Let me sort out the details, but I hear the feedback. The action is on me- I have it."

"Let us know the outcome," Van Pult gestured, raising his eyebrows, then scratching behind his ear nervous with anticipation, "I will make note, to pick this up in the next quorum."

Ward, a sadist and a pornography addict, bony fingered and slimy, shifted the conversation with a lilting tone, odd and changing the color of the room, "You're sure you're up to this Williams?"

Without flinching, "Absolutely. I took this silo for a reason- I'm the only one of us with a qualified background- thirty years in commercial GMP. And I'm confident in my team, I am. We will execute- we just need a couple of breaks. We'll stay in the lab, stay diligent, and make the breaks come our way. That's how it's done in this industry. I've seen it time and again."

Kliezen removed his thick glasses to reveal his drooping eyes. Sickly, but a cur, like all the others- "I don't doubt your ability to execute on the overall program. You misunderstood. I meant up to the task of killing a man on your team. Not to intrude on your silo, but I think there is a natural opportunity here for me to assist. Since my areas deal more so with the, operational, side of the house- I believe it's only prudent for me to extend an offer."

Williams cleared his nostrils, an obese man with bushy auburn eyebrows, hair dyed a brown two shades too dark, "Right. Of course, if... I appreciate that. Sure. We will connect after we break this evening."

Kliezen smiled, out from his wrinkling mouth, his yellow teeth barely poking through his thin grey lips- the oldest member of the quorum by nearly a decade- a phrase he'd heard from countless maids and clerks and hired help in his childhood home where he disemboweled frogs and small cats in the basement- "Happy to be of service."

Smithe pressed on, "And I suppose, if there are no other comments, I'll provide an update on the centralization project. Based on the census team's work in the field, and supplemental infrared tracing activities related to recommissioning- we are confident between the seven metropolises that we now have ninety-six percent of the national population accounted for. This figure is up four percentage points since we last met- between relocation services, and decommissioning, we have reached our highest population densities to date in the major urban centers. We estimate a total population of one hundred seventeen million people. And of those, one hundred twelve are currently within urban zoning sectors."

New York is up to forty-three million people by my group's estimates. Los Angeles thirty-two million. That's nearly seventy-five million between those two urban centers. In terms of projections, we will be near ninety-eight percent come our next quorum. This should greatly facilitate the local deployment of the virus in each of those areas. And once Williams provides a GO/NO GO date, I'll call in the rural teams and tasks forces back to the urban center. This may take a couple of weeks, depending on the area sweeps and the operational tasks that are on hand, but a month's notice should afford me ample time.

"At the local level we continue to find success with increasing accessibility to and expanding application within the Ter(mina)ls. Our urban police force continues to grow- which isn't a surprise. People want the chance to hold a gun- we estimated that was going to be a relatively easy area to service. Bottom line is we're recruiting more people and adding even better measures of control. Looting, public disorder and disobedience- manageable levels across the board in all seven urban centers. Very manageable. We keep on supporting local authorities- whether it be area governors, city chancellors- with increased leverage to make decisions- I really couldn't be more pleased. All the channels are well maintained, and we certainly have no bad actors. Everyone is **TCAG** obsessed, **TCAG** focused, and **TCAG** terrified. We continue to have turn-ins at each hierarchical level. All very healthy.

"And the national players, the legacy folk- they continue to languish nicely. Ron stands pat- he believes he represents the leadership of an inner circle. The press machinations continue. The relaunch of the election cycle poised for next year continues to garner support. Very much by the books. Nothing that could offer an issue for this group come the time to initiate the next phase. My least concerning area."

A pause.

"If there are any questions, I am delighted to answer."

"Wonderful news Smithe, wonderful." Van Pult nodded, then leaned back and rocked in his chair. Unprompted, he began and the eight other men joined, each one clapping together for Smithe. Van Pult, Johnson, Williams, Meyers, Ward, Duncan, Burnside, and Holden. A thinktank unlike any other assembled in history. The originators of the Compact.

Smithe pleaded for quiet with his hands, palms down. "No time to celebrate, gentlemen. We cannot let off. Four years. Four years of orchestration to reach this point. Don't forget the level of work. Don't forget the men we have lost. Don't forget the uprisings. We need to finish strong. Williams- continue to press. We have confidence in you. We are here to offer support. We're all here for each other, we're all committed to your success. It's our success."

Williams, without hesitation, "Thank you, sir. I know we'll get it over the finish line."

Smithe, an exaggerated folding of his hands, fingers interlocking, "You have my complete faith."

-O-

"High throughput screening, sir."

His menacing eyes were locked on a monthly status report- the Governor- the big boss in Frye's purview, but only one pawn in a string of pieces surrounding the board and laid out in protection of the nine members of the quorum- "And what the hell does all this accomplish?"

Dr. Frye took in a deep breath. The two of them, a viewing window, one of the laboratories- Frye was mindful not to be patronizing, "Drug developers used to model thousands, hundreds of thousands of different permutations of small molecules using this technique. A research scientist would be able to change structural elements, or as they are called 'sidechains,' on a certain molecule in order to understand if the different configurations were more or less effective against a target. We could do many different permutations at once, because essentially each one of these wells, these micro wells, is an experiment unto itself. Which is quite remarkable. This changed the landscape for drug development."

"What does it accomplish though, in terms of your program?"

"Well, we reverse engineered the technology- in a way. We have the culture strains, the cells from our population samples, and we expose a single virus line to hundreds of thousands of cell types, to understand resistance, to understand infection capacity."

“Translate.”

“It’s as if you can simulate 10,000 infections in different people each time you run one of these plates, though I prefer not to think in those terms.”

The Governor peered at the older man. “Your preferences are irrelevant. Listen, I didn’t want to intervene here, Frye. I had my lieutenant reporting out to me on this, and last year after that Emissary’s visit from the **CGTA’s** (*Changing for Greatness and a Traditional America*) Commission- I don’t have any time to play around. To be blunt, you are going to be made an example of if this thing doesn’t pick up steam. I really don’t care what your report says. I’ve been told- I need to know whether or not you’re properly motivated to meet the final target deadline.”

“Motivated?”

“Your daughter is in my care, as you know. And I wouldn’t want to have her fall into a bad place, Frye.”

Dr. Frye gulped, “A bad place, sir?”

A sigh. A smug grin. Rotting breath. “**CGTA** allegiance is a tricky thing, Frye. She’s young. She might not understand the imperative of allegiance, of **CGTA** loyalty. She might end up on trial for sedition. I might not be able to protect her.”

A tear nearly reached the point of gravitational no-return in Frye’s eye- he let out a faint whimper, “Take me. Kill me. She has nothing to do with this.” Terrified. Pleading.

“That’s the point. You’d be fine to sacrifice yourself. But her- she would mean something to you. Wouldn’t she?”

No response.

Exclaiming, “Wouldn’t she!?”

Deferential, defeated. “Yes. She would.”

Matter of fact, not meeting his subordinate’s eyes, “Bring this in on time, Frye. Let’s go. You have all the resources at your disposal. Your cap is literally unrestricted. I’ve been told point blank to approve any expense that comes out of your program.” Eyes up, contact- “Don’t mistake me for a monster. I don’t want to have to see anything bad happen to her. We only just started getting physical. That wouldn’t be any fun for me, either. Okay? I’m rooting for you. I really am.”

A blue suit jacket, a right hand- onto the scientist’s shoulder- squeezing- a third man, short, stocky, a goatee and precise sideburns, amber and red- pointing into the viewing area, past the glass, “How close are you, you little shit? How many people did that plate in there kill?”

Frye choked on his response, “I don’t- I don’t know- exactly-”

The governor admired Frye’s predicament for a moment, then, “Peabody, let him go. Dr. Frye- you have plenty of work to do, don’t you think? Would you please continue into the lab without us?”

Dr. Frye remained silent in his white lab coat.

Peabody cut a grave look into the doctor- despite being shorter in stature, the bulldog towered over the faint academic. A hand releasing, then a tidy slap on the cheek- “No rest for the wicked, huh doc?”

Dr. Frye, disjointed and nearly melting from fear, urged himself out of the door from the viewing area, a room between rooms- back to the cleanroom, back to the hood, back to the cultures and electron microscopes. The Governor and his lackey remained in the hallway.

Peabody begged, “If you let me have my way, I’ll get his ass motivated.”

Rebuking, “I don’t need him torn to shreds, I need this program successful. There are rumors I might be on a short list to make one of the National Committees. And if I get out of this shitbox, that means you’re out of this shitbox. I can’t stand having those shifty Emissary’s coming for reports, demanding this, demanding that- I’m tired of National breathing down my neck. All these old men and their goddamn military programs. We need to get the hell out of here. This little twerp is our ticket.”

Snorting up a wad of phlegm, “Why you figure they’re putting so much heat on this?”

“Who the hell knows? Some terrorist eradication plan, like a final wave.”

“A final wave?”

“That’s all I heard. All I know is I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of it.”
The lackey sneered, then plead, “Can’t I just muscle him around a little bit?”
“No. Stay away from him. If he’s late for the next target, he’ll have plenty to feel upset about.”
“You wouldn’t actually string out the girl would you?”
“I won’t have a choice at that point. That order was given to me, it wasn’t my idea.”
“So they’re serious?”
“They are. And I’m going to be seriously pissed if I lose that piece of ass.”
The fractious lackey chuckled.
The Governor indicated it was time to leave.

-O-

“What’s your problem? Move into the tram!”

Mickey contorted herself inward, scrunching against another passenger, then another- she possessed a rather thin frame, and after weeks on the road, malnourished, tired- she nearly disappeared in the train car. Squeezing, everyone- an anonymous pile of flesh, where boundaries collapsed- the morning commute. Bodies, arms and legs and more arms and legs, torsos and noses and greasy hair, packed. Mickey listened to herself wheezing, sucking in air. Municipal workers, **GCTA** (*The Government and Commission of Total America*) pawns, clerks, manual laborers- cleaning, shipping, hauling, repairing, stocking, packaging, trashing and burning. Economics, reduced to the essentials. No unions. No protection.

All aboard!

Mickey hadn’t planned on riding the subway trams, but the other afternoon she had picked up a roundtrip ticket blowing in an alleyway. Another sign. She hadn’t told Paul, and woke up early to set herself on a different course, to scope out a different part of town.

It had been a little over a week. A week of pavement underfoot, scrounging paltry meals, drinking poisonous liquor with Paul- when he said he worked 20 hours a day, it wasn’t hyperbole. Most of her time had been spent alone. She walked to keep warm- her hands in her pockets, her ears tucked behind a cotton beanie, a black wool scarf for her neck, gloves- the hibernal weather refused to break. Winter refused to budge, to make way for spring. So on and on she went, in no apparent direction and with no apparent purpose, amidst the others, the fleshy jetsam and flotsam. Mickey watched and learned. She noticed any sign of homelessness or destitution was literally swept off the sidewalk. The streets were kept open, clear. The dying and the poor who couldn’t manage to find shelter were hushed away into unmarked graves, not even a whimper. Paul said when he first arrived that families had piled together in bedraggled, makeshift camps in the parks and at intersections. No longer. Eradicated. Erased. Now the parks were empty. Police marshals did anything they wanted, took in anybody they deemed suspicious- no warrants or questions. A smog lingered, even into the daytime. Darkness broke early each night. *It’s like even the daylight is giving up*, Mickey thought to herself. This new world leeches into her- permeated her. This city with no children. This sky with no birds. Neon letters, sylphy- TER(MINA)LS- 24 HOUR INPUTS- DISCOUNTED TIME- LOWEST HOURLY RATES- MINUTE BY MINUTE ACCESS- PAYMENT PLANS AVAILABLE. Her appetite still had not returned.

Exiting at the *Central Transportation Annex*, the epicenter where she had first arrived- off the car in a flurry with all the other passengers except the bums and destitute tramps who blinked wearily, aboard for another loop, another ride, left behind and praying to remain hidden until they were discovered and beaten up by lowly Security Guards drunk at the end of the night. That savage, never ending hum of electric railcars- the doors shut behind her.

Choo! Choo!

Security. Police. **GCTA** Special Forces. Military consultants. National Guardsmen. Soldiers and uniformed men- everywhere. But nobody felt safe. Mickey did not feel protected. Out of the tunnels, up the stairs- her attention transfixed by a glistening automatic weapon held in front of a young man, a teenager. The

boy patrolled a civic building, maybe a judicial center or some other **GCTA** branch- his leery eyes were bulging, the skin pulled tight across his forehead- like too much white in his sclera was showing, unnatural- a chinstrap buried into his face- he chewed gum, pacing- barely any stubble on his cheeks and neck. Mickey walked by him and was quick to avert her gaze when his head turned in her direction. He could end her life without reason or justification.

For her protection.

With a general sense of destination, walking- down an alley between concrete towers- Mickey spotted three other guards club away at a pile of limbs, another teenager. Graffiti- fresh on a wall. The kid cried out for mercy. Nobody stopped to pay the scene any mind. The guards continued.

She hadn't spoken a word to anyone except Paul Nelson. How could she have imagined when she wandered out of the train station- civilization had come to this. Headquartered at a cheap rooming house. A studio with a kitchenette. Six minutes of electricity a day. After a week, broke, anxious- here she was- out and about to exchange manual labor for credits- power credits. Two credits a night. Paul had tried to prevent her from going out and "doing her share," but Mickey was obdurate.

This was the next thing she had to do.

Paul had told Mickey about the Work(S)tation(s), the sidecar counterparts to the Ter(minal)s. Kinetic energy transmuted to electric currents. The United States had run out of oil and coal, and the nuclear plants had been shut down and quarantined. After the terrorist strike- after the power grids were destroyed- the **GCTA** did what any controlling faction of society would do: institutionalize slavery in the form of Work(S)tation(s) to generate electricity and fill the gap. Cheaply. Quickly.

Inside the buildings: massive wheels like the deck of a ship covered in hand holds and pegs fitted by worn fingers fitted for human laborers- men and women and children, heave-ho, push and row and faster and faster- rooms fitted with bicycles, sweat and legs, desperate- floors covered in urine, vomit- wires twisted snakelike everywhere, insulated in copper and foam, tubes fitted around walls and dug into the ground, a network running in tangled nodes. Skyscrapers converted and filled. There was no minimum age. Anyone could do their part.

Power credits had become currency. No one had any money, or any use for it.

Citizens who filed their paperwork, checked in with their local officers- they qualified for assistance stamps, received ration stipends- theoretically. Mickey had spent much of her time so far in Freedom Six surrounded by unfulfilled promises of @onvien@enters. Lines and lines wound around corners- chapped hands, red cheeks, foggy breath- here there was never movement, never dynamism. Swaths of people, cursing silently, huddled on the concrete. Waiting days for a toothbrush, a bottle of mouthwash. Weeks for grain rations, cooking oil. Meat was processed and packaged in laboratories and had to be cooked well-done and charred because of the risk for contamination. There were no fruits, vegetables. Terrorists were to blame for the supply chain shortages. The terrorists burned our fields. Killed our farmers. Terrorists depleted our supplies, forced the lack of variety, the barren shelves and the dried- up medicine cabinets. Terrorists had done this.

Indeed.

But the enemy hadn't been able to take away our most crucial cornerstones of democracy. Steadfast and accessible, on every block or so it seemed, the fabric of society woven together by McDonalds fast food vendors, Coca Cola dispensers- signage and advertising for both. Mickey chuckled to herself, covering her mouth, passing a billboard with several children enjoying milkshakes- *Was there really a need for a marketing campaign?* It seemed rife with bathos. It seemed- patronizing. It seemed like more people should have seen through the charade.

But everyone remained silent.

Nobody spoke.

Nobody laughed.

Nobody did anything out of the ordinary.

SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING!

And if you tilted things at just the right angle, the **GCTA** continued to provide. On every block, on every corner- between the beatings, the arrests- a ray of sunshine, a breath of fresh air- the Ter(mina)ls. Amidst the grey street corners, flashing bulbs and changing colors – PLUG INS OPEN- HAPTIC INPUT PACKAGES AVAILABLE- AFFORDABLE RATES- FULL VIDEO IMMERSION. Body suits, 360 degree goggles- virtual playgrounds. Sex. Violence. Fantasy. Consumption. Drugs. Adventure. Friendship. Users could act out their wildest dreams, and fulfill their most basic needs, while plugged into a port. And people remained plugged in. People spent lifetimes in simulation- Baudrillardian- on the line.

Once you were on the line, you stayed on.

Mickey didn't have the paperwork required to pursue legitimate work at a state sanctioned Work(S)tation(s). Credits would have to be earned at a black-market operation. Luckily for her there were plenty of options. Even the UNDOX needed lamplight, so illegal warehouses popped up to fill the gap- the owners were **GCTA** officials who managed legitimate operations but kept these stations on the side to transfer additional volts and inflate their performance quotas.

Past @nvenien@enters of every type- COCA COLA, CREDIT EXCHANGE, LIQUOR - past the lines, past the abandoned cars junked and scrapped, the power coils makeshift and slapdash hanging above everyone- past it all Mickey found a six story, run down warehouse at the edge of the city center. Paul had told her about this area. Aptly designated 'The Junkyard.' An armpit, a nook between rows of skyscrapers- where the cold breeze worsened, the darkness thickened- where the homeless and poor felt safer, could be themselves- Mickey walked up to a door, a sign **CRDTS XCHNG** scribbled- unadorned- in cardboard with red spray-paint. No flashing lights. No neon bulbs.

It was a smell at first- sweat, bacterial overgrowth, putrefication. A locker room. Cheese cured improperly- or too properly.

Then a sound- rattling, chains or a spinning loom or a heavy footstep in the distance.

An older man, Hispanic- a ballcap turned sideways- his arms crossed, on a counter- a bank teller's window- metal bars, a push-pull bin that slid from his side of the wall to yours. He removed a piece of plywood. An opening. "How many you need?"

"Credits?"

"No- vacation days in the Gulf of Mexico."

"I'll take at least a week's worth in the Gulf- and maybe another couple in the south of France. My cousin has a chateau."

"That'll be a problem. We don't do international. You'll have to try the off grid down the street."

"I was worried I was in the wrong place."

"So was I."

A smile was exchanged. Mickey's first organic, anonymous smile. "How long would it take to leave here with a dozen?"

"Depends. Twenty-four hours on the bike, plus or minus an hour- you know, depending on how much juice you push out- and not taking into account any food or water we bill you for. Six hours at the wheel. We don't offer any liability protection, obviously. This your first time here?"

"Was it my suntan, or my accent?"

"Where you coming from?"

"Hard luck. Just like everyone else."

"Ain't that the truth. I'll tell you what- I wouldn't put a nice girl like yourself on a wheel- those bastards puking and pissing all over each other back there- give me twelve on the bike, and I'll get you ten credits."

"Twelve hours puts me past curfew. How many would eight hours get me?"

"I'll give you eight for eight."

"I appreciate that."

A logsheet. A towel. "Hand this to the room supervisor. He'll sign off on the incoming time. Once you're done bring it back to him and he'll sign you out. I'll be here until I ain't here no more- so I'll see you get your eight for eight."

"Alright." Mickey put the towel over her shoulder. "Down the hall here?"

"Second room on the left, can't miss it. Enjoy the views." A grin almost came over the proprietor's greasy face- instead it remained mostly inchoate, stuck on the corners of his mouth. Would it have been a smile of kindness, or a smile of deceit? Mickey offered an awkward salute and left him behind the bank-teller window, the chain links, sundry piles of trash on the ground- the lobby with no windows or light, two by fours and cobwebs.

The sound of wheels pedaling. Shrieking. Gears. Mickey winced as she continued down the corridor, a single lightbulb illuminating the way. From somewhere in the midst of this midnight cicada terror hovered a voice, a lulling voice of calm serenity- she opened a steel door- *For the introductory, low price of nine ninety-nine, with the first and last month paid up front, how could you go wrong?* A single television hung from a corner of the room. A fierce blue light cascading over a coven of exercise freaks-heads down, legs pedaling- men bare chested and spitting, women with their eyes closed, children, sweat running off everybody's foreheads and shoulders and lips- and that smell. Mickey dry heaved. A smell of fungus, of life decaying into death, then rotting itself back into life- a determined, pervasive struggle at the microbial levels- it ate away at Mickey's nostrils the moment she crossed threshold. Another dry heave. By way of an autonomic reaction, she covered her face with her palm. Disgusted. Her lips sealed together, her bottom slightly larger than her top. Her teeth clenched. A man, seedy looking, unshaven and lasciviously winking at one of the women on a bike near him, he turned to Mickey. "Papers?"

Mickey handed him her sheet.

He inspected the verbiage. He jotted off on the time. Mickey checked his signature, then a clock on the wall opposite the boxy television. "It's eleven thirteen, not twelve thirty."

"So you can read analogue?"

Bemused by the question, nearly stammering, "Yes."

"If you're so smart, what are you doing here then?"

"Can you please change the time?"

"I'll change it once you get off the bike. Go take a seat and get pedaling, smart ass."

Mickey, her eyes downcast, "Fine, I'll go back to the front, that man said if I had any trouble-"

"Give me that." The supervisor scribbled a new set of digits. "Don't give me any more shit, got it? I don't have time for any shit today."

Mickey took the paper and searched out an empty seat. She kept shifting her gaze on the ground. Cords like tentacles, like rivers in colors of black and red and yellow cut along the linoleum tiles running from the ends of the bikes around the room in no apparent order, with respect to no grander designs, by no method or reason, curling around the periphery and then meeting at a hole cut into the wall, presumably into some alchemical transformer- Mickey gaped, mesmerized by the activity. Fifty, a hundred bicycles maybe, a room the size of a baseball diamond- she tip-toe'd, apologizing for the accidental contact on a leg or handlebar- eyes upward, pointed at the screen, then down- a new voice, reassuring, another advertisement- *In life, there are passengers, and there are drivers.*

Mickey found an open seat.

On the handlebars sat a metallic box with a digital reading, **0.00**. Mickey clicked her feet into each of the pedal straps, adjusted her seat position via a rusted knob, and began to push. The reading, in red light, slowly began to climb- **0.01, 0.02**- it must be watts generated, or volts, she thought to herself. She turned to each of her neighbors- one with his head hanging forlorn, closed off. The other, an emaciated woman, her attention was pointed hopefully at the screen- commercial after commercial, absorbed- dreams of more time on the line.

Mickey glanced towards the door. The supervisor had his attention focused on her. She was jarred. He pointed two fingers towards his two eyes, then one towards her. A pit formed in her throat. *Goddamn it Mickey*, she thought to herself. She put her focus back to the digital reading- **0.14**. Her calves, then her buttocks- a burning sensation. She couldn't find a groove- the wheels fought her at each turn. The grating metal, like knives on a sharpener, back and forth.

Reflexively she took stock of the man next to her- older, in his fifties, hunched over, a featureless face- he was pedaling much slower than her. Turn by turn. Then the woman to her left- younger, a teenager- hardly moving the gears. Mickey decided to slow down. Eight hours was going to be a long haul. She checked the clock on the wall. Seven minutes had elapsed. If the proprietors were trying to rip people off with the time of entry, she could only imagine what sort of nefarious schemes they had cooked up to rig the clock to run slower, to show inaccurate readings- at least that aspect of economics had remained constant through the Knockout. Ripped off by another business. Disgusted, she resigned herself to engaging the pedals even more slowly. Rotation by rotation- her mind beginning to numb. She couldn't watch the television set. Dishwashing soap, fast food restaurants now defunct, new models now out of fashion by twenty years, cell phones, cars- vestiges of a bloated past- she couldn't relate. She couldn't participate in the collective nostalgia. Her eyes closed. She went to the golf course. Eighteen holes. The first tee. A par four- dog leg left- she took the driver out of her bag.

Hole by hole. Shot by shot. Putts, approach shots, tee boxes, sand traps- after her seventy second hole, two over par, she returned back to the room. 7:15. The reading on her handlebars had gone up to **101.75**. It was time to log out. The towel around her neck was soaking wet. Her legs were on fire. But she had to rush. Curfew would be setting in, and the trains would be decommissioned for the night. Adrenaline hit. She lurched over to the supervisor, unsteady on her feet.

"Long time pedaling without a break there."

"Yep."

"I was watching you. There was a good two hours you really didn't move much, so I'm docking that from the total. I'll credit you through 5PM."

"What?"

"You heard me. You weren't hardly moving the wheels around."

"How does that even make sense? I was moving just as fast as everyone else."

A weasel's face and a crack tooth'd smile like he owned a mouth with too many canines, a faded denim jacket, grey and brown whiskers in an uneven beard, dotted obsidian eyes like a dollhouse doll's- the look of the boy who killed frogs out by the pond, alone, suddenly all grown up and full of evil plots- he wiped his nose and croaked, "Not what I saw."

"That's a lie. I need the hours. I need the credits."

Sly, "How bad?"

Mickey reflexively raised her eyebrows, "Excuse me?"

"There's a room on the side, a locker room for the shift leaders. I'm feeling generous. We can go in there, and maybe I'll give you a chance to earn your credits."

Mickey began glowing with anger. She exhaled, dejected. Upset. Unbelievable. But not so unbelievable- this was the world, this is how things were done. No different now than how it was ten-thousand years ago inside the walls of Babylon- exploitation. Subjugation. Depravity. Man, the dominator- woman, the subservient. Pro forma- moaning and wailing and bouncing and happy for it all to be over. Sex for security. Pussy for money. Mickey considered her options, she considered the drama unfolding across history- to accept defeat and come to Paul's with little to show for, to unhinge a right hood and shock his system with her fist, or to hop back onto the bike. There had to be another way. Yes. She would outsmart the spider by leaving the insect realm all together; plug in a vacuum, hose his legs and his webs into a hypoallergenic bag.

Without premeditation, her arms akimbo, "Alright. Let's go then. I want to get this over with."

“Good girl.” The supervisor took Mickey’s wrist, walked out into the hall, unearthed a set of keys from his pocket and locked the door to the room where the other indentured gearheads continued on in their collective dirge. Mickey went out of her body. She couldn’t personalize his hand, her wrist- it transpired as if Mickey was watching a tableau. She floated above herself, in the third-person. He walked her across the hallway to a small door, unlocked it, and nudged her into a small area between lockers. A scabrous request- “Let’s both try to enjoy this, okay?” Without any warning his hands went to his zipper, his fly, down- a withered, wrinkled gland of flesh, half-hard- a nightmare in Mickey’s heart. He put one leg on a bench and motioned her towards him. She gulped. She returned to her person, went down to her knees. Her eyes looked up to the villain’s chin folds, the tip of his bulbous, red alcoholic nose- his hands went into her hair, he groaned- then gasped, nearly unconscious from a jolt of excruciating pain.

Mickey had gripped, then thrashed at the brute’s scrotum. Ripping, torn in three motions. Puncture, pull. Disconnected, predatory-prey. She jumped up and lunged out of the door in a single bound. There was no sense in checking over her shoulder. The creature was left writhing on the ground, his hands on his crotch, a pool of blood bubbling in spurts- instant karma- like stolen convenience store candies tucked away in teenage palms discretely under beltbuckles back home and satiated ready to sleep only to be jostled by a ringing telephone with news of a car accident, a fire, a guard rail, a dead father, an empty wrapper in a pocket.

Not everything had changed in this world.

Some of the rules were the same.

Down the hallway- at the bank teller window- the man asked her, “So, how was your trip?”

Out of breath, an affectatious grin, “Weather was picture perfect.”

She kept one arm, the arm, in her pocket. With the other she unfolded the sheet of paper, slid it across.

He inspected the line. His tone shifted. “Looks like Derek didn’t sign off, the last line here?”

Her arms were shaking uncontrollably, “He said you would take care of it.”

The man sighed. “Lazy bastard. Here’s your credits, Miss. Better hurry. The officers will be out with their dogs pretty soon. They put you to work all day, then arrest you on your way home.”

“Sounds like we both need a vacation.” Mickey retrieved her plastic credits from across the counter- a five-pointed diamond and three single-dots, blue and yellow laminated, the **GCTA** logo- into her coat pocket. She hurried out of the building. Once she was outside on the sidewalk, back towards the subway terminal, she took her other hand from her pocket. Red stained. Guilty. Back into her jean pants. Her pace quickened. Head down, furtive- she prayed a few times on her journey back to the ramshackle apartment, back to Paul. Mickey could smell the death, the ash, the laboratory meat, the grease and sweat- the blood, the dangling organs- she began to shake after a couple of stops. She panicked. *Wait- back to the course. Go back.* She closed her eyes. Freshly mowed greens. A colossal fairway sand trap. A hamburger at the turn. She played another nine holes until the subway hit her platform to exit.

Having returned safely, she told Paul about the incident. He warned her not to go back without him. He was almost angry. But then he considered the circumstances. He poured them each a drink. Admiring her, “You’ve never been one to mess with, have you?”

Mickey considered it, “It wasn’t even about me- it’s like, something took over. I- it’s like I became a vehicle for this, like this cosmic justice. It was coming due- crimes that he and so many like him have committed over the years- and today, he had to pay.”

Paul quipped, “Doesn’t sound like you’ll be losing any sleep over it, huh?”

Mickey realized how tense her muscles were, her legs and arms, a coiled pit viper ready to strike. She didn’t respond.

Paul finished his drink. “Listen- I’m happy for you to go around ripping the nuts off of scum bags. Lord knows there are plenty of deserving assholes in this city. But really- what’s our plan here Mickey? What’s next?”

-O-

A uniformed officer with a nightstick approached a woman and her children- one an infant, the other maybe five or six years old. The children were dressed in rags, layer upon layer. The woman was asleep, upright and leaning against a brick wall. The man wore a red **GCTA** uniform, full cheeks, a brimmed cap and a crisply shaved face- stocky, buckled onto huge shoulders- he stopped near the sleeping mother and poked at her shoulder.

“Wake up!”

Mickey noticed the scene on the corner. Paul and she had been walking for several blocks. Images continued to float around her in a dreamlike quality- she had been to St. Louis and Louisville plenty of times as a young person, she remembered the urban sprawls- but this world had mutated. Paul said it had once been a Hispanic neighborhood, but everyone’s skin seemed to be grey. She leaned over, “We should help her.”

“There’s nothing we can do.”

They plodded on. Mickey looked over her shoulder, but they turned a corner. More pavement. More trash. More smoke. A large billboard:

**REPORT ANY UNDOX ACTIVITY!
FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN DETAINMENT!**

“Who was the guy in the uniform?”

Paul lowered his tone, deliberate, “He was **GCTA**. Probably a selectman.”

“Selectman?”

“He runs a couple of blocks, maybe a third of a neighborhood. A Selectman will report up to an Alderman, who runs a neighborhood within a (W)ard. Aldermen report up to neighborhood heads, (W)ard Clerks. Chicago used to have seventy-seven community areas- at least that’s what some old timer I met explained to me when I first got here. Apparently after the lights went out, the count of residents quadrupled, a population boom- so now there are something like three hundred. These are the low-level players who care about busts. Busting UNDOX- the terrorists.”

“UNDOX?”

“Undocumented. They get all the blame. People without papers. People who haven’t signed on to **GCTA** allegiance.”

“Talk about Orwellian- who’s above the (W)ard Clerks?”

“(W)ards are tied together into districts. A Clerk reports up to one of the seven Mayors, and each Mayor runs a district. And at the top of the mountain resides the Governor. The Governor has total local authority. Above the Governor- that’s where things get hazy. Allegedly there are still mechanisms operating at the national level- Senators, State Representatives, the President- but the rules are unclear. I suspect it’s all for show. There hasn’t been an election in years.”

“So- who’s really in charge?”

Paul noticed a CCTV camera. He instinctively lowered his voice, drooped his head down. “I don’t think anybody knows who is really in charge, and whoever is in charge doesn’t want anybody to know.”

Mickey lowered her voice in response to Paul, “How’d you piece all of this together?”

“Newspaper articles, mostly. Local officials- these guys are all competing for ink in *The Sun Times*. Everybody wants a headline. A terrorist bust. A political score. It’s high drama.”

Walking, aimless.

Mickey hoisted up her collar. She felt compelled, in the moment, to make a confession to Paul, “I tried to visit your house again, after our fight- it must have been a couple of months after the Knockout. I came by, but nobody was there. You had already left. I tried to, to see you.”

Reflecting on the exodus- “My Mom didn’t handle it well. She kept nagging at my Dad to call the police. She freaked out. I mean- when the furnace didn’t work, when the toaster over didn’t plug in- she wanted the Fire Department, she wanted somebody to do something. She didn’t understand what was happening. She cried so much, she- it’s like something inside of her short-circuited. Like she broke down with the

toaster.” Paul let out a weepy grin, sympathetic, “She wanted her old life back. She would constantly pray for things to go back to normal. That’s why we came up to Chicago- my father couldn’t take it anymore. She kept saying everything would be different, that life would all go back to normal once we made it to the city.”

“I’m sorry Paul.”

“I’m not. She wasn’t meant for this. Her mind wasn’t built to operate in a world like this.”

“I don’t think she was alone.”

“Nope. Everybody lost their cool- really, I mean- everyone lost it. Look around. We’re all huddled into this heap, packed together like barnyard animals, and we’re supposed to be grateful to have the lights on for a couple hours. To have the Ter(mina)ls buzzing. It’s unreal.”

“I can understand why you started drinking.”

“Not much else to do.”

“It’s just such a waste. The whole thing.”

Paul sighed, “We used to have it made.”

Mickey paused. There were no cars, no need to wait at red lights- the traffic signals continued recycling though, eerie- the two of them at another intersection, she put her hand in front of Paul. A break. A moment. “Why doesn’t anybody stand up to the **GCTA**?”

Paul pushed Mickey’s hand back. He grabbed her shoulder and urged her forward. “If they catch wind of anything, any kind of uprising, any kind of resistance- people disappear. There’s no trial. The only press coverage is another terrorist bust. You’re here one day, you’re gone the next.”

“But what if-”

“They have the guns. They manage the refitted power grids. They distribute the food. They control everything. There’s no leverage. Anyways, even if there was a means- people couldn’t organize themselves. Nobody speaks to anyone outside of their immediate circle. Everyone is distrustful. Scared of **GCTA** spies, scared of being labeled an UNDOX and disappearing. It’s an animal mentality Mickey- everyone out here is fighting to survive. They’d kill you in a heartbeat if it meant saving their own asses.”

-O-

Doctor Frye inspected a plate under an electron microscope.

“Peripheral lysing?”

“Just a moment, Clark.”

Adjusting the lens, focus- careful- patient- clinical, a deft hand, a right turn, a left click- signs of rupture, hallmarks of apoptosis. Blue stains. The view reminded Roger of certain blastoma regions, a memory of T-cells and Natural Killer cells, his post-doctoral work- a young biochemist, a savant, obsessed with cellular biology, enamored by advances in genetics and technology- a quiet, curious adolescent. Dissections in grammar school classes. Salivating over complex diagrams. Measuring pea plants with a ruler, adjusting variables like soil composition, water concentration, acidity, seed density- methodical and determined. But his passion had morphed over the years. There was an external pressure now.

“I concur. A clear pathology. Consistent patterns. Do you have another control series?”

The plate was alternated. A hushed voice, “Same exposure, same viral load-”

Roger poured over the gelatinous death. “Alright. And the treated colony?” Another plate. An adjustment. Roger pinched the rim of his glasses. “What’s the time stamp on this?” To the point- unemotional, rigid- but there was an indication- there was a difference- this was something new.

Stark.

Exciting.

“It read, six hours.”

“Only six hours post inoculation?”

“Yes. Six hours.”

“Run the same series, three more times, at twelve-hour intervals. We’ll want to incubate this for another 48 hours at least.”

“If I may sir?” A final slide was inserted. “That was the tenth series. This is the first. One hundred and eighty hours post inoculation.” Waiting. Dr. Frye examined the slide. The younger colleague watching, whispering, “I didn’t want to call you until I was sure. But- isn’t this something?”

Doctor Frye paused. He wiped his forehead. There were implications- this was significant. But the momentary excitement passed. Back to examining the evidence. The scientific process. Reserved. Scrupulous. An innate suspicion filled the space in Dr. Frye’s consciousness—a career built upon skepticism, mistrust, verification. He faced his bench scientist colleague. “Do you have current endpoints and process margin data?”

“I have the computer write-ups here sir,” handing over a folder.

“And you’ve verified the outputs?”

“Several times.”

“Collated with imaging?”

“Yes.”

Roger would check and re-check the work. They would need to monitor growth for several more days, but they could start running simian models in parallel. A candidate. A candidate for now. But potentially- “While I review this, start updating the primate protocol and put the order in for a full regimen- as a precaution. Do it immediately. We’ll need Harper and his scale up team ready to begin as early as tomorrow morning. Assuming this checks out.”

A pause, a gulp for courage, desperate for edification- the scientist coerced, “This is promising- don’t you think, sir?”

Doctor Frye kept his attention with the papers in his hand. He did not acknowledge his subordinate with any body language. “It doesn’t mean anything yet. We’re a long way off. Remember- this isn’t our first primate study. You need to remain completely impartial.”

“Of course sir, but- we’ve never seen the consistency, the repeatability across series-“

“And we don’t know what it means until we verify. So let’s verify. In the meantime- the protocol, the animal orders, the scale-up. End of day. Understood?”

“Yes sir.”

His assistant disappeared. Dr. Frye stood by himself. He turned towards the laboratory exit, past the hoods, the stands- gas outlets, water pipelines- a badge swipe- a white coat onto an oak coat hanger, nitrile gloves into a wastebin, a door closed. A private satisfaction crept into his being. He opened then closed the door to his office. *Yes- this was promising- very promising-* papers were shuffled, images were reviewed, charts parsed over. *Look at the cellular matrix, the presentation- yes, this is unique. Promising. This could be something.* It must have been that additional string of nucleotides, a fortuitous paper on chain repeats and stability- applying the insights- all of the tinkering, all of the variables. *Yes. This could be an answer.* An answer for the **ATCG** (*Authority of Truth and Crossnational Governance*) Commission, for the Governor and his lieutenant- but more so an answer to Frye’s own fundamental questions, his driving forces: he could protect his wife, his daughter, himself; he could finish the program, retire; he could find peace, security. Ethics, morality, irony- Doctor Frye’s work had been insulated- concerned with himself and his family. The slides he examined were critical to fulfill his own personal duty, both as a professional and as a family man- a husband, a father. Duty is what comprised honor. There were no other consequences, no other considerations- as far as he was concerned.

He reviewed more tables. Beads of sweat dripped down the sides of his torso and were absorbed into his white shirt. Nerve endings fired.

The **ATCG** was peripheral. The **ATCG**’s agenda- even more distant. Frye was told the project was critical to a national defense initiative. Ultimately the contagion’s effects would become a problem for terrorists in the Interzones. Enemies of the state. And our soldiers, the folks near the weaponized form, would be

vaccinated. His project would ultimately save lives. It would protect the nation. It would aid in restoring America. Who knows- it might not even be executed; it might be filed away like dozens of other dormant assignments. Who cared? Not Roger Frye. He didn't care about the why, about the need for a 'full eradication' for the sake of public safety. He didn't care about the underlying consequences or repercussions of the Omega Project's execution. He cared about stable sequences, effective vectors, apoptosis, and a reliable antidote. He cared about GANTT charts and the project plan, about deliverables. He cared about his wife, his daughter. An erstwhile global vice president of manufacturing operations. A block-buster-drug developer. A scientist by training who happened to exhibit important business characteristics while locked into the prime of his career: he was demanding, he was profit-driven, he was competitive, he was able to translate abstruse concepts into talking points for a room full of investors. An undergraduate boy with an acute hyperawareness to his family's financial standing- whose father muttered to him "Son, remember what I always told you? Make lots of money." shortly before he passed- a boy who was profoundly shaken by a news clipping he read which explained why becoming a general physician was a 'death sentence'- a rising talent, a bright mind whose predilections ultimately led to executive level airport lounges and away from the microscope hood. A middle-aged, overweight corpocrat who surrounded himself with foreign automobiles, who kept long hours, who enjoyed equatorial vacations, and who lusted over zeroes ogling them as they piled up in his bank account. A man whose world changed one day, who found himself in a secret military laboratory working for shadowy figures who he had never met or known personally, who put this ultimatum on him.

A sycophant.

A professional.

A pawn.

A good man.

-O-

In line for food at a nearby @onvienien@enter – eavesdropping- a hoarse voice, a desperate and throaty grumble- "Another article for Zevi today. Did you see who they tried to connect him with? The Islamic Nationalist Regime. What the hell is the Islamic Nationalist Regime?"

Mickey turned to Paul. "Who is Zevi?"

Paul whispered, "Nobody knows for sure. He was the leader of a group, the 7EVEN FIRES, that claimed responsibility for the March 13th attacks. But they never caught him. He's still at large. He's a ghost, a legend, really. He might not even be a real person."

"A fabricated enemy of the state?"

"Maybe."

Mickey, curious, "But if he is real- he's fighting the **ATCG**?"

"If he's real."

"Do you think he is?"

"Either way, the **ATCG** needs him. He gives them fodder for the papers. They can peg the blame on different UNDOX, terrorist groups and use Zevi's attacks to continue the propaganda."

Mickey pressed, "Do you think he's real?"

Paul waited, biting his lip, sorting out the repercussions of his answer to Mickey- "Yes."

Energized, "We have to find him, Paul. We need to make contact with him."

Paul puffed through his nostrils, chuckling. "Sure. Let me call him up."

"No Paul, I'm serious. He's the next step."

Paul glanced over Mickey and acknowledged secretly to himself the degree by which the megalopolitan tangle had changed her exterior- the woman in front of him, in line with the other refugees of the apocalypse, was not the farmgirl sweetheart he had once admired. Her greasy hair had begun to cluster in strands, beginning to resemble dreadlocks thanks primarily to the rainfall and sweat. Thin, sickly almost- her body odor had taken on a unique odor, like a mound of peat moss. Her cheeks were bright red and

chapped, like the skin of her hands and knuckles- cracked and leathery. Her layers of clothing were covered in dirt and soot- they melted into one gray heap like a wastebin stitched quilt. But it wasn't only an outside job- her attitude, her demeanor- her terse responses, her determined glare- a caterpillar gone butterfly- psyche and body- she had changed so much.

This place had changed her.

Everything was changing.

At first he was so happy to have his friend back, so happy for those feelings- those feelings for her, special- secret- long gone feelings he didn't know he could still feel- but he became acutely aware, after a few more days, after a few more conversations- he was a 'piece of the puzzle'- he was today, but there was something bigger, better, tomorrow.

It hurt to watch- Paul's eyes- betrayed, dried up at the corners.

-O-

Imagine the hazy, soporific nightmare prescribed and dosed and sold in bulk by consumerism, by unmitigated global capitalism: that nightmare of 9 to 5, of traffic jams, of next day deliveries, of thousands of television stations, of social media moguls. Imagine that nightmare, now, as a representation of a 'return to glory.' Imagine sane people longing, so doggedly, to return to their combustion engines and underground tunnels and gelid dinner table conversations and triple-bypass worries? Can you imagine the conditions that would make returning to the corpocratic sleepstate so attractive? To return back to dog-eat-dog, a world which buried her weak and created an uncrossable gap of disparity between classes of people- which bred uneasiness and emptiness, which by design left the common man to assume the role of indentured servant, of useless wage-earner, of controlled and neutered cog- a system fueled by marketing campaigns that played into the common man's fears, perpetuating its own cycle of waste and despair and torpor- unfair, unchecked, unjust- we would one day look back and say "Wouldn't it be nice to go back to that?"

Do you understand the implications of such a wish? What conditions such a wish would require?

Here is what it might require: gestapo tactics, elimination of personal property, disregard for civil liberties and right, curfews, rations, state run media, unchecked dominator impulse, hierarchical gangs, submission, lawlessness, starvation, brutality. A great winnowing. Armadas of pain. A terrible hammer. A world lousy with suffering.

America lost 25% of her population within six months of the Knockout. One out of every four people- dead. Men, women and children migrated into the cities like startled insects darting across a tile floor after the lights had been turned on. Huddled masses.

Does it seem plausible now? Of course it does.

But does it seem justified?

Justice- for an eradication of native people, for the deaths of original Americans, for the decimation of tribes and villages and nations, for cultural annihilation, for Indian Schools and the haircuts and given birth names changed, for Bibles and the required pledges, for the priests and the politicians and the Bureau agents who administered the dominator culture's agenda, for the avaricious wave which throttled a peaceful people, which

disrupted the relationship between man and earth, which opened the doors of slavery and discrimination and industrialization, the looting and plundering of the land, of the women, the poisoning of children's minds, the sickness catching like wildfire a disease with tentacles contagious and without cure- justice?

-O-

A knock at the door- a faint tap, lightly rapping- one, two, three. It was past curfew. Late. Paul had never taken issue with any of the neighbors. Strange.

Mickey heard it first, slowly tiptoeing towards the noise. Paul stopped her. "No, I'll check." Paul had become more nervous for their situation ever since Mickey had her encounter at the Ter(mina)ls.

An eye through an eyehole, a fish-eye needle eye'd pull the line through and secure the hook with a strong knot kind of tiny slit- Paul saw two girls- pink hair on one, blue on the other- a dog collar on one, the other holding a leash- nose rings, earrings, eyebrow rings- leather and Day-Glo, a confused and collaged but celebratory sort of outfit- Paul hadn't seen anything like them in his life.

He stepped away from their door, the deadbolt firm and steel, slightly trembling.

Mickey waited, then whispered, "Well? Who is it?"

"I have no idea- they look deranged."

Mickey grew immediately inquisitive, "Deranged?"

"They're two girls, messing with us."

From outside the locked door, high pitched but audible like a pixie-wing'd Tinkerbell who intended to flag down a taxicab- "We can hear you. Let us in. We won't bite."

Paul swallowed a lump in his throat.

Mickey stood up. "Two girls Paul- really- that's what scares you?" She pushed past Paul and before he could stop her the door was creaked open and the pair of teenage steampunk motorheads were inside the room. The shorter one wore a collar, the taller one toted her about on a leash, tight in her grip- a leash in one hand, a small whip in the other- both girls wore dark mascara, neon colors- aquamarine fishnets and leather army boots, extravagant makeup, tattoos, an assortment costume jewelry. The girl in the studded collar held a glowstick up to her face, then licked it with a seductive tongue- feeling satisfied, "See! I told you they wouldsy letsy ussy insy, Bula."

"They look like a pair of worried little kitty cats, Rispy. We had better be friendly, my pet."

More tongue(s), more glowstick- Paul found himself aroused and terrified and the most furtive corners of his imagination began arranging maddening configurations which his body would surely be unable to navigate. Mickey was happy to break the monotonous grey of the city with this pair of wayward gypsies, their exotic appearances, their strange voices and vocabulary- she remained polite, "We're not afraid. We just weren't expecting visitors. I'm Mickey. This is Paul."

"This is my precious little creature Rispy. I'm Bula. We're new to the building, obviously. Lost our old place. Rispy is a snoop, so she caught your voice coming off from down the hall a day ago and she's been talking about you ever since. I told her I would ask you if you wanted to play with us. So here we are. Here you are. What do you think?"

Rispy joined in- hair gel'd and manipulated into a set of horns, four total- dye'd and detailed, splattered in glitter- a negligible leather vest, a low cut skin tight shirt laced in neon. Paul noticed, for a second time, her fishnet leggings- hers was the whitest complexion Mickey ever seen on another living person. "Prettsy pleasey?"

Paul remained dumbfounded, helpless.

Mickey asked for clarification, "What kind of playing do you have in mind?"

Bula, in her hair-curling chirp- nasal, taking flight- a corset underneath her leather jacket, boots up to her thighs, a red knit-kilt skirt- "Oh, I like her."

Rispy concurred, "I doosy, toosy."

Mickey waited for a response, fighting back a smile.

"The Catacombs my darling, where else?"

Paul moused out in a soft voice, "The underground?"

"The undergrounds! It's the besty westsy."

"Quiet, Rispy. Now darlings- tell me, you two tell me now and come clean, promise? Tell me you've been to the Catacombs."

Paul remained cross-eyed. Mickey spoke up. "No. We've never been underground. Other than the subway lines. I haven't heard of it. Have you?" She nudged Paul. After a moment, he shook his head.

"Oh Rispy, lookie here- a pair of virgins. Oh, I love virgins. I do. I love the look in their eye, when you show them- when you bring them somewhere they've never been- that place where they feel, oh so good- oh, I love it." Bula yanked on the leash and brought the shorter girls closer to her breast, a hand on her cheek, stroking. "Now they have to come, don't they Rispy?"

"Yessy yessy."

Mickey thought back to high school, to late nights in the soy fields, cheap beer and bonfires, streaking down long driveways, smoking homegrown ditch-weed- it had been a long, long while since she had any fun. And this sounded like fun. "What's underground?"

"Oh silly, I can't tell you. No, no. You are going to have to see it, feel it. Smell it. Taste it."

Paul cleared the fog- a head shake, back-forth- lispng, "Why should we trust you two?"

Bula was taken aback, surprised. Paul's frame, his build- a burly, strapping young man- she didn't expect his speech impediment, which happened to exacerbate under pressure, when he felt nervous. Mickey hadn't notice him lisp once since they reunited. But Bula walked over to him and tapped his pectoral muscle with a set of flame-painted fingernails- one after another- index finger, middle finger- "Because our party is *the* party, darling. We don't do sidewalk life anymore. Do we Rispy? No, no- we don't play-by-the-rules. We don't participate anymore. We're stuck here. Just like you. And just like you, darling, we want to have some fun. Because who doesn't? Especially when you're an UNDOX. And you two, you're UNDOX. I can smell it. Sleeping bags. Camp gear. No family, right? No paperwork, right?"

Paul didn't respond.

Bula leaned up to his ear, whispering, "Us survivors have to be nice to each other, don't you think? And you haven't had anybody be nice to you in a long, long time. Have you, darling?"

Mickey looked at Paul. "Get dressed. We're going."

Rispy delicately clapped her hands, and a coy grin broke over Bula's face. "Dress in your best my darlings. An outfit worth dying in, if you know what I mean." A tongue flashed out between Bula's two fingers, off of Paul's chest and in front of his face, tattoos on each knuckle: **F – U**

Paul grasped for more details. "How are we supposed to move around after curfew?"

"Leave that to us big boy. It's a girl's night. We'll call the shots- you relax. You look like you could use it."

Rolling her r's- a dormant libidinal sensation ran from Paul's head to his toes. He hadn't felt like this in a long, long time.

Rispy purred. Bula turned to her partner, grabbed one of her pet's electric-dye'd spikes, and licked Rispy's cheek. Paul scrunched down his brown denim pants. Mickey asked the girls for some eyeshadow.

Down the hallway. Down the stairwell. Across the street. Into another building. Inside an empty apartment, a hole in a wall, a pile of bricks cut out, blown out. Out into another street, an opening, an unassuming alleyway, maybe a hundred feet or so- stealthy, giggling- a manhole cover opened, a ladder down- water, frost, sewage- several tunnels- glowsticks for everybody- rat nests, graffiti- another tunnel- an arch, an entranceway- lights, shadows- opening- wider, into a street, a square- more lights, people- people everywhere- happy, confused, screaming- a scene.

Bula lit a cigarette, a real cigarette- not one of the many vapor sticks Mickey had seen in the mouths of the anonymous, aimless army of strollers above ground. Mickey asked for one, enticed, and Bula lit it for her. Inhaling. Paul tried to craft a bit of small talk, about where the girls were from- "It's not about where we're from, darling, it's about where we are going!"

Suddenly Rispy, swiveling, made eye contact with something, with somebody- the tiny girl broke free from Bula, bounding off- literally, a cat off her leash, on the loose. Paul noticed Bula's fingers slipping, the other knuckles- **C – K**. Mickey is enthralled by the girl bounding away, convinced she is moving on all four legs- Bula didn't hesitate, chasing after her pet, "Damn thing gets so distracted when she's down here- don't worry about us my darlings- go have fun- and stay in love."

Mickey and Paul were left behind.

They grinned at each other- unbound.

A world of shadows and twinkles, they set off into the fray. Glances, pretending to mind their own business- captivated- hushed offers for dope, for hash or speed or ecstasy or blow- offers for sex, give or take- offers denied, accepted- peddlers, dreamlike faces, a liquidity, a carnivalesque movement- the colors, so many colors- the voices, so much talking and shouting. A sharp contrast to the world above, the world of sidewalks and frozen feet. Mickey shrugged, sensing the irony: in the underground it felt like the lights had finally been turned on.

Here they are, out in front of a building, a set of red neons: *Spaceship Earth*. A cinema style marquee, Apollonian characters back-lit in a buttery light: ISMAEL- DRWING NEW CONSTLELATIONS, a conversation, a decision- a line- a tiny man resembling a peacock, darting between clots of people towards them from the entrance door, he meets and greets- he kisses cheeks, he ignores- small talk- big talk. He landed in front of Mickey and Paul.

Kinetic, frenzied- an accent, Filipino or Cambodian- consonants lulling- "Hello my beautiful babies! How are we tonight?"

Mickey asked the character, "We're great. How are you?"

The bird pirouetted. "Fabulous baby, always- when you're at the *Spaceship* how could you be anything but!"

Mickey laughed. Paul was taken aback.

The man asked, "Have you two babies ever been here before?"

Mickey shook her head, "First time."

"Oh my! Virgins! What brought you out to see me?"

Quick, "Friends."

"Friends are the best, baby! I love friends! All these people are my friends, and you two are my favorite new friends!"

Mickey felt a sincerity in the stranger. He didn't come off as glib, superficial- he was alive, truly excited. His ebullience was contagious. "I'm Mickey. This is Paul."

"Paul and Mickey, Mickey and Paul, Yoko and John and George and Ringo! I fucking love you two! Jesus why haven't I met you before? Why haven't we made *love*?"

Paul was frozen. Mickey joined in the fun- gauging the wind- "It's never too late to start."

Mortified, Paul coughed. The man put his hands on Mickey's shoulders. "You are perfect baby. P-E-R-F-E-C-T. On behalf of the free love free world baby, welcome! This is the new revolution!"

Mickey asked, "How long has this been going on?"

"What do you mean, baby? The underground? Who knows- since the beginning. I've been down here since day one. All the beautiful people followed me! Don't you see them? Armies of us! Ready for war, baby! We're all runaways, stray dogs. But I'm a cute one, wouldn't you say?" He took his arms off Mickey's shoulders and graced her with another spin.

Mickey clapped.

Bouncing, "We hijacked the tunnels that had been dug out for the subways and the sewers. Club owners even dug new ones. It's all fucking happening here! Because up there, it's all dead, baby! Everyone I know- so everyone worth fucking knowing- only comes out at night! I can't stand it anymore to see the way the city is during the daylight. So depressing, baby."

"What about the **ATCG**?" Paul wondered out loud.

The man looked over Paul. "Hah! The pigs? **ATCG** is nothing, baby- they're mall cops! They used to try to bust us up, but we keep on keepin' on. Can't stop won't stop, okay? We get smarter. We stay mobile. We have a fleet of generators cooking- we do the lights, the music- fuck the **ATCG**. Can't stop, won't stop!" He turned to a man and a woman in front of Paul and Mickey, high-fiving, shouting- then he shifted back to face Mickey and Paul, "For the last year we don't see much in the way of trouble. I don't know why. Used to be worse. Maybe they give up? I don't know. Maybe they think we aren't a threat- we're not dangerous. We're just a bunch of vampires trying to have some fun, right?" He howled, tilting his head up towards- the sky? The ceiling? The floor? Then he stopped. Inquisitive, "Okay you two- so riddle me this- why haven't you two beauties ever been to the *Spaceship* before?"

Paul answered before he could think, "We just got into town."

The man put a quizzical look onto his face. "Into town? This is the cit-ay bab-ay! No more towns left. Where did you ride in from?"

Mickey replied, "The Interzone. Southern Indiana. Stepped off a train from St. Louis two weeks ago." "My God! You made it last out there for this long?"

Paul, entering the joke, "Yeah. Finally had to give in. See what all the fuss was about."

The man was astonished. He put a finger up to his chin. "I didn't know people still lived outside of Chicago, LA, New York anymore. My God! Welcome my country babies! I'll have to put on a drawl now to make *ya'll* feel at home. Thank goodness you didn't get cooked by no terrorists, or the reactors! You must be a bad pair. Or good liars!"

Mickey's face was rigid.

The man continued, "I thought the only people out there were soldiers!"

Paul, with a sense of humor, "Well, a few cowboys too."

The late-night club-hero chuckled. He tugged on the lapel of his electric blue, velvet jacket. He adjusted his sunglasses, the diamond-encrusted rims. "Dig that. Hell yes!" Another wolf howl, upwards. "You two aren't bringing any trouble in though? Cowboys are welcome, so long as they don't mess with my club, or the people in it."

Mickey assured him, "No trouble here. Not for you or, your club?"

"That's right, baby. My pride and joy. And you are lucky ducks, you two, the Interzone cowboys- tonight is your night! You two are in for a real treat. *Y'all* don't even know it. ISHMAEL is major truth. Major laser. Sent from the future. Sent from the stars, baby!"

"ISHMAEL?" Paul asked.

The human discoball pointed up to the placard, the billboard- electric, humming- the whole area in a deep hum, overtones and octaves up and down, a constant fuzz and drone of copper current- wires, electrons-generator engines, battery rigs- energized, he responded, "Martin Sandozt, he is the most fabulous guitar player in Chicago. Whole city. Guarantee it. He's gonna set you two on fire. And Inrini Fox, her samples, her lights- they are special, baby. And they only play for me! Exclusive contract!"

Paul hesitated for a moment- he had been to the big city before, he had seen the lines, the girls, the owners and bouncers- there was always an angle, a play- a scheme- "So how much does it cost, for us to get in?"

Sunglasses off, a delicate huff for moisture- a ruffled coral shirt sleeve, wiping- "I'm always open to barter. But tonight I'm letting *y'all* in for free. This one is on the house!"

Mickey was genuine, "Thank you."

"The Good Reverend Nate Glitter says, you are welcome Miss Mickey of the Interzone. But now there's one thing left for you to do, okay? Take this little bitsy of paper, right here. Yep. One for you. One for you. Now you open up your pretty mouths. You set it on your pretty tongues, just like- yep, just like that. Now you babies smile! Good! And you walk with me to the front, okay?" one arm for each of them, interlocked, Mickey and Paul flanking the man- past the velvet rope, past the bouncers- "Now you are in and now you

go play!" The owner, with one skinny arm on Paul's shoulder, one on Mickey's, squeezed, then slapped both of them on the backside. "Go play!"

Immediately everything changed.

Paul felt a tidal rush on his senses. A rush, then an onslaught. A pervasive levity... Mickey was quick to find a wall, to set her two hands on it. She tried her best to grip at the flat surface. People began to surround them, swarm them, multiplying... the pulsing lights, fuchsias and blossoming azuls... a steady red beam at the end of the corridor... struggling, but... flying, their bodies released from the torture of gravity... there was laughter, there were tears... everyone, everything was disoriented... Paul took Mickey by the hand, their fingers stitched together for dear life... they held on, within one another... eyes locked, portals within other worlds other lifetimes encompassed in the totality of one another... joined together... anchored... then floating, layer after layer falling off... they were swept forward, together with the rest of the crowd... approaching the end of the spinning tube... the arcade opened up... a room... a kind of amphitheater... pulsating, a string of white flickering lights around the ceiling's perimeter... an elaborate multi-colored chandelier hung above the crowd, erupting in light... each digital candle changing colors, a school of psychedelic fish... a platform, a stage, an empty seat, a guitar stand... melting...

Mickey's eyes inverted, directed inward, another dimension... a vision, back to her time in the forest, her run in the wilderness... further back... her childhood, the farm... her parents meeting... her heart pulsing, a steady rhythm, outwards, exhaling... Mickey's own breath... the unification of her parents, her father's sperm and her mother's egg... the agony of her mother, birthing Mickey outwards... contracting, then releasing... a gasp, her lungs burning and filled with fluid then cleared, opened, a first breath of life... a miracle, the relief... the entrance... expanding, ripples on the water, symbols and energy... organizing forces unseen, atoms and molecules and cause and effect... Mickey had experienced the birth of her own body... first, her body... then further back... the first cell on earth, the first form of life... the bliss, then the pain, proceeding along an unfolding... blues, yellows, reds... photons being absorbed by stacks of chloroplasts, plasmatic green towers of incredible Hyperion breadth and stature stacked one on top of another... sunlight burst forward in gamma plasmas... a linear progression, layer after layer... notes, a melodic riff, guitar music seemed to envelop her... from the mighty oceans, onto land, slithering then crawling then walking, one life form into another... an asteroid, a volcanic eruption, a violent super-storm... beaten and slammed about, rolling forward through time, energy transferring, energy condensing then evaporating... beads on a glass shower door... falling, then rising... a series of chords, the music... the sounds of Creation, the almighty OHM at the beginning of time, the fibers of space weaving and woven together... red giants, the Earth consumed in fire... races of people, strange figures, life-forms like tiny nano-particles aggregating in vast configurations, rollicking across the galaxy... the last stars burning out, the ghostly cinders of white dwarves then black holes supermassive and the sojourns of timid particles to new dimensions... worlds upon worlds, universes upon universes... mixed together, coagulated together once again in a final node, in the Godhead of Creation, the first thought the first sound the first utterance which put it all back into motion... a thunderous sound... a wave of bright violet lights, a splash that brought Mickey outside of the dimensions, outside of the cosmos, looking down at it all experiencing it all absorbed by one singular emotion all of it wrapped together and held tight by the final principle the first principle the only principle... love... a series of tendrils, thin fibers like reflecting moonbeams off the ocean glimmering in shimmers and miraculous... the same light reflecting off her mother's eyes, looking up at her from a crib, a cradle, hearing a voice, "I love you Michelle"... her mother's death, her final breath... her consciousness being released and set free and out to dwell with all other consciousness all other thought forms the single mind of all things, all the levels... a thought of love... but then a darkness, a hollowed core, a void... terrifying, the tendrils are growing scales, horns, they release poisonous, noxious fumes... there is fire... there is a table of men... there is death, so much death... children, women... their retinas bleeding, their fingernails falling off... they want to die, for the pain to end... Mickey is in front of a mirror, a man's face, a scientist in a laboratory coat... looking at herself at himself his eyes through her

at him... blink, back to the abyss... falling... jettisoned through the hollowed eternity, then back to hallowed ground... a singular light, above her, a spotlight... towards it... melting into it, pierced... waveforms explode in photon packets like bullets hurled infinite... a breath, a deep breath... her mother with her, her father... Mickey is on his lap, bouncing, her brother is there, their hometown living room, a Christmas tree with garlands and silver tinsel whisps and handmade ornaments, with presents underneath wrapped in elegant bows... she opens a gift up, unwraps the paper... inside it is the room, is the club, the venue... she looks down, she flicks the chandelier, a beam of white light shot into her own retina, dilating her pupils... returned back into her own perspective... back into her own body, into a singular reference-point, an entity in time and space, a person... a woman, crying, tears careening down to her cotton t-shirt, now damp... her chin on a shoulder, on Paul's shoulder... crying together... tears and laughter, she whispered into his ear, "Oh my God."

Paul whispered back, "Was that real?"

Mickey, "I don't know. I-"

"What did you feel?"

"I felt everything. The whole- everything. From the beginning to the end."

Paul hugged her, tighter, "Me too."

Mickey pulled away for a moment, to look him in the eyes, "How did-"

Paul smiled, "Mickey, I saw your parents. I saw your life, I saw the Christmas present, at the end. Did you see it?"

"Yes."

"We saw the same thing. But I saw it, through you. You found me. You shared it with me."

"How?"

Paul continued on, exhausted but relieved, an intimacy between his lips and Mickey's ear, "I was in a sea of colors, with the music. I was so disoriented. You didn't say anything. You looked at me, then you took my hand. We merged, I merged- we were together. You told me you wanted to show me something. You told me after I showed you, I would help you find a way to share this, with everyone. You wanted to share it with everyone."

"I wanted to share it?"

"You told me to remind you. You told me to make you a promise."

Mickey grabbed Paul's hair. "You saw everything?"

"Everything. It was amazing."

Hesitating, "But there was something else."

Paul replied, "The fire."

"The fire. And the scientist?"

"I saw little babies, covered in blood, crying. It was horrible. I saw the city, weeping. There was so much darkness, then a fire."

"I don't know why Paul, I don't know how- I think- it was a glimpse into the future. That was- there's something terrible happening. There's someone trying to make it happen. The scientist, maybe. Or-"

"The table of men."

Mickey, without hesitation, "The table of men. That's who we have to stop."

Applause. Cheering.

Then a squeeze on both of their shoulders like talons into field mice, a familiar voice, "I told y'all! I told you! It was amazing, right?" He squeezed then joined in their hug. "Doesn't it make you feel amazing? Have you ever felt so amazing? Two hours just whizzed by, didn't it? Those little strips of paper are magic, baby! I told y'all!"

Mickey unhinged one of her arms, pulled it free, then helped move a little bit of space between the three of them. "What was it?"

A barndoor halibut of a grin broke across the Filipino's face- the son of immigrants, the promise of a new life and a new freedom- an American through and through, a rugged individual and a lover of the sensuous- "Everyone has their own ride on this stuff. It touches you one way, me a different way, him a different way. It's the excitement baby! It's the *magic*. It's what we do at the *Starship*. And something about ISHMAEL, the music- Martin makes me hand one out to every person at his shows, you know that? Gives them away like love candy."

"The guitarist?"

"ISHMAEL is his band, but he wants to give people more than music. He wants to bring them back to life. Isn't that fucking beautiful? He thinks he's saving the world, which of course he is- but, for me, my God, what a party! The first time I took it, I was alone in a garden surrounded by beautiful flowers and it was just Martin and me, he was just playing to me. I was so happy. Another time I became a hurricane swirl of colors, of happiness. It's so free. That's why I let Martin have his way. That's why I let *ya'll* come in. There's still life in this world!" The owner pointed upwards, towards the ceiling- through the layers of sediment and earth- onto the streets, the boots of a Selectman, a gun shoved back into its holster.

Paul cleared his throat. "But what is this stuff?"

The owner couldn't contain himself. He adjusted his funky glasses, wiped a bead of sweat from off his forehead, "Who knows baby! You want to ask him? I don't know why, but I really like *ya'll*! I do! It might be all the MDMA I've taken- who cares! Let's go, let's go meet Martin! I'll take you backstage. How does that sound?"

Paul looked at Mickey for confirmation. She looked back at him.

This was the next step.

"Let's go! Martin usually hates people- which is funny, right? The guy with the love potion hates people. But that's life. That's paradox, baby! It will be good for him. I can *feel* it. He needs to meet y'all. Come on. Here!" Reverend Nate Glitter's plump fingers took hold Mickey and Paul and wound them through the crowd, down the slope of the amphitheater. Incoherent. Mayhem. High fives, kisses on cheeks- everyone knew the Reverend.

But there was an odd moment, several in fact. Passing by, a few people began to look strangely at Mickey, as if they had seen her before, as if they knew her. One woman even pointed. Mickey tried not to pay attention, but a constricting, self-conscious, high school cafeteria vibration began to envelop her as she moved across the floor and towards the stage. She was relieved when Nate arrived at a door, indicating this was the backstage area.

Reverend Nate let go of Mickey and Paul, he knocked three times, then two, then a single knock. "My secret code, baby! You better not tell!" A large man opened the door a sliver, saw the owner, then opened the crack up further. Mickey and Paul were ushered inside, and the door shut behind them. A dimly lit dressing room, a red velvet couch, curtains hung on walls. Glasses of water. A bottle of brown liquid on an ornate brass coffee table. Cigarette smoke. "Martin! Inrini! Beautiful show! Beautiful! Beautiful!"

A woman with curly brown hair, a six-inch afro- a beautiful golden headband decorated with turquoise and gold Egyptian hieroglyphs- a violet lace top barely concealing her large breasts, light caramel skin- black jeans cut high above her ankles, fatigued combat boots- she gently massaged her forearms- her dark green eyes, her glowing skin- strong, elegant- dark maroon lipstick- "Why thank you, Reverend."

"Meet my new friends! Get this- they're from the Interzone. Crazy right? They came all the way from Indiana to see you two! Isn't that beautiful, baby?"

From the couch- a brooding guitar player- scruffy, short, pudgy- a troubadour's hat on his head decorated with a single feather, an ornament- a beard, an earring on his left ear- "The Interzone, huh?" He exhaled a cloud of smoke. "I didn't know they had heard of us out there." He turned to Nate. "You're taking in quite the orphans, Nate. You don't think they might be yanking your bedazzled chain, if you catch my drift?"

"These two? They're sweet as pie, baby. I know good ones when I see 'em."

Inrini glanced at Paul and Mickey. "Don't worry, he's always cranky after a show." Inrini smiled, then reached for a towel on one of the side tables.

Martin stood up from the couch. "Don't set limits to my crankiness, Inrini." He inspected the pair. "So what gives? You really came from the Interzones?"

Mickey rubbed her thighs, nervous. "Paul's been here for a few years. I was holed up in Indiana until a couple of weeks ago."

Martin pressed, fascinated, "Holed up? Whereabouts?"

"Southern end of the state, not too far from the river."

Doubting the gamine's response, "You lasted out there for more than five years?"

Mickey understood she was being tested. "My father was with me for most of it. He passed not too long ago."

Martin, "ATCG didn't ship you out?"

"We kept quiet."

"Good strategy." Martin took a step towards her and Paul. "I grew up in East Chicago. My old man used to work a steel mill in Gary, way back in the when. He was a big union guy. He'd come home and rant and rave about the working conditions, the wages. He'd open up a six-pack of beer, sit on the couch and watch the television with the volume turned off. I hated Indiana when I was a kid. I used to think it was a terrible place, torturing my daddy. I prayed to God for Indiana to disappear. Isn't that funny?"

Mickey smiled, "I said that prayer many times myself."

There was a silence.

Martin remained skeptical.

Inrini picked at her hair. "So what did you two think of the show?"

Paul and Mickey remained quiet- an exchange, unspoken, passed between all of them- an expression washed over them, they couldn't mask it- Martin nodded his head. "That good, huh?"

Mickey had to ask. "What was on the piece of paper?"

Martin responded, "Though she be but little, she is fierce."

"A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Martin relaxed. "Right. Right you are. And that paper- well, let's say it found me. Just like it found you."

Inrini took a step towards Paul. She could tell he had been through a bit. "You guys want a chair or something? A drink maybe?"

Paul nodded. "I could use some water."

Mickey felt more adventurous. "Do either of you have a cigarette I could bum?"

Martin opened up his pack and handed one to Mickey. "Martin Sandozt." He left his hand out, palm open.

Mickey clasped onto it with her own. "Mickey Gallagher."

Inrini waved to nobody in particular. "Inrini Fox."

Paul followed suit, "Paul Nelson."

Martin lit Mickey's cigarette- "Well, let's hear more of your story, Mickey Gallagher."

-O-

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He sure is- I met him working at an Elkhart, IN motor home assembly line. I watched him towel sweat of his brow, sick and tired of the struggle, wading his way through modernity's economic prescription mired in disillusion redeemed only by narcotics and pornography. I watched him slouch in apocalyptic resignation too drowsy for Armageddon with a double-shift approaching, his only wish to be fuzzed and comforted uterine in the womb of the digital age distracted ad nauseam so he don't have to dwell too long or lonesome on the noxious factuality that mankind in fact holds the power to destroy itself instantaneous armed with the destructive energy of a thousand suns ready for action easily accessible at the touch of a button. He is a child of the seventh seal, he

is beat up and haggard- he is descended from Egyptian slaves, hapless Medieval serfs, Jim Crow sharecroppers- peasant blood coursing through his veins. In debt to a bank. A car loan. A credit card past due. Yes sir, he is the great-grandbaby of ocean-crossing immigrants. I've seen him, a native son, a flower from the mud bright-eye'd and eager to stride towards the blossoming highlands hopeful to stop and rest and pitch camp. Our Lord and Savior, hung high on his post but too high to pick out any friends amongst the faces anguishing desperate, too far away to parse through the information slurry, blurred and unsure whether that perfect singularity waits out there in the distance. I watched a nail enter him through each palm, not enough money to pay the phone bill or refill the prescription medication tubes. There he was. I watched him roll away the limestone boulder, call Lazarus back to life. Now here he is insufflating fat lines of methamphetamine between overtime shifts off the dashboard of a 1993 Dodge pick-up-truck, underbelly rusted and blue-paint chip'd. I heard him curse his wife who works double-time sixty-six-hour/weeks managing a Drive Thru window at a highway exit Wendy's with greasy, deep-fried strands of grey hair stuck between the plastic sub-assembly components of her earpiece and a stale wad of gum in her jaw slowly chewing. She has pimples on her chin and her pussy itches. Jesus has five children because he refuses to wear a condom and will probably end up in jail for another parole violation because what's the goddamn point. Can you see him flip channels while he eats left-over spicy chicken nuggets? Soon Jesus will open up his fridge and count up the remaining beer cans fridge because his goddamn ten-year-old son has gotten into the habit of sneaking a few on the weekends. God the son. A ten-year old boy who hates Mexican immigrants despite living a thousand miles from the Southern border, who believes women are for fucking and for beating, who will never know any better. God the father. Jesus is alive and well and his best piece of advice is 'Aw well, fuck it.' Jesus is multiplying on an unprecedented scale, Jesus is poisoning coral reef systems and establishing billionaire tax-loophole foundations to preserve them. Jesus lies in waiting under his covers down the hallway locked inside a corner apartment paid for each month thanks to a dole allocated by his mother. Jesus is curling her hair in front of a mirror convinced nothing can be worse than her last date and maybe this guy won't have a wife and kids. Jesus can't get it up. Jesus has come and come and come again thanks to several centuries worth of BDSM saved on his hard drive. Jesus noticed a rash on his ankle and is convinced he is sick and dying and will spend the next several hours furiously delving about WebMD for more clues. Jesus is healed by the pharmaceutical industry. Jesus is skateboarding down a one-way street with a pocketful of stepped-on dope. Jesus is here, right here reading this and writing this simultaneously. He is chosen, appointed, anointed, a true believer, convinced that the collective hallucination of lunacy he participates in is real reality and something really is at stake and hard work is the key because his job means something meaningful and if he pays off the high-interest note everything will turn out right and he might even end up in heaven at the end of it all. But before then he'll rise from the dead and log back into his Amazon account to order that new dishtowel he saved in his cart. I've seen how tears of joy will cloud his vision so he'll wipe his eyes with the floral-patterned cloth, prepared at last to sink comfortably into his leather recliner before an evening binge watching old television shows. Martha and Mary and the other women beat their breasts. Jesus is disenfranchised and dispossessed and hopeless but doesn't have enough context to understand his plight so there will never be a sad winter hymnal that's sung from his belly or jeremiad recited from his tongue because he has no people or history. Jesus is condemned. Jesus is

betrayed. He has lost the power to make art, he has lost the power to be empathetic or sympathetic or acknowledge his fellows. I heard the cock crow and now he has no story. Jesus is no longer a man. He certainly is no God.

But maybe someday Jesus will wake up, maybe he'll forgive himself for being such a fool, he'll cast the false prophets out of the temple and confront the moral authority and re-chart his course. He'll call bullshit on the whole scene and tell the angels why he's right. He'll command all the saints and the blessed and the martyrs to shut up and listen. He'll re-commune this world to spirit, because spirit has been killed by science and microprocessors in modernity's fresh attempt to demystify the role of the shaman. He'll help us wake up to the truth within. He'll give a guest lecture and bemoan the ivy league undergraduates before him and implore the next generation to quit school and unplug and destroy the models of their parents maybe even kill their fore-bearers outright, he'll tell them to leave and pack a bag and walk for a year across the country untethered, he'll tell them to work as a bouncer at a sex club in Frankfurt, Germany and he'll say it unsympathetic and harsh and they'll gulp to understand Jesus isn't joking. But maybe he won't. Probably another soda pop can will fizz open, he'll only sigh and say 'I've already saved them once- you pay for one cup of coffee, you get one cup of coffee- because he remembered a hooker using the same phrasing from a movie he watched the other night. Probably he'll be satisfied and self-assured and sleep alright thanks to CBD oil and wake up tomorrow with a shower and a positive attitude, because there are enough assholes in the world and he's just trying his darndest to be a good guy. He'll probably give himself a thumbs-up, an A-OK signal in the mirror while he trims his pubic hair. He'll probably turn on his car, only five grand more to pay off, and be grateful for having the foresight to fill up his gas tank the previous day. And before he backs up, he'll synchronize his phone to his stereo system because Jesus loves a new podcast. He'll approach the morning commute with a VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS mug all gung-ho and gusto. And he probably won't get upset by the standstill uselessness of it all, he won't... not today... stay positive... if you watch close, you can probably catch him between yellow lines, centered and satisfied determining himself home this evening after another day of grind, another day of trudge, another morning another afternoon another timecard another tax-return another Christmas vacation another and another and another.

He's alive, sure.

Jesus is alive and well.

He's too scared to die, to stay dead.

Keep an eye out, you'll find him.

But he won't look back at you.

Magazine Editor: When did you realize it?

Zevi: Oddly enough it was after having sex with my wife. Orgasmic revelations, right? Clarity after the climax. But seriously- we had been married something like seven years at that point, and we probably hadn't slept together in six or nine months- a terribly long time- but it was my birthday, and it was required. Right? That had become our tradition. Sex on birthdays, anniversaries. So I laid on top of her for a minute or two. It went quick. And when I rolled over, we both had unconsciously reached for our cell phones on opposite nightstands. It was twilight- the room was beautiful, thick and dusky- the light was like an amber smoke, it was autumn- but there was this heinous glow piercing it. These terrible, twin blue lights. And then we started arguing- do you remember credit card points? We started yelling at each other over how to use our Cash Back Rewards.

And like a jolt of electricity- I can't really describe it- I just woke up. I felt so disgusted. I wanted us to hold each other. To remember- to feel something. I told her I missed her. She looked at me like I was cross-eyed. I turned my phone off. I turned everything off. Within a matter of weeks- I made a decision basically to follow this inner voice. I unplugged from everything. I quit my job. I sold the car. I donated most of my clothes. But I couldn't make her or the kids understand- they thought I was losing it. She had an intervention to have me voluntarily committed! Within two months, after seven years married, she divorced me and took every dollar I had. Which was perfect, because I didn't want any money- her lawyer had brought in a clinical psychologist to testify to the court that I had manic depression. I represented myself! It was a hoot. If you ever have the chance to act as your own counsel- I highly recommend it.

Magazine Editor: Credit card points?

Zevi: It was a metaphor, almost. A microcosm. I had turned into one of those husbands, one of those businessmen. Stressed out. Remember road rage? I used to lose it. I'd go mental in the car- like I was so important. The most ridiculous things I perceived as these massive affronts, these indignations. I was such an angry, empty person. I had become exactly what I swore I wouldn't, as a younger person. And I finally work up to it- I saw myself for who I was.

Magazine Editor: So what did you do next?

Zevi: I had it in my head to set out into the woods. I wanted to head far north, out of the Midwest, so I chose Maine. I don't really know why- a thought gripped onto me like a burr, and I followed it. I packed up, caught a bus to Boston, from Chicago. Then up to Portland. With the little money I had left, I brought some gear - hitchhiked a'ways after that. At first my brother Martin offered to put me up- but I didn't want to be anyone else's rehab project. I was overcome with this realization. I started to write things down- I couldn't stop. It's all I did. I filled up notebook after notebook. That section I just read- I wrote that section while I was up there. Ideas were pouring out of me. I felt alive. Stung by the Muse- alone, angry, confused- here's one, something like (flipping to a page):

Balled up, inverted. All I see are filled orifices. All I hear is a mountain of dissatisfaction, complaints. Their parents had it so much easier- the world was so much smaller- here's the research- we can prove it, "Check out this income to debt ratio chart." Bobbing on plastic dildos. Performing at home orthodontics. Loveless. Digital. Wasted. Unhappy.

Magazine Editor: So am I safe in assuming that the writing became a way to vent?

Zevi: It was an outlet, definitely- I couldn't talk to anybody anymore. Nobody was honest. Nobody was courageous enough to speak plainly about things. I just couldn't relate. I felt very isolated and alone, so I think I turned to the written word because there was some power there- it made me feel like I had some power over what I saw happening around me. Even if I couldn't do anything about the world, about the things I didn't like- I could write about it. I could actualize how I was feeling to some extent. And it could be very cathartic. Religion, the economy, our society's values. (flipping pages) Here's another one on Jesus- this piece, wow, it must have been fifteen years ago when I put this down:

Didn't you hear Friedrich? Jesus Christ is dead. Died on a cross, cross set to fire, fire keeps aflame. Nobody seen Him since, but plenty people keep talking about Him. Snake bitten, strychnine drinking Holy Ghost happy hour rollicking hillbilly relatives are the ones left to tell His story, an army of bellows- little voodoo churches up in the hills, dogwoods and locusts and mountain laurels- a legacy of illiterate miracles. Too bad He's stuck up in heaven. He'd see one hell of a goddamn show. He'd also have one hell of a debt to cover. Plenty dead, plenty wounded on account of His name. Plenty of no good sons of bitches singing His praises, acting out on His behalf. Halfwit, inbred morons begotten by His hand. He's lucky to be stuck up in heaven, safe from any ramifications or justice, safe

from the general ledger. Jesus Christ. Thanks for the memories. At least the devil offered a laugh, a roll in the hay, a fat marijuana cigarette- a little sinning did the soul good. Released the tension. Calmed the nerves. Jesus Christ never did anything but lay a heavy trip on a bunch of weak-minded fools. Heaven and hell- who needs the mental baggage? The guilt was useful for a while, at least it got people off their asses, but the rest of it- life is hard enough.

Zevi: And here's my hot take on the media:

From national concerns, remove yourself- CNN, NPR, FOX- different crazy straws emanating from one giant energy suck. Rooting on the blue or the red? You've been duped. The rich have you right where they want you. Wasting your time. Enthralled. Talking over dinner tables about incidents thousands of miles away, concepts that are light years beyond your comprehension. They want you taking a position, and fighting. They want you stuck in this global miasma. Sure- on a local level, it's worthwhile to engage, but only after you have your own life figured out. You are supposed to work outward. Work on yourself. Then work on your particular ecosystem. And if by some miracle you make it, if you're the one in a million, then go big. But not until you have everything in order. Figure out your own little area before you start reading atlases and spinning globes.

Zevi: All kidding aside, it probably saved me from becoming a suicide. I needed to spit it out, make sense of it. Dreams, visions, ideas, images. I wrote and lived off the land and then one thing led to another- I found out there were other people who were dissatisfied. There was a magnetism, this energy entered into my life- I kept meeting new people, connecting- eventually a community evolved. Everything started to unlock. And it was because I stopped trying to live an inauthentic life. I dropped the whole program, the whole success trip- I surrendered to the Tao, if you will. I got conscripted by a force, and instead of denying it I let it work through me. And life flowed, it started providing me unexpected twists and turns. Magazine Editor: Did you ever consider writing a novel?

Zevi: Sure. Let me see. Here. So here- these were a pair of characters I came up with- I thought to myself, isn't it amazing we live in a country where such a wide spectrum of opinions and perspectives can emerge? They're just descriptions really, a brainstorm- but it was interesting to me- I became hyper aware of different people's viewpoints- I was fascinated by how two people can live in the same world but view things so disparately. And what I realized is that the world is designed to keep our opinions and feelings hidden, protected. We're encouraged not to find common ground. We're dissuaded from asking the questions together, working things out together.

(Mid 20's, veteran) A junior officer who served a tour of duty in a combat unit, strong sense of brotherhood; encountered intense combat situations, ended up saving the lives of several men on his unit; unrecognized valor, performed a courageous act, but was never awarded a Presidential Star or a Medal of Honor, never received any recognition... on his way to an interview for a job, on his way to a new life, done with his service, a man who had performed his duty... in a couple of hours he will be seated in a neutered, unassuming office without any threat or duress and he will be asked by a Lead HR Representative of a company (a pudgy woman caked in make-up and nauseously perfumed) 'What makes you think you'll be able to handle the stress of this position?' with all the ironic undertones... he'll sit there with his hands underneath the table, clenching one fist into itself, a grip... constriction... reliving the field of battle...

unbelievable... this woman is concerned about his ability to assemble some widgets or some mundane idiotic task like checking time cards with manager? Frustration washes over the veteran at this point in time... he'll remember a myriad of glib responses he had received, 'Thank you for your service'... automatic, surface-level, vapid, Pavlovian response he gets from people... he understands the perfunctory nature of such responses... but he is torn up... he can't share his experience with anyone because the bonds of trust formed on the battlefield can't be recreated in 'everyday' life... isolation... isolated... unable to allow his vulnerability to come forth, the kind he displayed in front of his comrades... existential crisis in 'everyday' life back home, 'regular' routine... "I'm confident I'll be able to handle whatever situations" ... the HR Representative asks for a specific example of when he's had to make decisions under pressure... the veteran's discomfort grows...

(Mid 20's, stoner) I think that the biggest myth being propagated right now is that our democratic freedom, our country's values, are under attack. I think that is the quintessential fallacy of the 21st century. And everyone is buying it. Every fucking media outlet constantly reinforces this idea that terrorist groups are toiling around the clock aiming to unthread the fabric of the American way of life, and if the troops didn't go overseas and fight in Iraq and Afghanistan then our democracy would fail. We're under attack. We need to go to war. We need to protect our democracy. That's the biggest load of crap that's being sold right now. Who has ever attacked you? What enemy have you seen? Are they invading by land or by sea? Where are they? And don't start with the internet, or the Facebook jihadists... please, I don't fucking buy it for a second. 'They're infiltrating our kids' minds,' please. Wars are created for one purpose, and that purpose is not to protect our democracy. That purpose is not to protect your civil liberties. That purpose is not out of any concern for your life or your livelihood or anything that you as an individual value. The reasons why war is fought and waged is because money is needed to wage war. That money goes to the military industrial complex. War is a profiteering scheme. The money that goes to the military industrial complex is the most significant portion of spending that our country does. Don't be naive! The US budget funds and weaponizes and advances the technology of war. If there were no wars to fight then how would the spending be justified? How would the fat cats at Lockheed Martin or Blackwater, at Boeing or Raytheon, stay afloat? If there was no war, how could the thousands of defense contract and consulting firms be in business? War is their business. War is an economic enzyme. It catalyzes the economy. And honestly- this part you might hate me for, but- to me, personally, when I think about the veterans and the people who fight these wars and sign-up and enlist all ooh'rahh... I don't feel sorry for them. I don't. I feel no more sorrow for them than I do for somebody stuck working at a fast-food window at fifty years old. I don't feel like they are performing some courageous act of valor that ought to be honored or revered, and I disagree with this idea that veterans and military people are on a different plane than regular people because they are 'defenders of democracy.' 'Thank you for protecting our freedoms'... what a bunch of bullshit. They got duped into believing the lie. Or if they went into the service because of economic/social reasons, again... why are you more important than some poor black kid checking out groceries at the supermarket? So be it. They didn't go because of some deep, underlying fire to serve and protect democracy. Hell no. He went because he's a poor hillbilly with no other options, who fucking hates Muslims. What about that is honorable? What about that is worthy of celebration? Most of these kids are duped, and

they're happy to be duped. At the end of the day, whether they believe the lie or not, they make the choice to go over there and fire the rounds and blow up the buildings and kill 'towelhead' kids. That's their choice. There's plenty of fucking jobs across this country. No one is conscripted. I don't respect those people any more than anyone else who takes an underpaid, tough-nose job. Why should it be celebrated? Let's get to the root of the issue. War is an industry. Our country is a hostile, nationalistic empire. Our economy is built on conflict. Weaponized and ready to destroy whatever ideology or religion poses a threat on the 'norm' of our culture, which is the consumer capitalist pig model. That's the root. Demilitarization, nuclear disarmament... if we took all the money we put into developing new missiles and building new helicopters and maintaining nuclear silos, if we put all that into education or feeding the homeless... we could totally reset the value system of our culture. So to me, when you say 'We stand with the troops' I say 'fuck you, I don't stand for any of it.' It's a lie. And it needs to be called out. And the people who are brave are the ones who call it out for all to hear. Saying it openly and honestly... my position is not sexy, it's not a popular opinion. I realize most people who would listen to this would condemn me as unpatriotic, and frankly my dear I don't give a damn. The British supporters said the same thing to the colonials who founded this country. I don't care, because I've informed myself. And I'm not that bright! I'm not that brilliant, trust me. But I've educated myself to what the real issue is. There's no reason why other people can't do the same... I don't support any part of the mechanism. I think it's ruthless. It's senseless. And I stand up to it. War is terrible. The mechanism behind it is what's really ruining this country, the real value system of democracy... it's going to be the death of the dream. And I won't go down quietly agreeing with everyone else and participating in the funeral. I won't.

Zevi: Maybe someday I'll publish an anthology, with some of my speeches. But no New York Times Best Seller list for me, at least not any time soon.

Magazine Editor: Can you continue? I would love to hear some more. And I'd love to talk about that anthology.

Zevi: Alright, I'll sort of jump around. Here's something:

Listen- index fingers rub thumb lubricated in canola crumbled with salt turgid with diet soda diabetic by unconscious signals wired terminal wired carnivorous like dogs programmed singular -mouths to eat and brains only to gnash- crumpling up a napkin, destroying an entire Boreal rain forest. The sounds of peristalsis- driven by appetite above all else. Ours is a grumbling hunger- listen- hungry for more and on to the next and the next, more and more and more, consuming, starving ghosts unsatiated craving satiation- fitted in flip-flop plastic sandal thongs, squish. Listen- our fingers guided by minds unmoored, unfocused like forgotten basement strands of holiday lightbulbs, our blinking eyes fixated on the next purchase, click. Listen for the clicks. Clicking. Scrolling. The kingdom has come downloaded down from the heavens to our palms, instant access for our unmelted American souls to fatuously click our way into salvation. Only Satan could have composed this modern symphony. And only we could have been boorish enough to play these notes. The players- us, we- we are nothing, we have nothing, we are nothing other than domesticated bipeds surrounded by cultural dross and waste regurgitated digital, lifeless and immobilized, turned over every few weeks to avoid bedsores and asphyxiation. Excessive prodigals, blasé profligates, pontificating garrulous hucksters, avaricious and

puny dictators, insane and obsessed curators of temples built entirely for the sake of self-aggrandizement. Nothing in the way of passion or audacity- to put it simply, a people bereft of spirit. There is no vision of life- there is only buy more, sell more. Even our pitiful kindnesses are performed not on account of an inherent virtue but only due to a specific and perfect fear of reprisal, civilized via civilization from barbarian to dignitary; a weak, stupid, indolent, craven, hopelessly vile and wasteful, desperate, cretinous, hungry people- the chosen people- this is us, who we are, what we have become. The players. Obvious, but contemporaneously secret and muffled in perfect background noise: can you make out anything like truth through the din? A haunting refrain:

I am a dead man.

We are a dead people.

This is a dead earth.

Who needs life insurance?

Zevi: This is my, how should I call it- this is my misanthropic phase.

Content horny and clicking, scrolling- how could a single one of us ever hope to make a positive impact, anywhere, in any capacity? I know it's risky to underestimate an individual's ability to change- but maybe it's the safest bet, at least until the conditions change. The conditions dictate the outcomes. Nurture dominates nature. I suppose visionary insight might emanate from a source beyond self- but then what makes us worthy of salvation? What could possibly, at this point, make us an attractive candidate for intervention to some primal energy of goodness?

No one I know even talks about their dreams.

Life full of death disguised as life- dead images, false idols, spectral retirement plans- their hearts have been disconnected from reality so only the unreal is real to them. They refuse to question what they have inherited from Sunday school and dinner tables and newspapers, from unoriginal fathers and sheepish mothers, from the marketing firm and the advertising agency, from textbooks, from Uncle Sam. They don't believe in anything until it is corroborated by an internet search engine- and only then is it believed for a moment.

My caste is fated by black stars. Disingenuous. Vapid.

Hopefully nature wins out.

Zevi: It lasted a while...

Is it really a wonder modern 21st century Caucasian Western mankind felt like they were sinking into a collective anxiety, a nervousness, that came oozing up their sides and over them like quicksand? Do you think the guilt of their mothers and fathers had anything to do with it (yes, the mothers are just as guilty; women know better, and they knew better; but none of them uttered a remonstrance- lest their cupboards go barren, lest their ballroom dresses not show up in time for the party)?

People are primarily governed by their unconscious reactions to life that take root in a haunted feeling which they have buried inside for as long as they can remember- a feeling that none of this matters because we've already lost. That our sins have been committed, and cannot be atoned. That consequence is running headlong in our direction. And this feeling reflects everywhere- we mirror it back to ourselves in every form of media, across galaxies. Our guilt lingers. Our imagination is obsessed with our

own demise, our own reprisal. The Roman Coliseum. Horror films. First person shooters. Apocalypse endgame vanity, nervous. We put the devil out in the dark woods the moment we burned their (see: Native Americans, Indigenous People) first village.

Zevi: A long, long while...

Here's what else I remember. You'd ask somebody how they were doing and then they'd list off all the important things they did... went to the movies, took a vacation, saw a concert, ate at a fancy restaurant... what they did, never who they were or the person doing the doing... and that's the crux, that nonentity... that's what landed us here. There was a bunch of busy bees buzzing, a bunch of stuff happening... but nobody was there to be present for any of it. Nobody to say I'm drowning at an existential impasse. Nobody to wink. Nobody to cry for joy. Nobody was home.

Zevi: But I eventually, here you go...

Don't gloss over the ugly contradictions maintained by the wealthy, exhumed by their children, sarcophagi... their third floor addition, their airplane tickets, their church picnic lobster boils, their triple-cargo-capacity SUVs, their cul-de-sac neighborhood watches... watching their liberal media television shows pretending to be class conscious pretending to be eco-friendly pretending they were on the right side of the aisle... as if they suffer, as if they understand, as if they are common men with common plights... their burdens of investment portfolios, malfunctioning broadband... groaning and moaning about the price of a cup of coffee, the morning commute, their back aches, their leather furniture leather fading prematurely, their kids' teachers, a corked bottle of wine at an anniversary dinner, the wrong size t-shirt being shipped a day late, the check engine light appearing on their dashboard, the neighbor's dog barking... as if... everything became a bother which threatened their comfort, their entitlement... graceless, without an inkling of real suffering, pain, oppression... they dealt in absolutes, to remain absolutely comfortable... college educated, pre-programmed like their cable televisions- believers, worriers, comfort junkies- worried and buying up pharmaceutical solutions and chewing 'em down while managing their IRAs and scrolling through Netflix... groaning and moaning, 'What's the password, honey?'

No fun hypocrites of the satisfaction survey era... there was so little enjoyment after it was all said and done... knowing, deep down, in the inescapable and immutable center of their humanity, they knew they hadn't earned any of it... unconscious, but present... they weren't connected to any of it, they weren't rightful inheritors... they were poseurs, posturing... experiencing an American middle-class experience which was beyond shallow... their guilt infected them, they wallowed in their lack of substance, their meaninglessness, their filthy existence doctored up and posted onto their Facebook pages.

Their only prayers were to remain undisturbed, to preserve their humble status quo of never hurt anyone never did any wrong only worked hard only saved up, did it the right way... deserving... supporters of a new mythology, the great myth of hard work and success and convenience... Odysseus replaced by Carnegie, Aeneas by Elon Musk... in their world, there was no need for compunction save for instances when it resulted in maximum profit... in their world, the equated happiness with material acquisition... by

their rules, they deserved their dopamine releases... they deserved their trailing zeros... deserving... if ONLY they were to receive exactly what they deserved. And what they deserve, when you dispassionately and objectively place them, is that they ought to be lamented. We ought to give them compassion... what else could you give the most neutered, sterile, lifeless generation of humans to ever walk the face of this Earth?

Magazine Editor: You found your way out of it?

Zevi: I did.

Magazine Editor: Does part of you still feel that way, though? About people?

Zevi: Well, I realized, after a good long while, that people can change. I looked at my own life. At the individual level, anything is possible. Within the herd- that's a different story. But if you can get face to face, if you can connect heart to heart- there's magic there. That's what I believe in. The potential of the individual. That's why I eventually came out of the woods, so to speak.

Magazine Editor: Did you ever think you would be reading these passages out loud?

Zevi: Of course! I wrote speeches in here! Manifestos! (flipping) Here's one I saw myself delivering at a university:

Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men- anybody read that one? Yeah? Alright. So then you might remember- before Lennie broke that poor doll's neck in the barn, before his friend George met him in their clandestine secret safe spot and pulled that trigger, fired that slug through Lennie's temple- before the plan went haywire, in other words- there was an opening. There's a moment in the novel, when George and Lennie are discussing their dreams of the future with the brokendown old farmhand Candy, and Lennie makes it clear he wants to leave. He pleads with George, he says forget this job. He wants to bail, to make haste towards his simple alfalfa dreams of caring after fuzzy rabbits- but he can't. They can't. They're broke- and so they've got to stay. They need to cash another couple months' worth of checks before they can begin anew. They're bound to a load. And right there Steinbeck plainly lays out the sin of it all- the plight of the common man- forced to ignore his holy inner voice at the expense of an almighty dollar. Lennie had picked up on some worrisome adumbrations, vibrations in his soul- he sensed the impending doom. That's what the soul does. And that's what money does to the soul- stifles it! The tragedy is it all could have been avoided. Lennie's fate could have been different. But simple economics did him in.

Simple economics.

Simple economics keeps us from connecting to our truth. We're concerned for the dollar above all else- like we can't follow our hearts until our bank account registers an acceptable string of digits.

Worst of all, it keeps us separated from each other. Keeps us competing. Keeps us trying to out 'working class hero' our neighbors.

I remember back one summer when I was working with my father, I was finishing up a shift painting fabricated steel- I used to get in the habit of saying 'Almost quitting time!' and I said it once and an old timer looked back at me and said 'Boy, there ain't no quit from time. I got a bum knee and a wife that won't leave me alone. Must be nice for you.' And he shot me a look like I was one of them, like I was one of the sales folks on the road making twice as much as us, or one of the executives in the offices making three times as much- so I shot him a look back. I said, 'Hey old man. Cut the crap. I'm trying to be positive. I didn't put you into this mess.' And he took a step back and said, 'What crap?'

real slow and tough so I took off my gloves and looked him in the eye and said, 'All this, how bad you got it, crap! Got it tougher than anyone else- how easy it must be for me, for everyone else. We all got the same Lonesome Road Blues you damn fool, and we're blaming all the wrong people for it.' And that was it. He didn't say another word. So what's that got to do with Lennie and George? I'm not sure. But I do know we don't stand a chance so long as simple economics keep dictating our every thought, our every move.

Zevi: But there are other parts, deeply personal, like this:

"No more to say, and nothing to weep for but the Beings in the Dream, trapped in its disappearance, sighing, screaming with it, buying and selling pieces of phantom, worshipping each other, worshipping the God included in it all—longing or inevitability?—while it lasts, a Vision—anything more?"

Ginsberg said we're "beings in the dream trapped in its disappearance" so he wept in a practical way on account of ineluctable facts like we are trapped and doomed to disappear alone and forever. Now I weep too because what else is there to do, exhausted from laughing at the tragic suffering nonsense of each day, each car ride, each phone call. I have laughed, and now I cry. The tears have made my bones wet and cold, shaking with finality- arrived at the last conclusion and I realize one day the game will be up, and nothing will be remembered, nobody will be spared- none of it will have meant a thing because you won't be there with your broken heart and desperate arms and eyes heavenly focused at ravens in the sky wishing you could make it mean something please dear god almighty. Washed away, everything. Today it's a pitiful sadness which consumes me, inside out. Maybe I'll never recover- even if I do, what difference will it make in the face of the inescapable? What hopeful notions could possibly be reconciled? When you've cut through the illusion? When you've accepted death?

Maybe there is still a chance for laughter... maybe there's still a chance for redemption... maybe when we die we are gone in the sense that the illusion of self is gone... maybe there's a vastness, a beauty beyond our imaginative capacity. Maybe it's for the better- this atomistic, neurotic, insecure personage whining and fussy- maybe it's better we don't have that kind of baggage in hand as we sift into eternity? Is that creature ready to face its Creator? Is it ready for the ultimate? Maybe we are the game, not the players. We are the performance, not the actors. Maybe what we are is so much more than what we believe ourselves to be. Maybe when you die only part of you is lost. Maybe another part is found, more full and complete- a sculpture- a sculptor- one who reveals secrets by a process of elimination; one who enlivens by destroying; to build music out of silence; to release an image, a figure, a message hidden in a stone block, in a body of flesh. Maybe so, maybe not... not today... no, today I'm a citizen in a decadent, dead land... Benares, but without any of the grace, without any hopeful practice or ritual, without any faith. Today I am overcome by the ugliness of my human existence, yet I shed tears because I will lose that ugliness. I'm afraid to lose it. What the hell could I ever know?

Magazine Editor: That's haunting.

Zevi: Isn't that the point?

-O-

"Paul, before we ended up backstage with Martin and Inrini, did you notice people- did you notice anyone watching us?"

Paul considered the moment. He tried to replay it from various angles. "Now that you mention it, I did see a couple of people point at you."

"Me too. I couldn't figure it out, until now. I think that vision I gave you- what if I passed it on to everyone else in that club?"

-O-

Inrini sat bowlegged on the ground.

Martin had risen up to his feet, his hand through his long jet-black hair, untying a ponytail, tying it again- looks of dismay, looks of survivors holding onto a life raft afloat in the Atlantic for fifty-nine days sunburnt and dehydrated, the first glimpse of an ocean liner scooting along in the trade lanes. Visions like holy rites performed ceremonial deep in the caverns of Egyptian pyramids by priestesses dawned in gossamer veils with incense and drums- protean visions, fantastic and unforgettable scenes had filled their souls.

Mickey was nervous, her fingernail in her mouth- for almost an hour there had been music, there had been rapture- hunkered in a room, a bunker- explorers.

Paul's eyes were still closed.

Inrini couldn't help herself any longer, "Mickey- how on earth?"

Mickey responded, quiet, without an ounce of conceit or ownership of the work- not her work, the work, the good work of saints of alien starship heroes of miraculous luminescence of prevenient grace- "I don't really know- I- it's going to sound crazy, but it has to do with the sound waves- I can see their structure internally, not with my eyes- but- I take hold of the waves- I'm not physically doing it- it's not in my mind, it's more in- I don't know. I can't really explain it. I'm sorry"

Martin piped up, "There's nothing to be sorry about. Are you kidding me? We ought to celebrate! This is- this is transcendent. That was the most powerful thing I've ever seen. I- I've taken those tabs so many times, so many times- I never saw anything like that."

Mickey, "The tabs inspired me, but I realized- it's the music. The music is the substrate."

Martin shuddered, "Chills. You're giving me chills. And I love you for it!" He laughed.

Inrini nodded her head in agreement, now cross-legged on the floor. Taken aback by Martin's genuine excitement, his optimism- she could only muster the strength to affirm, "Me too. That was breath taking."

Martin professed, "That's what I've been looking for, my whole life. That was *it*."

Inrini, tender, her emerald eyes cascaded to Mickey- reverential- the look of a revenant- "Have you always been able to do this?"

Paul, his eyes still tight, "Your show. She did it at your show, the first time we went. I thought I was the guinea pig, but we realized everyone there had seen it too. We thought it was the drugs- but obviously not. Not now. Like Mickey said- it's the music."

Mickey licked her lips, demure, their fullness withering thanks to the dry, polluted air of the city, the lack of moisture underground, "It was more of an accident the first time. I'd never done it intentionally until right now. When Paul and I first experienced it, like he said- it was accidental. I didn't mean to do it. It leaked out of me almost. But I've been thinking about it- I had an impulse- this was the first time I tried, where I opened up to it happening."

Martin, simply, "Thank you."

Then Inrini, "You got the gift, girl."

Martin had found the mechanism. "Mickey, you realize what this means? What we could do with this?"

Mickey's entire appearance went silent. She knew. Not from a logistical level- not from the level of tactics and execution, not as the operations manager- but she knew. A haunted part of her left in that instant, with Martin's question. She had made it to the doorway. The fates were in control of the rest.

Martin continued, "If we can get this out there- I mean out there- broadcasting live- bigger than Woodstock, bigger and wider and (hands gesture), whoosh- like the Super Bowl, the Olympics- if we can find a way to transmit this- every person who hears it, who gets it- the world is going to change in an instant. We could bury the **CGAT** (*The Council for Greatness of the American Tradition*)! We could- we could hijack the spiritual consciousness- we could hijack the entire collective memory- Jung, Bergson, Christ, Plato- we could link mankind back up to the divine, with the essence."

Inrini tried to slow him down, "Martin, relax. Please. You're going from zero to a hundred. You can't lay that kind of a trip on somebody. You sound like your brother."

Martin waved his hands, "He has nothing to do with this."

Mickey looked at Martin inquisitively. His brother?

Interrupting everyone's flow, Martin picked back up, "Paul, didn't you tell me the other day? You told me about India. This is all destiny, Inrini. This is bigger than us. And Mickey knows it. Don't you Mickey?"

Mickey watched part of herself leave, running- hiding. She didn't utter a word.

Paul began to simmer with resentment. He had gotten along to this point, but what was there left to do?

Mickey had her destiny. Inrini and Martin had the music, the vehicle. Pieces were coming into place. Paul no longer fit. His hands morphed into fists, tense.

Martin continued. "Paul, tell your friend. Tell her."

Paul glanced up at Martin, then at Mickey- he shut his eyes again. "She already knows."

Mickey had begun pacing in a leather jacket, high cut olive green dungarees, blue checkered socks, metallic studs and bracelets, combat boots and lapis lazuli nail polish- Inrini had opened up her wardrobe to her over the past few weeks. Mickey's transformation accelerated.

Paul recognized her less and less.

Martin approached Mickey and took her hands. "You're going to unlock a portal with our music- we're going to beam it out across the city. This is it. This is what I've been looking for. This is what we've been looking for, Inrini."

Inrini, faintly, "Martin, calm down, you- "

"Inrini! Don't you get it? This is it. This is *exactly* what we wanted ISHMAEL to become. This is what we set out to do. This is what we believed in- music can change the world. Music is visionary. Music is a tool for enlightenment. It can wake people up- to stand in defiance of tyranny! And now Mickey- Mickey is the missing ingredient. She's here for a reason. We're here for a reason."

Frustrated with her partner, "Martin, hold on."

"Inrini- remember when we were talking about what Sun Ra was really saying? Remember? You explained it to me, why he put so much time into all the wacky antics he did? Why he said he was a traveler from Saturn, why he beamed himself down from the stars- remember what you told me? He was telling poor, black people to stop thinking about the ghetto! He was telling them to think about outer space! Think out of the box! Go to Mars, go to Neptune- there is a whole galaxy out there, a whole mystery. Mickey can bring that mystery right to people's front doors! And we, Inrini, we are the Arkestra! We are the cosmic symphony- and Mickey you are going to conduct us." Martin had been scratching at his beard frenetically. Arms in a series of motions- formulating- directing- activated. Turned on.

"Martin, you need to slow down- this is way too fast, too heavy."

Now Mickey interrupted Inrini- not so much interrupted as redirected- they made eye contact, Mickey let Inrini know it was alright- it would be okay- let me handle this- lining up a putt- "He's right. Martin is right. I need your help. I couldn't believe it at first- but there's something to all of this. It isn't random coincidence. We're meant to do this. Together."

Paul pulled his eyelids tighter.

Martin pulled four cigarettes out of his pack. "Together!" Lighting the first, the second, the third, then his own. "Power to the motherfuckin' people!"

Mickey nodded, accepting the cigarette- a grave nod, to some extent- to the extent she knew what this would ultimately require from her.

Martin passed out one more to Inrini, but when he stood in front of Paul there was no hand off. The filter hung from his face after Martin inserted it between his lips.

Inrini should have been scared- the old Inrini would have run- but with Mickey there- with the truth so close to her soul- ever since she met Martin in the park, ever since they began working together- it felt right. The entire evolutionary process- from cosmic soup to primordial soup, helicase enzymes unwinding double-strands like spiders along webs, supernovae depositing ripple'd material across spiraling galactic arms, pearls reflecting pearls- connected, infinite- as an artist, as a lover of beauty- as an orphan, as a product of a failed system- a smile crossed her face. A look of defiance, of comradeship- she exhaled a puff of smoke, "Power to the motherfuckin' people."

Martin had a plan outlined before his first flakes of ash hit the tray. "We start with an experiment. Let's see how large of a group we can get. Tonight. We won't dose anyone. We'll tell Nate there's been a change of plans- no drugs. We'll get as straight a crowd at *Spaceship* as there's ever been. And we'll go for it. We'll put you onstage Mickey, and we'll go for it."

Mickey questioned, "Do you think Nate will be alright with the stipulations?"

"He'll be alright. He'll have more dope for himself!"

They laughed- sideways- cautious but optimistic.

Paul slowly disappeared into his own private despair.

-O-

Martin woke up ornery- it was nothing irregular. When he was a child sunlight used to invade his eyelids like a burn, a terror that would pull him away from the dreamscape. His mother worried about how long he would stay in bed. This morning was no different. He fought the impulse. Finally, he leaned forward, cracked his neck, and stood to his feet. He lit a cigarette and began pacing. With loud footsteps around the communal living space- Inrini's apartment- one room, echoing, dour like "Does anybody understand what this is all going to take?"

Inrini rebuffed Martin, "Only you can wake up, after a night like last night- after our girl rocked it, after she blew everybody's minds- and start the day on some doom and gloom nonsense! Only you Martin!"

Martin took a bow towards Inrini. "I must be cruel, only to be kind."

Mickey stirred from one of the corners, a sleeping bag- she yawned, then replied, "I hadn't really considered it."

Martin had been considering it. "We'll need a remote connection to the **CGAT** servers. We need their infrastructure to broadcast. Either a remote connection, or we hack them internally. But before anything, we'll need access codes. But to do any of that- we're talking about tens of thousands of credits to put this kind of equipment together. Not to mention we'll have to connect with a source to locate it all- it's not like they sell this kind of gear at the local C-Center."

Paul yawned. He looked to Mickey. "So how do we get the money?"

Mickey remained optimistic. "We'll get the money."

Martin said, "There's no way."

Mickey looked at Inrini then Paul, each in their own cots on the floor. Then she looked at Martin, his hand through his long hair, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Inrini, offhand and musing, "What about Zevi?"

Mickey shot up, "Zevi?"

Inrini, "Yeah. Martin's brother. By the way- I love it when you call it a C-Center, Martin. It reminds me of C-section. Like this world is unnatural, like it got pulled out of some dying womb. If I ever get back to doing

punk gigs, I'm going to use some Victorian abortion images with like tongs and vacuums- super twisted. That just inspired a whole phase."

Martin walked up to Mickey. "Zevi is out of the question. I haven't spoken to him in years."

Mickey stood up and reached into Martin's breastpocket. She opened his pack of smokes. "I'll talk to him."

"You'll talk to him?"

"Paul and I will go."

"Go where? You think I know where he is? Where the 7EVEN FLAMES hang out? His group is armed and hostile, they're not a fucking chess club, Mickey. These people are soldiers."

"He's your brother."

"He makes himself unavailable. Even if I did know-"

Mickey put one to her mouth and lit the end, inhaling. "You know something."

Martin glared at her. "I knew something. Knew. Past tense. And it was practically nothing. It's a- it's a code, a symbol- graffiti they used to use in the Catacombs. It's like a marker system, he uses it to move between safe houses, to store his ammo and what not- he told me about it years ago. I don't even know if it's relevant anymore. I have to imagine it's changed."

"It's a start."

Inrini looked at Paul. "She's persistent, isn't she?"

Paul rubbed his forehead. He didn't respond.

-O-

"I don't hate him at all. I feel sorry for what happened to him."

"What happened?"

Martin was quietly tapping a bongo drum. A subtle rhythm. "He lost the only thing he believed in. He went as far as he could. He believed he could use his life, his wisdom, to help people change. He believed in the individual, the human person, the human spirit- he believed that he could inspire other people- literally, breathe life into them. But he ran into a wall. He slowly realized how hard it is to change people's attitudes without changing their conditions."

"And that's why- so he started fighting?"

"Violence was never his way- not as a kid, not as a young man. He was a bookworm." Martin had always admired his younger brother's profundity, in awe over him- yet he was never one to feel competitive, or insecure. From the earliest days there had developed and flourished a pure brotherhood between them, like twins- though they did not share a womb, they were cohabitants of the same wound. Martin's face changed expressions, "But his heart hardened. And in some ways- his hand was forced. It wasn't his choice."

Mickey ruminated, and her hands unconsciously took a closed grip position, a fade- she could feel the club- "Did you ever talk to him about it?"

"Not as much as I should have. We grew apart. I couldn't condone what he was doing, when his agenda changed. And he started to resent me more and more."

"Why?"

Martin was quick to respond- like it had been a thought he kept near to him for some time- "Because I still had what I loved, what I believed in."

"Music?"

A flourish of beats, the rhythm continuing- "Music."

-O-

Mickey asked a question that had been on her mind, "How did you two meet?"

A deep voice, for a woman. A strong voice. "Through Zevi. Zevi told me about Martin. I fell in love with Zevi, then I fell in love with him. Talk about family drama, right?"

Martin didn't react.

Mickey nearly blushed for him. "That's a story- and you've been playing together for how long?"

Inrini continued, "A couple years. The underground scene was the only place for me. For us. It's been good to be able to keep creating, be creative, with everything going on. I don't know about him- I can't tell what he's brooding over most of the time."

Martin caught the end of her response, "Give me a break! I feel good tonight. I do!"

One hand cupping her mouth, to the side, to Mickey with a tone of sedition- "He frustrates easily. Don't let him fool you. I've gotten used to it. Will you excuse me?"

Mickey smiled and Inrini strolled away from her and Martin. Martin lit another cigarette after pinching Irini above her hipbone, a flank- tender, affectionate. "She's one in a million, that one."

"Yeah- I like her."

Martin allowed for a half-grin to dance across his face. "Me too. Me too. And hers is one a hell of a story. She lets her smooth exterior belie her past."

Mickey took a sip from a cocktail glass. "How so?"

"When she was fourteen, she lost her virginity. Which is, in it of itself, nothing outrageous. But see, well here she is- Inrini, Mickey wants to know about your story. I told her you had one hell of a story. I told her you were one in a million. Didn't I Mickey?" Mickey nodded. "So tell her. Tell her why you are the way you are."

Martin set his hand on Inrini's shoulder.

Inrini shrugged. "Why I am the way I am. Well. Where to start?"

Martin encouraged her, "I took the liberty of letting her know you lost your virginity at fourteen."

Inrini chuckled. "Perfect. That's where every good story starts. Fourteen. Humping awkwardly in a closet. Yep. We have a Hollywood script here. And once the humping ended- see, he was sixteen, we didn't know anything about anything- it was absurd, really. But after it happened, I ended up coming down with a urinary tract infection. I had to tell my mother and father, because I didn't know what to do- but when I did, they refused to take me in for treatment. They were too ashamed by me. Religious types. Strong people, proud folk- but they were blinded by how their church group would react. They were proud. And they didn't know how to approach it. So after a while, the infection got worse- it spread. It worked its way up to my uterus. And finally, when I did make it to a doctor- thankfully one of my friend's mothers had the sense to bring me in- they rushed me to the Emergency Room, and they had to remove my uterus to save my life. Fourteen years old and no uterus, no parents. I was kicked out of my house. So I hit the streets- I always loved art, loved drawing- I got into graffiti, then music, then production- one thing led to another."

Mickey couldn't help it, "Wow. That's amazing."

Martin followed Mickey, and affirmed, "She is amazing. She lost something, something huge, something so big that so many people take for granted. At a young age." He turned to Inrini, "That's what makes you such a beautiful artist. You turn pain into beauty. That's what *it* is. That's what it's all about."

Inrini was blushing. "Thank you, Martin."

Mickey considered it- losing the ability to be a mother- broken- neutered, in a way- and yet here she was, a beautiful, confident, incredible woman. "Cheers to you, Inrini."

Their glasses clinked.

Martin, "It's not like we're getting married or anything- but I couldn't imagine ever spending my time with anyone other than you. You've got the most beautiful soul- the most real soul- I've ever encountered."

Mickey couldn't help but watch them, watching each other. That love. That power. That connection. She couldn't help but feel like she too was broken in some way, neutered, because she had never felt that with another person... except once.

-O-

Through an open slat- a thorny, harsh voice. "You obviously don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"Nobody calls them **CGAT** around here. **CGAT** or **TAGC** or **GCTA** or whatever alphabet soup they happen to spoon up this month. That's what they'd have you call them. We call them the **PLU**. That's our name for them."

"The **PLU**?"

"The Plutarchy. P-L-U. The few, the rich, the chosen. Privilege, lies, unfeeling."

Images of skewered martini olives, of Sobranie cigarettes being delicately tapped between index finger and middle finger into platinum ashtrays, of plush velvet pillows, of women in black lingerie tied with hempen ropes between brass bedposts- Paul spoke up, unafraid, "I didn't realize what anybody calls them matters."

"I bet you don't realize a lot. Because what we call them does matter. Everything matters," gravely.

"Everything you say, everything you do- this isn't a game. How did you even find this location?"

Paul explained, terse, "We followed the signs."

"The signs?"

"The graffiti."

"What do you think this is? Some kind of treasure hunt? X-marks the spot?"

"No. We're here because we're looking for him."

"Who?"

Paul checked behind his shoulder. Darkness. Dripping pipes. Rats in communion. "Zevi."

"Who?"

"She needs to talk to Zevi."

"Talk to who?"

Paul's nose wrinkled. "You know who he is. We know who he is. We know his brother, Martin. He told us how to follow the markers. We want to know if he's here."

Eyes locked on Mickey through the rectangular porthole, "Who the hell are you?"

Defiant, Paul burst out, "She is somebody who needs to see Zevi!"

Mocking, "Does somebody have a name?"

Assertive, Mickey pushed Paul aside, "Mickey. Mickey Gallagher."

"Is that a play on Annie Oakley? Are you a six-shootin' rodeo star, here to entertain me? Is this your manager? Two cents a ticket? Get the hell out of here. You two don't have a clue."

Mickey paused, she turned to Paul, "Let's go. This isn't right- this isn't the right time. Let's go. I don't want any trouble. Martin was right."

The stranger behind the divide whispered, cajoling, "Listen to your little cowgirl, alright pal? I'll tell you what- here's my last two." Into his pockets, a duo of fluorescent green pills. "On the house. Miss Mickey, you meet Miss Molly. Alright?" The stranger stuck his hand through the window. Mickey put her own, palm up, underneath. The pills fell. "Pure. You two go back to wherever you came from, eat these, take your clothes off, and forget about this place. And forget quick, comprene?"

As Mickey took the pills into her pocket, not thinking twice, Paul grabbed the man's hand with the force of steel vice, a desperate animal. The opportunity had ignited his hindbrain. The man screamed in terror on the other side. "Let go you sonovabitch!" Paul set one leg against the door for leverage and pulled until the entire forearm, up to the elbow, jammed through the small porthole. The man continued to scream, yawns of torment bouncing down the lonely alleyway like aluminum cans fallen off a garbage truck- Mickey watched, unsympathetic. Motionless.

Paul shouted, "Open the fucking door!"

"Hell no!"

"Open the door!"

The muffled cries of anguish continued. Mickey checked over her shoulder. She stood behind Paul, bracing him. They were all in. This was it.

Then suddenly a boom. A lock switched. The door slid ajar. A barrel emerged, a man stepped forward with a gun pointed- a click. "Let go, or you're both dead."

Paul released the man's arm. The door slid open wider. A figure stepped into the frame. A silhouette. Tall. A thin man. Another click. The barrel disappeared. A hand motioned Mickey and Paul forward, a shadow into the shadows.

Mickey approached first.

The watchman lie on the ground, hunched over, holding his arm. "You broke my arm you sonovabitch!"

The shadow barked. "Quiet!" He motioned Paul to follow Mickey past the threshold. Paul walked forward past the ingress and the door collapsed shut behind them. The shadow extended his hand, a greeting. Dressed in black, a hood over his face- no discernable features, no light. Mickey offered her hand. The man took her wrist, turned it, and inspected Mickey's calloused palm- the heart line, the love line, the life line, the money line, Mercury, Apollo, Saturn, Jupiter- "Lines in our hands are like the lines we used to draw between stars. They tell a story." An open fist, fingers spread. "What's your story? Why do you need to see Zevi?"

Mickey closed her fingers shut and took back her hand. The smell of dirt, of earth- of lime, of yeast, petrichor and fossils, worms, and minerals. She took a deep breath. It reminded her of the farm back home. It was good to breathe deeply. "You're him, aren't you?"

The shadow appeared more fully- resembling Martin in almost every way except the length of his hair (shorter than Martin's) and the gauntness of his face (thinner than Martin's), "Who are you?"

"Mickey. Mickey Gallagher."

"Mickey Gallagher- I have a question for you Mickey Gallagher. Have you heard about their bunkers? Have you heard about their genetic laboratories?"

"No."

"They're building a new race. They're buying time to wipe us all out and start a new Earth. They don't even want to grind our bones for their bread- they're fine with dropping the whole game. Do you understand what kind of historical precedents that would be? Do you understand what this kind of activity means?"

"Not really."

"The empire has decided her subjects aren't even worth the trouble."

"Then I suppose we'll have to change their minds."

"Open your palm back up."

Mickey complied.

"You have the M- see?" He opened her hand, taking it into his own. He drew an 'M' with his opposite index finger. "Mickey with her M. And her tattoo- the dream catcher. Your talisman. Did you see this in one of your dreams, Mickey with her M?"

Mickey closed her hand a second time. "We need to talk."

"Why?"

"Because you're the kind of person who understands the historical precedents."

Zevi grinned with false pride. "What flattery. What charms." His face shifted, accusatory, "Who sent you?"

"Martin."

"My Marty? Are you a musician?"

"No."

Zevi began pacing. "Well- Mickey and her M- have you heard about New York City, in the beginning? When the grids first went out? Use your imagination, alright? Hundreds of thousands of people rioting in the street. Protesting. Shouting. Waving flags. Discharging handguns. Everyone scared. They want food. They want water. They want medicine. Hundreds of thousands. Mostly underclass, underprivileged, uneducated- the lower caste- you understand? Rich bourgeoisie cursing their failed alarm systems, nervous and locked in their penthouses- they couldn't handle the chaos. But the poor, the disposed-

alright- they could work in pure chaos. They knew it already, from their own lives. Alright? So that's our scene. Poor, desperate, angry people. Willing to fight. Ready to fight. Forming a mob. Rich people are nervous. Now- do you know what happened next? The **PLU** showed up. They made a deal with the rich. They said 'We'll take care of this for you, but from now on, you listen to us.' The rich agreed. Soldiers were called in. And then it happened. Hundreds of thousands of people were mowed down in cold blood. Slaughtered. Automatic rifles. The National Guard of the United States. Bullets paid for by hard-earned American tax dollars. And do you know how it was justified? They were labeled as a mob of UNDOX by the history books. Women and children. I heard from someone there that the troops didn't even bother with riot gear. They knew. They circumscribed the crowd like a bunch of cowboys. From the periphery into the middle. A field of corpses. They walked over the whole pile, made sure a bullet rested within the skull of every dissenter. Every UNDOX. Tossed in the Hudson River like pharmacy receipts. You picturing this?"

"Yes."

"Everyone who saw or heard about it shut up real quick. Those rich folks in their penthouses- they were grateful. There were no more riots. They could stay inside, hiding. They could wait for orders. And orders came. Do you know what Walter Benjamin said about fascism?"

Mickey, puzzled, "No."

Zevi motioned them further into the darkness. Footsteps. Finally, a lightbulb switched. His face- Martin's crooked nose, the prominent cheekbones and bushy eyebrows- "Behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution. That moment in New York- the **PLU** was born. In an instant, those in power were no longer accountable. The state was no longer an extension of the people- it had morphed like a cancer, mutated. And the **PLU** took hold and didn't think twice. It's almost unbelievable, isn't it?"

Mickey squinted her eyes. Zevi's face was so intense, her eyes unaccustomed to the fluorescence- she didn't respond.

"Do you know what Einstein said about fascism?"

No response.

"Nationalism is an infantile disease, the measles of mankind. Are you afraid, Mickey?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be, right now, in this moment."

Zevi tapped his forefinger to his nose, grinning. "How's Martin these days? Still strumming his guitar?"

"He's trying to make a difference. We need your help."

Zevi's smile faded. "Why didn't he come ask me himself?"

"He said you wouldn't listen."

"And he was right." The wiry, lanky figure who had been pacing and swaying became conscious of his freneticism, and quieted himself. "Do you know what God said, after Cain killed Abel?"

"No."

"The blood cries out from the ground." He raised an eyebrow at Paul. "What is it exactly that you need? Guns? Explosives?"

"Computers. We need a server and access so we can plug into the **CGAT's**... the **PLU's** radio broadcast system."

Zevi pondered, "Hold on. Is the idea- it can't be- do you intend to broadcast Marty's music?"

Mickey didn't respond.

Chuckling, "This is rich. Are you his manager or something? A label executive?"

Mickey was growing frustrated. "We need to send a message."

"What kind of message?"

"We don't know yet."

Zevi pursed his lips, psssch, behind his teeth- then he said, "No can-do, Mickey with her M. You smell like **PLU** to me anyways. Who really sent you?"

"Your brother."

"See, I don't believe you. I don't think you've ever met Marty. I think this is all based on some nonsense intelligence report you pulled on 7EVEN FLAMES. And now, I want to hear an answer I can believe. I know Marty, well- and I find it to be inconceivable for him to be associating with the likes of you tyros. And if I don't hear an answer I can believe- see your partner here? He looks nice. Doesn't he look nice, Vertigo?" The watchman, who emerged from an unknown periphery, answered while nursing his damaged arm, "Swell."

Zevi, direct, "Who sent you?"

Mickey answered, "The **CGAT**."

"Is that the answer you think I wanted to hear?"

"Yes."

Paul was struck from behind, at the bend of his knee, a nightstick- a thud. Mickey screamed. Zevi, quietly, "Truth- that's what I want to hear. Tell me the truth, Mickey. Tell me about your M and your truth, or else I'll be left without any other option but to kill you both."

Paul moaned terribly.

Mickey screamed, "You're no different than they are then!"

Martin shook his head, supercilious. "Sure I am. I'm quite different than them- be sure of that. I am not afraid of the truth. So tell me the truth. Spill it- tell me everything."

Mickey grabbed hold of Zevi's coat collar. "His name is Paul Nelson. My name is Mickey Gallagher. I came to Chicago from Indiana a couple of weeks ago, I had been living in the Interzones, on a farm, with my father- Paul grew up with me, but he left for the city with his family when the Knockout happened- after my father died, I left my home, I left Harrison county- I headed for Lake Patoka- on my way, I heard a voice. I was called. I was called to come here. And since then, every person I've met, everything that has happened, has been conspiring to bring me to you. You. A man gave his life for me to make my way here on a train from one of their bases. And then I found Paul on the streets, Paul who once went to India and had a yogi tell him he had met the redeemer. Then we met your brother in the Catacombs. He told us about his research chemicals, his music- at *Spaceship Earth* after a set, we took some kind of psychedelic- now Martin and Inrini have taken us in- we've experimented together. Something is behind all of this. Something is pushing all of us together, and you are the missing piece. Martin refused to come to you, but he told us about the graffiti, how we could find your group. Listen- I have a gift. I can use his music to implant sensations, visions into people. I can- we need to find a way into the **CGAT**'s network. We want to hack the radio stations and to transmit a message. I can carry the vision across the entire city. We can change people, in an instant. But you're the only person who could help us. You. That's the truth. That's the only truth I know, and the only truth I can tell you."

Paul groaned on the floor.

"This voice you heard- tell me more."

Mickey inhaled, almost gasping- she had been panting, raving- "A woman's voice. A voice from outside of me, strong- she told me I was called to help my brothers and sisters. I would bring them a vision."

"Do you fancy yourself a prophet?"

"I don't care. What you call me doesn't matter. I know what happened to me. I know the truth."

Zevi was intrigued. "Tell me more. About you."

In a desperate search, inside of herself, reaching- "My whole life, I've been afraid, scared to be who I am. Scared because I knew there was something big out there, out here in the world, for me to do. And I felt, I felt like it would require so much, so so much..." crying, tears... "I felt the pain, the sacrifice it would take, and it scared me. It hung over me my whole life. But now, I feel like the weight has been lifted. Signs have

appeared. I've been called- and I'm finally acting on it. I thought I knew where I belonged. But now, I don't know- I just, please, leave my friend alone. Please leave him be."

"Mickey with her M- look at that. Are you listening Vertigo? This is truth. This girl is telling us the truth. She knows Marty. She does." Zevi took Mickey's hands back into his own. "You belong right here." Turning back to his compatriot, "She belongs right here. Help her friend up. Put them up in the lounge. Water- give them water." Back towards Micky, clasping her hands together in his, "I have to take leave for a minute. Vertigo will have you set up. I apologize. I do. You can't be too careful."

Mickey watched Zevi depart, back into the shadows.

Terrified.

Relieved.

-O-

Mickey watched the screens through the windows of the **TGAC** (*Total Governance of American Conservatism*) *Community Information Unit*. There were uniformed players. There were people in the stands with beers and hotdogs. Noses were pressed onto the glass.

"Baseball?"

Paul shrugged, "America's pastime."

"I can't believe they have the nerve to pawn this off like it's happening live. Don't people know it's a recording?"

"Sure they do. But they doctor up the names, the dates, the announcing. It's as good as live. It's happening right now. If you pay attention though sometimes you can catch where they miss an edit."

"That's absurd."

"It's a perfect metaphor- those people standing there, watching, rooting on their home team- a willing suspension of disbelief. They'll disagree with a strikeout call and curse the umpire. A strikeout that happened years ago. They're just happy to have the chance to argue and cheer."

Mickey could feel her stomach in her throat.

-O-

Paul watches a young girl pull Mickey's coat sleeve.

The child, inquisitive, ethereal, "Excuse me? I want to know what you are. What are you?"

Mickey kneels down to face the girl. In front of the girl and her sister... smiling... a pink hat, a pom-pom... ketchup on the corner of their mouths. French fries. Excitement. A carnival, Ferris wheel and cotton candy, brown teddy bears and singular goldfish in transparent bags. Mickey volleys a question back to the girls in a warm voice, "What do you think I am?"

The younger sister flashes, "Aileen says you're a witch."

The girl who had pulled on Mickey's coat, Aileen, replies, "Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not!"

"I heard her. I did. But I say you're a queen. My mommy says you could be a queen."

Paul suddenly woke up from his dream.

Mickey was asleep in the cot next to him.

Paul arched forward, immediately restless. Things were moving so fast.

His heart ached.

Feelings- of being glossed over, abandoned, neglected, being forgotten- especially after all he had done- underappreciated. Paul felt left out. Sorry for himself.

Mickey never smiled at him anymore, she had lost that sense of relief, of connection, when she first arrived. Now, everything was serious and apocalyptic. They hardly spoke in private, so wrapped up in the process, in the plan and the execution- she had become the cynosure of a new group of people. And what was his role in that group? He was nothing. A tag-along. A guy with a busted knee.

There were musicians. A programmer. A militia leader. A messiah.

Paul was nothing.

Besides- things were moving too fast. Nothing had been thought out. It was all hubris, nonsense- wasn't it? Mickey was turning into something else, somebody else, and for what? *For these people?* A girl he once loved, he still loved- who was she? He was losing her, to them. To everyone. To the world. Maybe a part of him knew it had to be this way, that it was unavoidable- but the other part of him was selfish. Paul yearned for Mickey to be his, and his alone. For himself. He wanted her love, for him. *Who cared about what the world needed? Who cared about liberating society? Saving the human race? That ugly, faceless, impersonal mass- so they could go back to polluting lakes and streams, manufacturing bullets and tanks, swiping their credit cards mindlessly? What was really at stake? And how is this plan even supposed to work?* Psychedelic drugs, radio waves, telepathic emanations, sitar music- it was nuts. *This is crazy, the whole thing. Kooky.* Doubt filled Paul's mind, regret his heart. Maybe he was part of a doomed race? Maybe this was all some kind of ridiculous folly, some desperate finale? Maybe their karma had been fated long ago? Maybe there wasn't anything that could be done to prevent what was already set in motion? Why couldn't he spend these precious final hours with Mickey, in her arms?

Paul scratched at his face, moved the blanket from off his body, and went to the window. He looked out, as much as he could. He pressed his nose up to the sere'd Plexi-glass. A single window in their room. Even as he gleaned desperately- there were no stars twinkling, no pock marks of light, no diamond strings- there was only black, grey- clouds, dead space- the Earth was receding from the rest of the cosmos. This place was falling into itself. He remembered the Indiana skies, the new moon evenings bursting wide open and ecstatic across a country road, overhead a celestial theater starring Ursa Majors and Canis Minors- *what had happened?*

What went wrong?

Where was this going?

-O-

Williams dispatched the coded telegram to the other eight members. An emergency quorum was called. They met three days later, a bunker outside of Freedom Six.

Proud, like a father watching his son round the bases in the bottom of the ninth, the metallic crack of the bat still ringing true blue in papa's ears, Smithe watched gaily as Williams stood up in front of the others, snorted, then announced, "Gentlemen, the final gate has been cleared. My team has analyzed the last set of confirmation trials. Two hundred human subjects, fully exposed. We compared the effectiveness against attenuated virus particles- for a stronger control- and I'm happy to report those recipients, those who received the mRNA vaccine, survived maximum exposure levels and continue to thrive two weeks post-exposure, with no signs of long-term injury or cause for concern. Furthermore, the bloodwork on those who received the vaccine has confirmed that any viral load has been fully eliminated, with evidence in all cases of antibody formation within the immune system. That's 100% survivorship and effectiveness in that group. The unvaccinated trial group showed 100% mortality within seven days. The attenuated virus group, about 30% mortality within seven days. To date, across various trials, the antigen has been presented to nine hundred and seventeen subjects, displaying lethality in every single unvaccinated participant. I wanted to personally share the numbers with you. The culmination of many years of work- and I can now announce to this quorum that we have achieved success. I have put the order in for two thousand doses of vaccine, with an additional two thousand for redundancy and the option of boosters. Those doses will be ready in six weeks' time."

Van Pult, forever impatient under his shiny brown toupee, "And how long to fill the order on the weaponized systems?"

Williams, "Approximately two months to develop enough quantity for the aerosol delivery systems we previously agreed upon. Another two weeks or so to mobilize, to have the entire network online and ready for deployment- Holden will have to speak to that."

Holden offered, between gutturals, "Two weeks, at the most."

Williams continued, "We will be at full production scale- on both the antigen and on the vaccine. We have our multi-suite GMP plants serviced, resourced, ready to move to full capacity. We will handle the storage and aggregation, run the vaccine in parallel like I mentioned, and then Holden's team will receive the API payload in a coordinated fashion. His teams are for the most part adjacent to our facilities. It won't take much in the way of logistical planning."

Holden, his stern voice, buzzcut hairstyle, thick ankles and wrists- "There will be no issues, I can assure the quorum. We've had several models to study and replicate, and if the population estimates are within a 20% margin, we will have plenty of effective dose and effective coverage. I see no issues. Based on the clean-up measures, based on all our models, there will be virtually no chance for any kind of viable survivorship."

Smithe, "The models are certainly within that margin. If anything, we are looking at plus or minus 2%."

Holden nodded.

Williams continued, "Since the virus has a three-day exposure window, meaning it can survive outside of a host for seventy-five hours, and since the vast majority of lethality has occurred within that same time period- it should require only one wave of deployment."

Holden clarified, "Once deployed, we'll monitor via drone surveyors using infrared at a little over one week. We will then have the option for a second, targeted deployment. We have all the decision-making tools in place to conduct that exercise, when the time comes. Using the maps we've been generating the last couple of months, we should be able to extrapolate to both a national and global level as to whether or not we have been successful. Again, when the time comes."

Meyers, itching to set his point across, asserted, "Failure is not an option."

Williams, "At this point, I can say with a high degree of confidence that failure would be a near statistical impossibility."

Meyers, "It appears that way. For now."

Johnson, "Remember our worst-case scenario from Compact Protocol gentlemen: if we do not achieve the target we are after, this all becomes another piece of terrorist propaganda for the quorum to platform, pivot, and leverage. There are contingencies in place, should we need them. Goddamn if we do, but they're there."

Ward, bloodthirsty and sensing a moment to interject before the subject matter veered in an overly technical direction, "What about those subjects you vaccinated Williams? They'll be immune, won't they?"

Williams responded, casually, "The majority have been terminated as part of the study protocol. A few are left, accounted for of course, and are being monitored as part of a longer-term study. Once the most conservative scientists on the team are satisfied, those remaining subjects will also be terminated."

Kliezen beamed, "Reassuring to hear that every box has been checked."

"Understood." Williams adjusted his red necktie, "Well- I know there were several other pass-balls here, and I wanted to call quorum in order to move to the next phase and provide everyone with time to prepare their respective departments and sub-actions."

Smithe clicked his wrinkled grey tongue in his mouth, with just enough spittle to eek out, "Wonderful to share this success, Williams. I appreciate you finishing this critical piece- I trust everyone has prepared themselves for this moment. I will call in the rural units. We'll put a message out on a Defcom Five-terrorist nuclear threat. We'll create full density in the urban areas within a month. I'll make the final pushes with the local **TGAC** officials, raise the threat levels across all hierarchies, and work with the state media to cook up a nice distraction for the upcoming months."

Van Pult, "Excellent sir. I believe the media propaganda plan has been outlined in detail, already, in the dossier. Appendix nine or ten, if I'm not mistaken."

Smithe, a glance down to a vintage wristwatch from an 18th century European watchmaker, "Van Pult, can I ask that you review and verify your final headcounts and assignments? I'd like a report from you sent

over to the quorum by next week. There's plenty of room for error in the personnel area to keep you busy. I wouldn't want anybody left behind at the last hour." A cryptic message, a veiled threat perhaps- Van Pult's eyes widened, Johnson grinned surreptitiously- Smithe continued, "Holden- I'll expect we meet once more shortly before the weaponized form is available?"

Holden replied, his military background keeping his words taut, "Affirm."

A question from Meyers, "How will we ensure the vaccine makes it to all the proper recipients, unadulterated?"

Van Pult, a stickler for protocol, anal-retentive and obsessive compulsive and pages nineteen through four hundred thirty-three memorized, unconsciously breaking any previous tension, "It's all been established in the procedures. Williams will be responsible for the certification and delivery of the vaccine and will provide the required evidence to the quorum at the assembly point. The doses will be randomized and delivered to all our people. It's all outlined. The location is outside of Freedom Six. We have a temporary compound constructed- before the exodus. From there the last orders will be given, those selected will be vaccinated, and Smithe will address the Compact. From there a transport will shuttle us to Point Renewal."

Multiple voices continued on, each one compelled to offer the perfunctory regurgitations- piggy backing on what was previously said- as previously stated- to reiterate- to hear the sound of their own voices- "Impressive work, Williams. Damn fine job. Are there any other challenges you've identified my team can assist with?"

Williams would nod, then offer something like, "Appreciate it- at this point we are in good shape. Based on everything else needed to move on, I have no obstructions. It's a clear path."

Smithe beamed, "Gentlemen, a bottle ought to be opened. A toast." He opened the door, called out to his assistant. A rare Scotch whiskey, aged- crystal glasses, ice and water for those who cared for it. The assistant left. "Our days of writing propaganda are over. Our days of shepherding a lost flock amidst a sea of lions are done. To each and every one of you- a well-deserved congratulations. I am privileged to be in the company of perhaps the greatest round table since Arthur and his knights, since Christ and his Apostles. Truly. And make sure to commit this to memory- do not forget- we are here to properly restore mankind and restore our birthright as inheritors to the greatest country, the greatest civilization, in human history!"

Cheering, the most emotion they had let out collectively in years, "Here here!" and "To the Compact!" and a few "Amen!"

Even Burnside could be heard during the celebrations.

Before Holden convened the quorum according to procedure- "I will schedule a revisit in one month's time. We can use that final session to rehearse the deployment protocols in the Compact, and by then I will be able to confirm we have our delivery systems tracked out. I believe our agreed upon procedure calls for a detailed simulation of the deployment orders, which we should execute as a group."

Smithe, quick to agree with the former brigadier general, "I second."

Holden finished, "Once I obtain the payload from Williams, I will work with you Smithe on making sure the deployment matches your latest population numbers. Van Pult, you have your marching orders for transporting the selected members of the Compact to Freedom Six before final deployment, so it would be useful to have that accomplished before our next session- assuming the paperwork is in good order, of course."

-O-

Paul stood amongst several men and women. He listened. There was a captain, a leader of the team... his name was Sollero... wide shoulders, deep voice, incessantly chewing gum... a torn t-shirt, camouflage pants, a bandana, smeared camouflage face paint, shaved head and a piercing gaze... a fit, muscular man. "So we've got approval for a full stock run here. Everyone shoulders an automatic, three grenades, and we'll have a couple of flyers to take up our little homemade incendiaries."

"What's the target?"

"Labor Bureau."

A man interjected, "They've put a garrison up outside that place. Tanks. A turret."

"So?"

"So? What's an AK supposed to do against tank armor?"

"Don't shoot at the tanks. Shoot at the **TGAC** officers and their grunts."

The man protested, "I thought we had a few rockets left over?"

Sollero pulled the wad of gum out of his mouth and stuck it between two bricks on the wall. "Automatics and grenades, that's the order."

"Who's order?"

"Listen. You don't have to be here. You know where the door is if you don't like it."

A woman, burly with short red hair, "I think we all want to know there's a shot of comin' back alive."

The leader of the group spoke gravely. "Coming back alive? Coming back to what?! What do you think we're out here doing? This isn't about life! This life ain't worth shit. Death is a gift from this shithouse. Get all that coming back alive shit out of your head. All of you!"

The woman did not respond. Nobody did for a moment. Then the first man said, "She was only trying to ask if we were being smart about it, that's all."

"Smart?! Fuck being smart. Our parents were all smart. So were their parents before them. Generations of dupes getting fooled over and over again. Not one of 'em smart enough to figure out the DNC and the GOP were the same thing, the same machine pitting us against each other to sell tickets. Who would've guessed? Smart enough to get wrapped up in fake wars, debating phony issues- meanwhile the rich got richer- molded sneakers, poured smog into the atmosphere, bow tied garbage and sold it to us and delivered it to us and charged us a flat rate. Smart? We are the descendants of a fooled people. I don't know about you, but I'm here because I'm done trying to make the smart play, to feel safe. That's as good a cause as any worth dying over to me."

Paul reacted, impulsive, "Hell yes!"

Sollero tucked his shirt into the front of his pants. A look out from the corner of his eye, "At least the new guy is excited. Now come on. We arm up and then hit the sewers before dawn." He walked off away from the team, maybe a dozen volunteers with some veterans and some first timers.

The same man who had been asking about the weapons came to Paul. "You make sure to save that fire for when the fighting starts. Easy to get big down here when lead ain't flying at you."

Paul responded, "Don't worry about me."

-O-

A tape recorder- a red light- a thumb, a button pushed- click:

(barely audible voice) May thirteenth, eleven ay-ehm... anno domini two-thousand twenty-two... the New York Center for Equal Opportunity and Welfare...

My father was an iron worker. We grew up in the city slums, and manual labor was our family business. His father before him, his grandfather before him, right on down the line- factories, steel mills, punch clocks. My father told me several times, once I grew old enough to understand, that I should never become a mill worker. He told me that I should go to university, take up business or the law or medicine. He was adamant that his way was not a viable way to make a living. It was dishonorable. My father was ashamed, in many ways, by his profession. I remember his sentiment well.

As I reflected more on my father's viewpoint, as I got older- it greatly disturbed me. Here was a heart-breaking character. The head of a household, feeding me a meal at his table, a meal cooked by his loving wife, my mother- his hard work was providing a fine shelter, as fine a life as any for our family- and yet, he was ashamed. I grew up with all the necessities provided for. My father and his work were the cause

for that. My father raised his family with dignity and respect. And yet- shame. Why did he feel the way he did? Why was he disgusted with himself? Why didn't he feel proud of who he was?

I know many of you can relate- being made to feel like what you're doing isn't or wasn't adequate.

Because my father's mindset was not unique- the more I learned, the older I became, I realized many people I met felt this way. 'I'm not rich enough, I'm not successful. I would have done things differently so I could have made more money.' As I listened to more and more people, I began to understand the ubiquity of this defeated mentality. I saw defeatism everywhere; I saw it in so many people. And I began to understand the causes for it.

I found that the cause for this psychic problem was rooted in what I call the 'transactional perspective.' A transactional perspective is one that conflates moral value, in terms of good or bad, with monetary value. Rich is good. Poor is bad. If it makes you more money, it is good. If it loses you money, it is bad. If that person has a new car, they are good. If they have a dilapidated house, they are bad. Every moral or feeling based evaluation is rooted in a monetary or quantitative basis. And in the final analysis, if there is somebody with more money than you- well, there is somebody better than you.

Take a minute here- do you think an accounting system is suited to bring any semblance of peace or happiness to an individual? I have not found that to be the case. It is not a fungible mentality- it will not enhance the life of an individual. It does not make for well-rounded human beings. Such a mindset is dangerous- to think about the world and about the people around you from a transactional perspective- when you think about yourself from a transactional perspective- everything becomes discolored. Nothing is ever enough. Especially when there are billionaires. When there are Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos.

Yet this is the lens which our economy requires of us to view the world. It requires us to think and behave transactionally. If we don't, the whole system is upended.

I want to take a moment to emphasize the impact of 'transactional' thinking to our value system. Children used to be taught to be honest, hard-working, thoughtful, considerate, truthful. Now, they are taught to do whatever it takes to be rich. A person who cuts every corner, who is an aggressive businessman, who puts others out of work to maintain the empire, who finds tax loopholes, who stuffs his pockets and grows and grows and grows at any cost necessary- because that is the true measure of success in the eyes of America today. The true measure of success is not the means by which we accrue, but rather the bottom line of our accrual. American history textbooks are filled with deified renditions of the lives of Morgan and Carnegie and Rockefeller.

Allow me to highlight my argument with a scenario. We'll approach a situation- say for example, every Friday you offer a coworker a ride home after work because they live nearby- and you've been doing it for years. Our society would have you think, 'Well I've given this person a ride X amount of times and they've never once offered to pay me gas money, how much does he or she owe me? They owe me big.' Do you see the fundamental flaw here? This approach totally misses the point of every human interaction you had with that person. And not only do you miss the point, by examining and evaluating others through the lens of accounts and balances hopelessly deteriorates your relationships. Every conversation, every laugh, every smile, every tender moment. That which makes us human is nullified by a transactional perspective. We substitute a human relationship for a financial one. It strips the beauty away- two people coming together is it! It is the be all and end all! A contact between souls, a contact between focal points of the entire universe- the consciousness of the universe illumined by this contact- that is the whole ballgame! The moon reflecting the sun's light back to us at night. When two or more are gathered- and I'm not being hyperbolic. There lies connection, friendship, love- all of which lead to truth- these are the highest ideals to achieve. Spiritual ideals. And not only are they ideals of the spirit, but such behavior is indicative of our genetic makeup- we are social creatures we are designed to seek out our brothers and understand them and have them understand us. We seek to be sought, we seek to understand as well as to be understood- by design. Inherently. It is how our language capacities developed. It is how our consciousness evolved.

To think about the world from a transactional perspective is a betrayal of our birthright. It is at odds with the cornerstone of our nature.

Yet, again, such a perversion is required by our economy and society- and by participating, we are being redesigned. Advertising, technology, the media- everything is in collusion, it all promotes the reprogramming of our brains to focus on the transactional. You being here tonight is an opportunity to change the program, to rewrite the agenda. To rewire your neurons! Have you ever sent a payment request for \$6.00 because your cousin drank three Diet Cokes at the party you hosted? It's preposterous, right? But you've thought about it- you've hosted the party, and watched your cousin or your auntie eat your food, drink your drinks- it's alright. You were taught to think this way. You were taught the only time you should give anything to anybody is when a tax rebate is associated with the transaction, when there is a form you can fill out and preclude Uncle Sam from raking in more of your salary at the end of the year. That's the only time people are supposed to be generous to each other, or kind to each other. And then, even generosity had been perverted!

Are you sensing the perversion?

Can you feel it?

We're consumed by competition- obsessed with beating our fellows, with trying to break through an impossible ceiling which the 0.1% highest earning alpha-corpocratic elite of society have created for us to reach for. We are playthings. They control our aspirations- and why? Because we've been taught that the only inherent good, the only Platonic ideal, is to be economically successful. To be rich is to inherit the kingdom! That is the lesson we have been taught! Being wealthy in our society is achieving the ideal good, no matter what the cost. Again, here is the paradox of values that we've been filled with, been forced to resign to even at such an early age- how could you understand it any differently?

I remember an experience I'll share with you. I was driving in downtown Des Moines, and out the passenger window I saw a homeless man, or a man I assumed to be homeless, walking along the sidewalk. I felt bad for him- it was January, and cold. He was covered in coats, rags, toting a clear garbage bag full of recyclable items. But something happened. This bagman bottle collector, tattered and full of quarters saving up for his next bottle of wine, I saw his head turn on a swivel to follow an expensive European car which had driven by on the other side of the street. He turned and watched that white German car like he was gawking a blonde-haired beauty. He stopped dead in his tracks and drooled as the automobile careened away from him. I couldn't believe it. I witnessed our problem, the problem with all mankind, summarily packaged into this tidy image. Even at the lowest rung of society, this poor man still bought into the myth of becoming rich.

Transactional emptiness is the road we are on. We have become stones, calloused towards even our own families. I don't have time to get into our rapacious treatment of the planet. And we harden our hearts in the name of success- vying desperately to get our hands on as much of the money in the stockpile we can possibly manage- so we can carry it home and lock it away into concrete rooms, hidden and sequestered our gold doubloons counting them endlessly over and over again.

But here you are. Here we are, together, tonight- let's change the model. We have a clear view up at the ceiling, and we can decide once and for all to refuse. Let's destroy the pillars holding that unreachable ceiling up above our heads.

We have an opportunity because no one has identified the root cause of this maligned strangeness, the sickness that is upon us. Nobody talks about it. Nobody has been able to see through the symptoms to understand what's really driving this behavior. I hope I have called it out, because what I see is what I see. We are conditioned into this sickness. We are not offered an alternative.

And tonight, we need to speak about alternatives. In my view, the refusal to participate starts at a very fundamental level- the individual person deciding to disengage at their level, to end the chase. Small, idiosyncratic solutions that are actionable on a practical, everyday level that require simple yes-no, binary choices. One after another. Complex problems require simple solutions. Because the activities themselves

are so benign and pointless, the irony is people think “there is no way this can add up in a substantial way” – that is the psychic hurdle we have to overcome. You have to treat each decision as part of a process, part of a solution towards a greater good that is the truly noble ends, a good that is worth achieving and pursuing.

We have seen what happens when we chase the middle-class ideals- the new car in the driveway, the home renovation project- we have been programmed and baited into participating in a meaningless parade of economic spectacle. It has informed all our decisions. We are surrounded by it- what colleges to apply to, what sports teams to root for. The digital mechanisms which integrate and interface almost every aspect of our environment is designed to keep us insulated and contained- and they are not life affirming. They are not informative. They are designed to make us fuss over a bunch of nonsense. How much time do you spend- in all seriousness- checking websites, posting messages and opinions? The time and energy spent and wasted, distracted?

It is a cruel, strange world we live in. But you have a choice. It doesn't have to be this way anymore. You can change the course. We can claim our birthright. Stop buying. Stop participating. Stop valuing what you are told to value. Stop believing the lie. Stop equating success and wealth to happiness and accomplishment. Stop teaching your children hand-me-down lessons of greed and doom, meant to serve a faceless elite, a plutarchy who cares nothing for you or your children, who hardly views you as more than part of a quarterly report- a target for an advertisement- a fraction of a percentage! A plutarchy that rides an expanding wave which eats everything in its path. Let that image sink in. You are downing.

Our age, this generation, this time in history- we are at a crossroads.

We, the People, must learn from our mistakes.

I want to pivot for a moment- I want to circle back and talk about my father again. He told me once, not long before I left home, that ‘Don't forget one day the show ends. This isn't a dress rehearsal.’ He reminded me to keep a deep respect for life itself, for being alive.

Because we are only alive for a short while, and death is coming. Death has no concern for our petty trivial dribble, for our microwave dinners or our graduation requirements or our oil changes. Death doesn't care about our schedule, doesn't aim to meet our expectations. Death can and will take from you- it will do so with an indiscriminate, uncompromising hand. It will reduce you and I and everything we are. Reduced to a number, a statistic, an invisible nothing noted on a book burnt up in a sun forgotten forever for unthinkable years infinite thereafter. It will completely and fully eradicate your foundation. It will destroy your scaffolds and egoic constructions that you have created to make sense of your life. My father's reminder wasn't so much about carpe diem as much as it was about being humble, humble before the finality and power of death in a world that had turned raving mad, and oblivious of that power.

If we're not afforded a dose of humility, if we can't reorient from this high and mighty position we've built ourselves into- then how can we evolve any further? How can we learn anything? How can we encounter meaningful epiphanies, which these days have become so rare in our sleepwalking society?

Use death as a meditation. Memento mori. Remember death. Remember your time is finite, your decisions are critical, your life is precious. We can't wait any longer. We can't be fooled into believing the individual cannot make a difference. The time is now. We are here, we are alive. We need to act. The impermanence, the beauty, the sacred- what frightens me most is that our very notions about what make us human will be lost in the not-too-distant future. On the horizon is a transactional generation devoid of spirit, so long as cell phone companies and internet service providers have their way, so long as social media outlets and instant quick-fix updates continue buzzing us. Mankind is losing her ability to develop a nuanced appreciation and understanding of her own humanity. And if we keep losing contact- if it keeps diminishing- we will not be able to recover.

We are nearly lost.

A final hour approaches. If we decide to acquiesce, if we settle, if we opt for conformity- if we buy into the messaging from above, if we keep our computers and televisions ON, if we keep on applying for credit

cards- we will surely lose it. And what will that society then look like? How will children have any hope if they grow up in those homes where there's not only a screen in every room, but a screen surgically inserted into their palm? A chip embedded in their brain? Without even being granted a choice in the matter? You're born, and you're plugged in. There are radical, frightening end-game avenues that humanity could end up treading down if we're not careful.

And tonight you are here with me to take a stand. My father is dead- his day has passed. The great silencing has befallen him. And I think about him tonight because I think about where I came from- as a son, as a man, as a human being, and where I want to go. I know what his legacy was, and even though he wasn't always proud of it, I certainly am. I want to be proud of my own legacy. I want to be proud of what I contribute. I'm here tonight as one person- you are here tonight as one person. But together, we are the people. Together we can go forward, so long as we remain united. We will continue our approach, we'll continue to be forthright, to oppose. And most importantly we'll continue to spread kindness, to radiate it out from our communities.

There is a singular, final prescription which will combat the perverted, capitalistic worldview of 21st Century America: a radical disengagement from modern values and technology. We need to unplug. The antidote against our sick society- against the apparatus which has manifested to conserve only itself, economic growth for the sake of more growth, the corporate model driven by greed, the constrictive plutarchy- is this: disengagement. Disengage on an individual level. Unplug. Step out. Deny the cultural program. Kill your old self. Question your values. Make small decisions, and conserve your integrity. Preserve your spirit.

I offer you a choice- I am giving each one of you a choice. You can continue trying to chase empty promises, you can continue worshipping false idols, you can remain distracted- or, we can establish new values and the norms which we find true. We can be people again. We can be proud. We can be alive.

I want to end tonight with another reflection on my father- a final message- something he told me throughout my childhood. When I would struggle with something, he would say, "If it's hard, you're probably not doing it the right way." Tonight, standing before you, I can honestly say my life has led me to an opposite conclusion: nothing truly great is ever easy. If it's easy, it probably isn't good. The hard is what makes it great. The course we are set out upon is not a simple one, an easy one- it is perilous. It may even be deadly. But don't be afraid of death. Use it to bring yourself back to life.

(barely audible voice) June fourteenth, nine pee-ehm... two-thousand twenty-four... Washington Dee-See... the Kennedy Foundation Annual Summit for Political Action...

Culture is the organized façade which we have inherited, which we are confronted with every day- a façade built by a ruling class. The corpocrats, the plutarchs- the wealthy elite who take every measure to remain hidden in the shadows but are equally assiduous in presenting their spectacle to us in every aspect of our lives. Culture is the spectacle, it is the reflection of our socio-economic paradigm. It is their program, established by them in order to keep them in the empyrean and us on the streets- and it is all working according to their plan.

Anxiety and fear are important tools by which they scheme and operate. A common citizen lives most his or her life in a state of perpetual uncertainty- bills to pay, mouths to feed, a changing world that grows bigger and stranger and more complex every single day. Increasing costs, debts, and competition; decreasing resources, opportunities, hope. Their socio-economic program has been created to induce stress, anxiety, and fear through every mechanism possible- through every media outlet, every commercial, every screen, every stimulus, every second.

And once we are stressed out, anxious, and afraid- the modern program offers us a solution. It's very simple: buy things. Buy more and buy often. Its simplicity is genius. And technology has developed according to this particular stimulus-response pairing. Fabricate stress, then make the panacea readily

accessible and available. Feeling lonely? There's an app for that. Feeling self-conscious about your body weight because of a commercial on television? Log into Buy It Now and here is a link to the next diet pill fad- we'll have a thousand tablets delivered to your home tomorrow at 20% off. Skinner's critics cited his reductionism as his downfall- but the man was on to something. And their program has been built with his work in mind.

As I have stated- the program has been built. It has been premeditated- make no mistake- carefully assembled, ruthlessly organized by those at the top. There was a great deal of attention that went into the presentation. It is not consistent with other positive human systems which have preceded- it is not redemptive, it is not centered on wellness or wholeness. It is designed to control, to enslave.

But if it is so simple, why is it so difficult to break free from?

Well, their program is classically founded- and by that I mean there is a fundamental ideology which sits beneath its structure. This ideology is hard work Puritan Americanism- if you work hard, follow the rules, keep your head down, do whatever the television tells you- then good things will happen. Someday you could be rich too. And if you see people who are in dire straits, who are poor or who don't have access to the things you do- it's because they're not following the ideology. This ideology allows for predictability and safety, it allows for exploitation, starvation, mental health crises. Its roots are in the industrial age- factory owners who stole their ideas from plantation owners. The model follower, the ideological zealot if you will, is little more than a pastiche of television stereotypes who follows a simple set of orders: Go to church. Arrive at work on time. Pay your taxes. Don't think too much. Gulp down a Scotch. Root on the home team. Upgrade your car every five years. Make sure your neighbors follow the program- if they don't, talk about them and chastise them.

Follow the program. Continue to follow the program. When in doubt- follow the program. (laughter)

It's funny, because it's that simple. Trite, jejune- but this is the essence of our culture. It is also paradoxical. We are ideologues who believe one day, with enough adherence, we might catch a break and join the elite ranks of wealth and prestige. And the ruling class, the hands in the shadows who have rigged the entire game, they want nothing other than to guard their position and keep us out.

If we don't break through? Easy- we didn't work hard enough. We deserve to be anxious. We deserve to struggle. We deserve to feel imprisoned. We deserve it, because we didn't follow the program.

We are the products of this culture, this ideology. We have been conned. We have been duped. Yet- we do nothing. We remain unoriginal, scared, disorganized- doomed to follow the program like our parents did before us- to wind up with our children hating us, with a job that is slowly killing us- martyrs who have been robbed lifeless for no worthy cause.

It's terribly depressing when you say it out loud, when you state the facts.

But let's step back. How did it happen? The modern age, the scientific age of reason and industry, of knowledge and connectivity- the sharing of ideas- how did we get here? I don't intend to trace it back from our Mesopotamian roots, but the point I want to make is that the accelerant in the last thirty years has been the internet. The internet allowed the wealthy elite to transform the world according to their socio-economic program. What is the internet? The internet is many things: a connector, a place for collaboration, connection, creativity, freedom, information- this is what they would have you believe. Who has heard these descriptors? (rumbling) The forefront of human technology- the best and the brightest- a source of innovation, the answer to our problems- are you sold yet? Are you all in? Good. Because here's what isn't in the contract: the internet destroyed our autonomy. It has been built according to the program. It is a reflection of our culture. And it took things one step further- because now, now they became purveyors of truth. They had the answers. They provided the search engine results. They eradicated our individuality, they defragged it, tore it asunder. Our world has become completely flat. Efficient, effective, and informative. Personal experience, intuition, insight- eradicated. Go online. Google it. See what somebody else says. Human beings are no longer empowered- we can no longer make decisions on our own. We need the internet. We have been taught to dismiss our inner voice.

The scientific revolution stole our gods, our myths, our legends. Science took away the mystery and wonder- now everything can be explained. The technological revolution stole our inspiration, our insight, our individuality and our autonomy. What is left? (rumblings) What do we have left? (a voice in the crowd- Nothing) Exactly. Nothing. We aren't even alone- we are beyond loneliness. Isolated even from our own selves. We can't even ask the fundamental questions. We don't know what they are! Instead, we sit around making polite, benign conversation about the weather while we track our latest shipment of brand-new sneakers.

(a silence) Let's pivot for a moment. Let's look at the situation from the perspective of artists and the youth, which are in my opinion important barometers for the health of any society. A robust youth culture, a robust art scene- these are the hallmarks of any thriving civilization. Every cultural transformation and expansion in human history has been fueled by artists and young people. How are these groups faring today? Well, wasn't the internet supposed to enable any artist to open their own online storefront, to present their media on global scales, to collaborate with other artists and engage in new mediums and technologies? Wasn't that the idea? But the opposite has happened. Amazon happened. Saturation happened- accessibility happened. There were thirteen million self-published novels written last year. That's five percent of our population. One out of twenty people. Think about that. How could you possibly find Melville, or Dostoevsky, in a pile of thirteen million? Would either of those authors sell today? Consider it.

And youth culture, which previously had produced the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the punk ethos- youth culture has been converted into a cash cow. Uniqueness and creativity are no longer celebrated- status rules. Memes dictate our cultural ability to create meaning. Youth culture is self-referential, ironic, and unsympathetic. Kids are anything but free thinkers. They log on, tweet, upvote, and download. They are the most targeted cohort in terms of advertising. More money is spent by market researchers trying to understand the buying practices of twelve-year-old's to eighteen-year-old's than any other age bracket. Where are the youth out there? (shouts) Thank you! My God. You are important! You represent the periphery, the leading edge- you are supposed to challenge the status quo, promote growth, replace that which is dead. Now all you do is make sure you can get your parents' credit cards to buy trendy garbage. You document and post your every move, unreflective and chaotic and hoping for more likes. Hello! I'm talking to you! (boos) Good. React. Do something fucking original for once! Youth culture used to stand for honesty, expression, it used to question authority- and now- listen up kids- you are afraid of being totally human! That's the truth. I see it in your eyes! You are scared of being sentimental, emotional, sympathetic. You are scared to alter and explore the boundaries of what you are and what is expected of you. You are too scared to care about anything! You are cynics- but you have not lived! You are young, you have not been hardened by life- so why don't you care anymore? When teenagers can't be bothered to get angry- when the young are no longer excited by life, when there's no overburst of joy- watch out. The end is near. There will be no Kaddish to sing, no death full of flowers. No hope.

Here is another one of the great tragedies, in my opinion, with this age. Children are being inculcated by cultural mechanisms through hip and cynical television, music, and movies, to mistake sincerity for weakness. You have been taught to cast anything sentimental or emotional off as chintz. Nothing means anything- the world has become a forum for ironic self-reference.

We need young people to help us wake us up from the nightmare we are in.

We need artists to help us wake up.

We need everyone.

'Waking up' is itself a process- my 'waking up' certainly was a process. Images, ideas, experiences, insights- people are moved in different ways, by different stimuli. My fix was words, honest words- reading- I loved to read and write. And I really came to life after reading some material written by a gentleman named Larry McCaffery. He is dead now, but when he was alive, I came across his work by divine intervention, or by accident- depending on how you want to frame the world. That's another story- regardless, his words

articulated exactly how I felt in my soul. One of those hair on the back your neck moments. Frisson. I'll never forget the first time I read this: he said we live in a "postmodern desert inhabited by people who are, in effect, consuming themselves in the form of images and abstractions through which their desires, sense of identity, and memories are replicated and then sold back to them as products." How perfect is that? He also talked about the history of mankind, how we arrived at where we are. He said, "Enlightenment sought to end mysticism and myth but only changed its shape, and authoritative structure... now any fool with a computer can start his own religion. Our measuring sticks and boson detectors ironically made the world more scary and dark and in need of a loving mother... all we are left with now is our apathy our laziness our dead imaginations and piles of garbage... we have manifested the tools of the apocalypse, for all the better, because ours is a society hardly worth saving." A bit overly pessimistic for my taste, but nonetheless poignant.

The button unclicked, decompressed. The recorded voice was extinguished. A human voice- proximal- "I have been doing this for a long time, M. For years and years I tried my best to enlighten people- or at least to speak my truth, uncensored and from my heart. Jesus, I practically wished the Knockout into existence. And when it came, I thought it was an opportunity. I thought the sun had come to our rescue."

Mickey reacted, "Wait- the solar flare?"

Zevi grinned between his gaunt cheeks. "Didn't we talk about this last time you were here? I mean, how could anyone have missed that aurora?"

Mickey scrunched her face to one side in agreement. Then her face relaxed. Calm. "Why did you stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Being an activist."

Puzzled, rubbing his nose- "What do you call this operation?"

"This is violence. This is war."

"Your words, M. Your perception."

Mickey, in that instant, could understand why Inrini chose Martin over her libertine brother. There was something irreproachable in Zevi she couldn't understand, something that quietly distressed her. "So what do you call it? How do you perceive it?"

Matter of fact, Zevi nearly yawned at the obviousness of it- flippant- "I call it bravery. I see it as a noble struggle. I see it as the last real thing worth doing in this world."

"Going to die?"

An electric jolt, "Going to live! In a world where there isn't anything worth living for- this is the only stop on the map that counts. That's how I see it. That's how I *live* it. You think I send people to their deaths for fun? On some power trip, some ego trip? Men and women come here with desperation in their eyes. And be damn sure I mourn each and every one of them who doesn't come back. Be damn sure. I feel for you. I'm sorry for what happened to Paul. But this isn't about me. It's about him. Why *he* came here. What *he* was looking for."

"You didn't even know him- you filled his head with this violent-"

Interjecting, a jab- then a pause- "Look look look- you don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

"He loved you. I could read it all over him when we first made acquaintances. Yes! That man loved you like something terrible. But he came here when he realized he couldn't have you- this was the last noble thing for him to do. To be part of the resistance. He didn't come here because of me. He came here because of *you*."

Disoriented, a punch in the kidney- falling into herself- "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know more than I ever wanted to. I lost friends. I lost family. I've watched the **PLU** operate for more than five years. I have been here, on the front lines, trying to make a stand in a world that has lost its damn nerve. I treat this with the utmost respect- and rightly so. This is life and death."

Frustrated, unnerved- "Where's the life then?"

Zevi attempted to level with her, "Let me ask you a question. What would you have me do? Fix up a soapbox and go back out onto Michigan Avenue? Convert municipal workers on their way into the high rises? Selectman on their way home to dinner? Don't be naïve. You're not a kid anymore. Violence is the only meaningful response we're left with. Grow up. Accept it. And to be perfectly honest, we waited too long to respond."

Mickey wouldn't condone it. Silent.

Zevi tried to be as sympathetic as he could muster- for all her naivete, for all her pseudoreligious visionary strangeness, he saw a bit of himself in the girl. "We're all that's left. Me, you, a few others- there aren't many. People are plugged in day and night. The ones that aren't are either too scared to squeak, or wear a **PLU** badge- our numbers are shrinking. But it's up to us. There's a better life to be lived. We can live it. We need to act. We have to meet the enemy. It's going to require some amount of sacrifice. We're going to have to pay in blood."

Mickey repudiated him, "It doesn't have to be violent. Paul didn't have to die for a change to happen. I don't believe you."

Zevi reached into his pocket. "I have to show you something." A piece of paper, unfolded, handed over- Mickey unpacks the words- a message, typed out- translated- encrypted, de-crypted:

DEVELOPMENT OPEX- signal PASS 616263

CONFIRMED- Sequence VgM Capstone 4-7 final

CONFIRMED- item 147.a.2. Conjunctive antibodies (Mab) isolated.

CONFIRMED- item 154.c.9. Awaiting delivery instruction.

Process Capability CONFIRMED- item 122

Operational Supply Chain CONFIRMED- see ATTACHED matrices- item 142.d.6

Mickey handed the paper back. "Now you're going to tell me what this means."

"VGM- viral genetic material. A weapon. A biologic. It means genocide. It means final solution, holocaust."

Incredulous, she repeated back to him, "Holocaust?"

Zevi continued, "This is what they have been planning behind the scenes all these years. It makes perfect sense, too. They're taking advantage of the opportunity. They're operating under the same premises as they always have- to take everything from everybody at all costs. And this is it. No more fighting over resources. No more maintaining the program. No more problems. They want to kill us and recreate their psychopathic reinterpretation of the Garden of Eden. And you want nonviolence? You want Gandhi's march to the sea? You still want all of that, knowing they'd have you buried and treated like an infection?" She asked, "So what if you told people the truth then? Share this?"

Zevi groaned, "The people? Fuck the people! People forgot! They forgot how to look each other in the eyes, say what they felt, mean what they said! I've fought for single mothers, for bankrupt farmers, for immigrants, for children- I've tried. I've tried harder than I could begin to explain. I love the individual- I do, I love the person- but after everything- you can't trust people."

"Then what makes you any different than them? If people are the problem? Isn't that the same logic they have been using?"

Zevi leaned back on one of the concrete walls. Cracked, dripping with rust, rainwater. Salt. Decay. "I've never lost faith in the individual. And I have accepted the fact that you can't have one without the other. Every person is part of a group of people. The two are not mutually exclusive, unfortunately. But I still believe."

"So why not tell the truth?"

"They've been away from the truth for so long- most of them wouldn't know what to do with it. They would deny the possibility of such an atrocity. They wouldn't be able to fathom it."

Mickey responded, "You don't trust them enough."

Zevi scratched his head, genuine. "You're right." He thought to put a hand on Mickey's shoulder, but declined his impulse, "But I do trust some. And I trust you. And now you know the truth."

Mickey still was not satisfied. "If you trust me, then why not try my plan? Why not help me? Why does it have to be about your cause? There is another option. I'm putting it right in front of you."

Zevi approached Mickey, close, face to face- he took umbrage to her remark and intended for her to know it. "My cause? Yes, it is my cause. It's also the cause of the downtrodden, the oppressed- give me your tired, your hungry, your poor! It's our cause! And M, if you accepted the truth- it would be your cause too. Don't question my motivation, or accuse me of self-aggrandizement. I've put everything on the line. You hardly know anything about me- or yourself."

"And you're not lost, you know something?" Mickey responded, growing truculent, "Because you have a scrap of paper with some jumbled words on it?"

"You think this is a gimmick?" He forced the paper in front of her nose. "Do I look like I'm one for practical jokes? It's an extinction level event."

Incredulous, "From one message? You figured all that out?"

Zevi folded up the paper. "My team has intercepted hundreds of messages. It wasn't until recently that we've been able to decode them." Back into his pocket- "This was picked up two months ago. We decoded it yesterday."

"You could be creating propaganda the same way they are."

Zevi chuckled. "See what I mean? This is my case and point. You don't want truth! You want television, Pepsi Cola and DVD rentals! You want the illusion. You're starved for the illusion!" Exhaling audibly, "If you don't accept it, how can they? You've had the visions. You told me about the table. This is the table. These are the men. This is what they intend to do."

Mickey scratched her cheek. Her hair was terribly mangled- she hadn't washed or bathed in weeks- the awfulness of her physical body collided with a feeling of failure, a notion of complete inadequacy- and naivete. She had seen the vision. She knew this is what was coming. Why was she fighting the truth? "How could anybody possibly go through with something like that?"

"You will never understand it because you have something they don't- a human soul. Their kind, they don't operate on the same playing field as you or I do. They have completely deluded themselves. They believe, they truly believe, that they are the chosen, rightful inheritors to the planet. Biblical-level sociopathy, far beyond any psychiatric treatment. They have already answered to God. They are fulfilling His plan. And all of us- you, me, everyone you know, everyone out there- we are standing in the way. Listen, I know this is a whole lot to lay on somebody at once- but you need to catch up. This is really happening. Today. Right now."

"So they wipe us out, they have all the resources, all the technology- they start over."

"Exactly. They become colonists. But instead of embarking on a voyage to a new world- they create one- by destroying ours. By destroying the one we all live in. Point blank. Full stop."

Mickey wasn't as shocked as Zevi would have predicted. She stared into his eyes. The men at the table. The scientist. "I saw it. I saw them, but I didn't want-"

Zevi leaned forward. He whispered, annunciating each word, "You didn't want the truth."

A light deep in the bunker shut off. Mickey closed her eyes for a moment. Her thought pattern shifted. There was no time, calculating- "So what do we do? How long do you think we have?"

"Based on a number of factors- our estimates are somewhere on the order of months. We have no idea what kind of production scale they are working with- and we can only assume they have the basic infrastructure already in place. At best, I'd say 120 days. But that's from the date of the message. So cut that in half. Every day is one day less, one day closer."

Mickey considered the options. "Who else knows about this?"

"The people on my team who need to know."

“What if we worked together?”

Zevi replied, “We are working together. I’m waiting for you to get on board.”

“I’m waiting for you. You go your way, fight, bomb them, shoot them. Do it. I’m not judging you for it. But I need to go mine. I need your help.”

“You and Marty, the plan?”

“Yes.”

Zevi, acerbic, but resigned- “Alright then. Sing us into salvation. Fine. I’ll connect you to my contact, the hacker- I’ll loan you the money, the equipment. Alright? I’ll be listening. I’ll be hoping. But I have a feeling the only sounds either of us are going to hear are bullets from my squads. And if you don’t succeed, remember that you took away from precious resources at the final hour. We have this one chance for a last stand. So that’s on you, M.”

“That’s on me.”

“Mickey with her M, with her visions- I’m rooting for you. I really am. I hope one of us is right and the other is wrong. But I can’t stick around for the lesson.” Zevi reached out his hand, “My condolences about your friend Paul. I’m sorry. I’ll arrange everything as I promised. I wish you would stay, but I understand why you have to go.”

A portion of Zevi’s speech had been cut off from that night- a final word to his audience in the ballroom, from the pulpit:

There are two options as I see it. We can either allow this age to pass, remembered by nobody as the last song of humanity, our final strokes paddling down the eschaton, OR we can embrace our struggle, overturn the powers that be, and adopt a new way of life. We can start anew with the hard lessons we’ve learned. There’s no middle ground. We get to decide. Not them. Us. What to keep and what to discard. We still have a choice. Let’s honor that choice while it is still available. One day, sooner than later, it won’t be.

-O-

Mickey had been accosted by a man outside of Paul’s apartment, a neighbor anxious to talk. She hadn’t been back to Paul’s since their first night in the Catacombs. She had spent most of her time in the underground, but she had to resurface to gather a few of her possessions.

She listened to the old man for a couple of minutes, ranting and raving, then she granted him a polite hand wave before rebuking him, “I don’t mean to offend you, but none of that happened.”

Gruff, “What? How the hell would you know?”

Mickey responded, “I lived out in rural Indiana for five years after the Knockout before I came to the city. There were no terrorists. The **AGCT** (*Administration of Governance and Counterterrorism*) took my father’s house and our farm. They’re the ones that killed people in the Interzones. I met a brother and sister out there, they had been attacked- not by terrorists, but by our own government.”

Genuinely confounded- startled almost- he grimaced then said, “How can that be? Everyone in the Interzone is either dead or in a lawless gang. It’s all over the news. It’s common knowledge.”

“Whatever it is, whoever told you- it’s not the truth.”

He scratched at a whiskered chin, a tight, round chin which hovered over a fleshy pouch of fatty gelatinous skin that hung clam-belly’d off his neck. A tall man. A boxy set of shoulders, arms that hung down next to him not off his sides- a healthy waistline- a low forehead- a man who was rarely wrong. A man who followed the rules. Who believed. A believing face, a ‘retired from thirty years of company service’ face, a rule following face, a church going face. “If you were out there, how did you manage the radiation- how did you survive the reactor meltdowns?”

“The reactor meltdowns?”

“After the attack- the nuclear power plants, the explosions- most of the country became destabilized. The control systems were destroyed, the cooling stations- there were meltdowns. Radiation leaks big as Chernobyl. Across the whole damn country. I saw pictures. Explain that.”

Trying her best not to be confrontational, Mickey uttered, “There wasn’t a single radiation leak by my house. Put it this way- if there was, I never saw any of the effects. I grew vegetables in a garden. I grew corn, potatoes. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He guffawed- “You mean to tell me all them papers, every report- there’s no way. They had pictures. They couldn’t have made that stuff up.”

“I don’t know, I’m sorry. I really am- I didn’t see any of the reports. They didn’t bring the papers to my town.”

Backed into a corner, his tone shifted- vindictive, defensive- taking it personally- “There’s no reason to be a liar. To stir up trouble.”

Mickey was losing patience. She stared up at a single lightbulb in the hallway, suspended, until it distorted her vision. Self-inflicted. “Nobody is lying. The only time I was ever in any danger was when the **AGCT** showed up.” She rubbed her forehead.

Disbelief- he continued to scramble, “There are gangs out there killing people, raping women, children- it’s a massacre. I know people who lost loved ones. I damn well do. You insult them!”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I really am.”

The man took her up and down with a suspicious glare- the grumbling stalwart rebuked her, “They’re UNDOX, they do horrible things. Terrible things to folks. And you- well, I don’t know how else to see it other than you’re a damn liar, and a troublemaker.”

Annoyed by canards, annoyed by his judgement, annoyed and irritated, pinching her eyelids tight, “My father died. Everyone in my town left. I lived alone, then the **AGCT** took my home away from me and put me on the run. That’s what happened to me. That’s how I got here. And if you call me a liar, one more time,” Mickey glared at him, her voice growled, “I will cut your fucking throat, old man. I will cut it and watch you bleed. You don’t know a thing about me. I made it up here on a train from St. Louis after a friend traded his life for mine. He’s dead! Just like my father! The only friend I knew in the world, he sacrificed himself so I could make my way! And the only people I was ever scared of while I was travelling were the armed guards and uniformed officers in **AGCT** colors! So don’t call me no liar!”

Puttering like a dying engine, “**AGTC- AGCT**’s been trying to clean things up, trying to bring folks to the cities to rebuild and clear all the scum away.”

Mickey cleared her throat. “Rebuild? What have you seen built lately? Come on! Wake up and smell the compost! You’ve been lied to. They’ve been trying to round everyone up to keep them under control, until their next move. *The Sun Times*, that paper you’ve been reading, it’s full of lies. It’s no different than how the news used to be- CNN, FOX- it hasn’t changed. People who control the truth- they don’t want you to know it. They’ve been feeding you distractions. They mean to keep you scared, and keep you believing in their make-believe world so you don’t smell the real one! The rank mess under your nose!”

Scoffing, he pinched at his waddle, “I think I’d be able to tell the difference,” like Math class, a wooden pointer, explaining right from wrong with the definitions on the board, a finger wags at Mickey, “I’ve been around a lot longer than you, for one-”

Mickey raised her voice, “Listen!” The man peered at her, distrusting. Mickey took a breath. “When the power shut down, when everything stopped working- something unexpected happened, something nobody could have predicted.” A vision of Paul flashed across her internal landscape- his rudraksha beads on his wrists, his thin cheeks, his wiry verve and vim before it all happened- “A solar flare, a solar wind- an electromagnetic blast hit the planet. It fried up the technology, the circuit boards. The government made up a story. They lied to us, to you and to me. Then they forced us into the cities. To live like animals. To live like hamsters with a little dispenser of sugar water in the corner of our cage- the Ter(mina)ls. They’re waiting until their next move.”

“You say it like, like you know something about it? Next move- what on earth do you know? Miss Southern Indiana- and you’ve figured it out what they mean to do?”

There was no turning back for Mickey. The information had been withheld long enough. He needed to know. “I know people. I know people who are hungry for the truth. Transmissions have been intercepted. They’ve been decoded. The **AGCT** is planning something awful. A final solution- they’re planning to eradicate everyone in the cities with a fatal virus. And they’re not far from doing it.”

He grunted, then laughed. He stomped a foot. “Woohee! I used to hear about people like you. I sure did. Conspiracy theorists! Alien hunters!” Clinging to his safety, clinging to the articles, the broadcasts, his duty as a citizen, clinging to his rightness- he snarled, “What a bunch of garbage. And not only is it garbage, but it’s illegal, too. What you’re saying is treason, do you understand?”

Calm, hands at her sides, unclenching her fists, Mickey responded, “It’s the truth.”

Emphatic, motioning his hands- apoplexy occurred- his bags dropped to the ground next to his worn brown shoes, “Be gone! Don’t talk to me, don’t come near me, you hear? I don’t want anything to do with your smut! In fact I ought to go report you, so I don’t get tied up in your mess of bologna!”

Mickey was resolved. “You asked me questions. I answered them.”

“No- you made up a bunch of nonsense!” Shaking his head, “No, no! No! Shame on you- trying to disrepute our great nation! Shame on you!”

Mickey turned away from the man.

Strangers huddled at their doors, set their ears on the cold steel, and listened. The man promptly left the elevator landing and walked down the hall. He turned a key and left Mickey in the hall. Locks fixed themselves. Ears continued to listen. Mickey’s shoulders slumped. She exhaled. It wasn’t her nature to be so harsh. Underneath it- pity.

Pity, then horrible frustration.

She had been confronted by the impossible barrier: people. Zevi was right. They were scared fools. Sheep. Anal sphincters on sheep. Feces in the last folds of sheep colons. Flies on grapey turds piled high and melting out from the sphincters of sheep. The quotidian citizen- who fixed supper in the kitchen as your mother, who idled to work as your father, who ran around recess playgrounds at school as your brothers and your sisters- ordinary people- aunts and uncles at Christmas parties, drivers on the morning commute, backs of heads from your seat in a movie theatre the lights blaring, children in parks, restaurants noisy and full, gameday cheers and Cracker Jack glee- everywhere, everyone- unwilling to accept the truth. Unable think past basic programming.

Maybe there is nothing we can do.

Maybe it’s for the better.

Without warning, the old man peered out through a crack in his door. A bronze key in the lock- whispering down the hallway, “Hey- Southern Indiana. Over here.”

Mickey had been gazing down the corridor, upset. She turned around, towards him.

His voice went even quieter, “Suppose for a minute- suppose you’re right. Suppose you got the rub. Why isn’t anybody else savvy? Why are you the only one who’s on to what’s happening?”

Mickey found his eyes, joined, “There are others.”

The man considered it. “Why don’t you come in here for a second? I- let’s hear some more. I want to hear what else you got to say. Even if you are from the land of no shoelaces.”

“No shoelaces?”

Grinning, the old man, “That’s what we called the pscyh ward, back in the day.”

Mickey chuckled, cracked her neck, and headed towards the faintly open doorway- pleasantly surprised.

-O-

Immediately, the pecuniary systems of the world were exposed- digital forms of wealth were erased. Commodities became solidified. Stocks, bonds, futures, options, each and every fantastic method of make-believe financialization was rendered null and void-

invisible wealth was laid bare at its core. Millionaires evaporated into paupers overnight. Then the **AGCT** (*Administration of Governance and Counterterrorism*) collected any remaining droplets of condensation. Currencies around the globe were destroyed by inflation, devalued to the worth of the materials they were comprised of- copper, nickel, zinc. Hyperinflation. Destabilization. Fiat money became useless.

There was no need for banks or such institutions- the whole infrastructure, the whole façade had crumbled. The **AGCT**, once back online, controlled access to credits, controlled every ledger, controlled every Access point and every transaction.

Raw, natural resources- the original king makers. The gold standard. Physical, tangible goods- that's where focus shifted. The value of bulk material became impossible to evaluate- those in a position to do, with those resources at their disposal, made predictable power grabs. The **AGCT's** top layers included those individuals at the head of major industries- defense and military, agriculture and food, water and sanitation, mining, oil refinery and extraction, chemical compounding. Shop floors. Construction equipment. Reality-based objects became important again. Things, things you could hold- things became important again.

And most importantly- a muscle had to be flexed to ensure order and control over those resources. So corporate overlords made quick to align themselves with military personnel. America's military was expeditiously and furtively consolidated. Generals, defense industry leaders- agreements were made. Soldiers with guns simply took orders from the next rank up, because that's what soldiers were trained to do. Nobody ever questioned- *where do these orders ultimately come from?*

The military personnel, understanding the volatile nature of the situation, resorted to tried and true tactics. They recruited thugs, gangs, strong men and mafiosos- they identified who would most likely challenge their authority, then drew up alliances. They recruited those who were equally hungry for power, and equal in their ability to operate without moral compunction. District officers, aldermen, representatives- men designated by the **AGCT**- they doled out indulgences, and local strongmen were allowed to prosper. The **AGCT** leaders kept them hungry, kept them greedy and kept them moving. Homes were foreclosed. Stores were consolidated and rebranded. Neighborhoods were brought to submission. The countryside, the spaces between metropolitan regions- a carte blanche was awarded to the most crooked, the most corrupt and greedy sect of gangsters the **AGCT** could find. "Drive them out." That was the order. "Take whatever you want. Move the living bodies into the cities. Don't worry about burying the dead ones."

The quotidian citizen was scared. The quotidian citizen wanted somebody in charge. The quotidian citizen wanted to hear from the President, the Congress. The new regime understood these desires well. The American government was stripped of its egalitarian values, but figureheads were preserved. Statesmen were allowed to remain in name only- Senators passed no bills, the courts made no rulings- at least independently. The President appeared on the radio six months after the Knockout- it was a sensational victory. Order had been restored. Though the President was not in charge. The Congress was not in charge. The People were not in charge. A veiled command was dictating every action behind the scenes. An elite, an illuminati- they impressed their will over the entire

landscape. They created more positions and posts. They were clever enough to build a complicated reporting structure that not only functioned, but also kept everyone obeying orders entirely in the dark. Conversations never occurred between the executive team and middle management. And perhaps their genius was rooted in a fundamental axiom which they all agreed to, in principle: they never allowed for a singular despot to emerge.

Thus, the **AGCT** was created and solidified- Democrats and Republicans, united. Centralized, distilled- a monolith emerged in the wake of the disaster. Branded as a 'New Freedom,' branded with typical patriotic fervor, bolstered by claims to justice and authority, the **AGCT** acted without checks or balances. They acted on behalf of the citizenry's interest. A guiding hand. A humble servant. A caring parent. We would get past this crisis together. We would come out the other end stronger, better for it. The challenge would be met. America would be great again. The **AGCT** was going to get you there. The **AGCT** was going to get us there. Trust them. Trust us.

-O-

Li twisted her hair. "This is *not* what I was expecting. Wow. You guys are ambitious. Really. Like- can I ask a question? Who do you all work for?"

Martin wasn't convinced. "What does it matter to you?"

Backstage after a gig. Martin, Mickey, Inrini, and Li. Nate had excused himself in order to make a date in one of his private bathrooms.

Mickey stopped Martin. "We don't work for anybody. We have no allegiance. We got help from Zevi, but we don't answer to him. We aren't with any group."

"Wait a second. So- you're telling me, you like dreamed this up on your own?"

Martin, "You saw what she can do."

Li, "Sure. And don't get me wrong, like- wow. That was cool. Super cool. I've never taken drugs before and now I'm like, maybe I should have been. Right? But- but that doesn't mean- I don't mean to be rude- but some cool, trippy stuff in a club- it's a little amateur hour, you know? To think- okay, let's do this across the whole city, trip everyone out, and like, take over the **AGCT**. You know what I mean?"

Martin defended his friends, his own idea, "Amateur hour? That's rich. Listen, if you-"

Mickey steered towards a less tumultuous course- "Li, you've seen our plan. We have the money for the equipment. We trust your work. This is for real."

Martin mumbled, "Amateur? I'm a fucking artist, alright!"

Mickey looked at him. He stopped.

Li went over a scrap pile of documents, plans, which she had been handed. "Even- okay- okay- let's say I can rig this up, let's say I can program everything, let's say we get all our duckies in a row- there's still a big problem. Alright. We have to plug into their mainframe. Right? And their mainframe- it's not remote. It won't work. We can't get the access codes. We have to physically, like, stroll up and connect to the node."

Nobody said a word.

Li chuckled, "I'm sorry, like- here is a crucial part. The nodes are like super protected. They're- like you have to go into **AGCT** building, plug into **AGCT** terminal. The security is Fort Knox style. It's super intense. Nobody has hacked in before."

Mickey reassured her, "Leave that piece to us. We can get you in safely."

Li's eyebrows raised. "Okay- well- hey, mind if I take a pull?" She gestured towards a bottle.

Inrini giggled, "Sure you're old enough for that?"

Li jerked the fifth from off the glass table, throttled down a long rip, then wiped her hand across her mouth. She passed the bottle to Inrini, seated cross-legged on a chair.

Mickey continued, "We'll have the equipment in three days. Can you meet us then?"

"Three days?"

"Three days."

"Pretty anxious?"

Mickey went for the bottle. "That might not even be enough time."

Li, confused, "Okay- let's cut the bullshit. It's always better- alright- when there's no bullshit. Bullshit free zone. That's when I work best- okay? This is why I asked before. Who do you work for? What do you know?"

Mickey sighed. "AGCT is up there, right now, preparing to release a biological weapon across the entire city. We know we have less than two months- but we might literally be at the final days. Every second is one second closer. There's something terrible coming. Something final, for all of us."

Li's heart skipped a beat. Her grandfather- a memory- his words- *they'll wipe us out if we're not careful.*

Martin stepped forward, "With that being said, let's figure out the most important part of this before we go any further."

Li looked at him. "What's that?"

"How much?"

"How much what?"

"How much is it going to cost, for your services?"

Li glanced over the room, over the faces- "Listen- if what you say is true, then this job isn't about credits. This one is for me. Personal. Three days- alright? Three days. Let's do it."

-O-

"Feels like there's more troops around, don't it?"

"There's always soldiers walking around the streets."

"Nah. There's more of 'em. Something's going down."

-O-

What happens the day after the revolution? After Parliament is cleared out, after the cardinal's nephews' sinecures are removed, after the bishops' miters and robes are burned and his jewels pawned, after the pork barrel is wiped clean, after the headquarters are burned down, after the heads roll guillotine'd and bloody? What's next, what now? What economic or political model replaces late-stage capitalism? Where do people turn to? Local democracy and community co-ops, to face radical global human problems? Archaic welfare notions around social democracy, to operate in a digital and hyper-complex world? How is the power restructured, how is it redistributed? Who could even go about directing a path forward?

What happens when the debt constricted account manager has no job to return to or accounts to manage- what does he care about "transcending the sensuous" or "commodity fetishism," what does it matter the moral issues involving any exploitation of objects and people and images and services- he has mouths to feed, kids? To him, late-stage capitalism might have been a karmic boon. A reward. AMAZON, NIKE, COCA COLA, McDONALDS- what if this is his promised land flowing with ketchup and neon polymer? What if he suffered through millions of lifetimes of denigration and starvation and cracked ribs and broken teeth and infected reproductive organs to make it here? There's a serious argument to be made here. This generation, with the advances in healthcare, technology- to be a white male in the twenty first century American democracy- there's been no better place to land in human history, in terms of being an citizen of a society. None better. Hands down.

What if this is his heaven?

What if all the dissenters are wrong?

What if this is as good as it ever could have been?

Maybe praxis only matters when there is a position available in which it can be exercised. Maybe theory is nothing more than mental gymnastics, an aesthetic and rhetorical trance tumbled and cartwheeling sideways with references and footnotes and models, pretty to look at but lacking vigor, lacking the real, lacking any dynamic element. Maybe the power structures in place want you to believe there is no alternative- to continue arguing over why this or that may or may not be viable. Maybe there isn't a viable option, right now, but only because the opportunity has not been presented to establish a new method, a new practice, a new society. Because the space is cluttered.

Cluttered until the paternalistic billionaire worldview of wealth accumulation is disavowed, the idolators cleansed. Cluttered until we stop letting the accumulators pretend to be the redistributors. Cluttered until we call out their philanthropic tax havens. Cluttered until the banks stop loaning them exorbitant loans at hyper-low interest rates, printing money and essentially hedging their own positions against a hyper-inflation they create.

Necessity breeds design.

What happens when a void is created, when one power structure is toppled, when the lead gang is busted? New gangs show up. New structures form. New alliances bud.

Maybe shifting the power to the people doesn't even make sense. Maybe we need to focus on novel systems of value, examine our relationships within and among the human community- to itself, to the planet, to the universe- and establish new paradigms. Maybe those concepts with regards to what the human community is, or can be, have not yet been formulated in the mind of anyone born- as of right now.

Regardless. Too big is how they want the problem described. Too complicated is how they want the solutions to appear. What they most desperately want is for you to believe this is heaven, that we've made it, and this is as good as it could get.

Does this feel like heaven to you?

-O-

I was twelve years old when the Knockout happened. Like, I remember my dad's face- maybe it was an hour or two after the lights went out- he was freaking out so hard about his bank account, his money. "I have to get to the bank. Stay here!" I remember that was the first thing he said after none of the computers turned on, after his cell phone shut down, when people started screaming down the hallway. He left and he didn't come home that night. He ran to his bank and waited there with a thousand other people. The doors were locked. The managers put up a sign and said they would open the following Monday. He waited in line without food until Monday morning, no joke. The bank didn't open. He never recouped his money. Nobody did. He came home stressed out, like crazy. But my dad was always stressed. He always was down about work, about bills. I don't know what I thought- I was a kid- I wanted to watch videos on my mom's phone. I cried about not having her cellphone a couple of times. Which is funny, right? Oh well. That's the kind of evaluation that was going on in my twelve-year-old brain at the time. Like, I didn't know what the hell was happening.

When I think about it now- everyone should have been freaking out like way more. If I was my age, now, and it happened- I would be going crazy! Every digital infrastructure- the cloud- the internet- like, it evaporated! Poof. After the hard drives and servers fried- there was nothing. Everything disappeared. It's not like there was a backup to the backups. There wasn't an aluminum filing cabinet with physical documents somewhere offshore- like, everything was gone. A world that had evolved beyond hard copies- it still blows my mind. Like, in a flash, in one second- between moments- trillions of dollars disappears. Every medical record. Every conversation. So many books, music. Every treasured voicemail or text

message. Diaries. Photo albums. So many folks' most prized, dearest possessions. It's unreal. It blows my mind still. I would have lost it, totally.

But it's like- it's not that people cared about books or music, or even pictures- it was the money that mattered. Everyone wanted their money back. My dad- everybody did. Everything they heard- first it was like 'there would be a reconciliation.' Then, it was like 'there would be a reallocation.' Then, 'there would be applications.' Then, 'there would be a universal income package.' Waiting around, promise after promise- finally when the *Relief Commission* took over the messaging changed. People would be 'given what they needed.' People would be 'provided for at the State's discretion.' My father sent letters to congressmen, the mayor, aldermen, city officials- can you believe that? Like, this random Polish guy, writing letters to a fake congressman- it's hilarious. I loved my dad, he was such a cute guy- but this was like crazy. He wanted to believe so bad. But obviously, okay- he never received a response back.

The first days were exciting, like- you were presented with a new challenge as time went on. It was fun for me, okay- the lights won't turn on. Find a candle. The computer doesn't work. Read a book. The food went bad in the refrigerator. Get ice for a cooler, like, get some duct tape. It was like solving little problems- I loved puzzles. It was cool. But obviously, okay- there were big problems. Stoplights don't work. Nobody can get gas. Nobody could make a phone call. Nobody could turn on their television or radio. Hospitals have no power, no medicine. But I was twelve, like- I wasn't thinking about somebody in an airplane when the circuits fried. I was in my little world.

I remember people in our neighborhoods, trying to understand what happened. People started working each other into frenzies- lots of conspiracy talk, fear- people went to the stores, tried to buy up as much food as they could. It finally got scary- like, I think my parents really flipped out when they understood the extent, that every amenity run by a computer or operated by a piece of electronic equipment was useless. Like dead. The whole power grid was down. And then, like when we heard about the nuclear reactors losing the ability to adequately cool the cores- that was a big story, alright. That freaked me out. A radioactive wastelands spreading across the interior of the country- I remember like, that's what first really scared me. Holy crap. Not good.

Then I remember my dad going to those Assemblies. Remember those? It was like set up in tiers- at town, city, state levels- and they were advertised as open forums, for questions- but that's where the directives first came out. People were sent home with official messages from the President, from Congress. So these Assemblies became these big pacifying events. Because at first there was a chance it could all go towards a mob mentality.

People didn't know what to do- most couldn't perform their jobs because now their jobs were irrelevant. Like, can you imagine the purpose of a social media influencer or a digital marketing executive without the internet? What the hell did they do? They must have flipped out. I would have.

I mean, there were some riots, some chaos- that did happen. People like tested the waters- stormed supermarkets, busted up luxury storefronts- I remember my grandfather, he said they were "gestures of panic." Like, but then the organized criminals started marauding- cars, houses, jewelry, hostages- that was scary shit. When that started- that and the reactors- that lawlessness- I was freaked out. I knew what rape was. I knew about some bad stuff- I carried a knife on me.

But then the military stepped in. I remember the tanks, the uniforms and berets, the automatic rifles hanging off their shoulders- they were going to kill somebody if they had to, and they did. And the crazy thing was, we were happy to see them. We welcomed them. I cheered those guys on, like- alright- let's go!

Crazy, right? Because that's basically when the **TGCA** (*True Government and Citizens Alliance*) was established.

A new message went out- "We need to beat the terrorists." I remember that speech the President gave on the radio- they set up these makeshift loudspeakers, they played it everywhere in the city over and over. It had been maybe three or four months- it was a miracle, right? Like, the radio is back- woo hoo!

What a bunch of idiots. He told us a terrorist group had knocked out the power, the grid. The terrorists were after us. He was consolidating the three branches into one- into the **TGCA** - and everyone in Washington was banding together find the terrorists. He made all these promises, assurances. He made up these timelines. I look back, right- I'm like, where was anybody who lived through 9/11? Didn't some alarm bells go off? It was complete propaganda. But it was brilliant. The fact they could get loudspeakers working- folks trusted everything they heard because they had to, they were so desperate to go back to the way things were. And that trust brought with it a sense of order, and order was restored. Like, it was brilliant what they did. I bought it, I mean- I was thirteen, but still. The gangs were cleared up- for a while. People got food. People got assurance. More Assemblies.

Hindsight, you know? But like I can empathize with my parents- they were totally unprepared for the Knockout. Totally.

I remember one of my aunts would always be complaining on, "Amazon still owes me a new set of dishtowels." She had ordered these dishtowels the day before the Knockout. She talked about those dishtowels for the next four years, like, no joke. I mean- the whole dream of this safe, comfortable middle-class insulation had slipped out of lucidity- people couldn't deal.

I also, weirdly, like I distinctly remember lots of fires in the beginning. Folks weren't used to candles, so they weren't careful. Fire departments weren't dependable- I watched an entire building on our block go up in flames. My mother, you know she was Chinese- strict, like crazy- she was so, so diligent about making sure the candles were in good order, making sure we had light and didn't waste matches or lighters. She watched those people outside that burning building, she would just go *tsk tsk*.

There were a lot of funerals. I remember my father saying something to that effect - "I wear this black suit and tie more than my blue jeans." A bunch of my cousins, aunties- my family was pretty big. Medicines ran out for a little while, and when they came back they were too expensive for most people. But my dad, like, he didn't try to explain any of it in terms of heaven or God's will or an afterlife or anything- the tragic beauty of the human condition, right? No, he had nothing- he couldn't find a spin on any of it. In some ways, I hate to say it, it was easier for people who went down in the beginning with their blood vessels exploding or their infections spreading. Like, at least it was over quick.

My father never got his money or his job back, but my mother was a nurse, so she went back to work pretty soon after. Chinese dedication, right? She was happy to take on the breadwinner role. I think it went to her head. Sometimes when she had a few drinks, she liked to say she knew it was coming. A lot of people said that kind of stuff. Mostly religious folks- like, it was Jesus' punishment for our wrongdoings, God leading us into the desert, the Devil's work or something- lots of symbols were pawned off, nonsense like that. Religious groups claimed it was a sign- a warning. People started going back to churches. Pamphlets were passed out- JESUS WILL SAVE YOU! It was crazy. Preachers would be out there handwriting these things in markers before the printing presses came back- once companies relearned how to print without computers. But that was only in the beginning, right- eventually, **TGCA** banned all of that.

My dad pouted instead. Like, he used to wonder out loud "Where did all the money go?" Nobody really figured it out. Not that there was like this big use for money anymore. Nobody shopped anymore. No vacations. What would you even do with the money? Soon enough there were **TGCA** sponsored stores, **TGCA** sponsored goods, **TGCA** sponsored everything, and the handouts- like, and then that's all there was. Everything else was shut down.

I got an education, in a hurry. A big part of that came from my grandpa- my mother's father. Like, he was the only one out of all the adults I knew who didn't seem to be losing his mind. He smoked his cigars. He read his old books. He couldn't be bothered by anything! Like he was so funny- he would always be wanting to take me out, go for a walk, let me run around. I think he knew that I would have to find an alternative way then what my parents could offer me. After he set up his canvas army cot in the living room, we spent a lot of time together. We had fun, me and him- like, best times.

After maybe a year, alright- that's when people started noticing things- the lights, the redistricting- there were areas of the city that were marked off, sequestered, blocks and blocks within the city- that's when they built the new transformers. They rebooted, the **TGCA** did- by themselves, protecting themselves- and they hid it from us until the Ter(mina)ls came out. And when the Ter(mina)ls showed up, wow- everything changed. Crazy. People disappeared- to have a taste of the old life- it was nuts. And with that came the credits- **TGCA** Credit Tokens. Now there's like these new economies- vice, right? Prostitution, gambling, drugs. People got some money, got that taste back- it's like then, that's when the city really fell apart.

TAGC (*The American Greatness Compact*) was everywhere by then. It happened quick. "So and so has an uncle at **TAGC** Headquarters; so and so's mother is secretary to the Head of Commerce." You had to have connections. And the **TAGC** lured people in. It turned people on each other. The creation of the UNDOX- it was super smart. They've always been smart these guys, you know? They created a bureaucratic process to prove you weren't a terrorist, to prove you had the right papers- people snitched on each other, people did anything to get closer to the inside. Witch hunts broke families apart. No one could be trusted. The **TAGC** was safety. It was crazy, like- my grandpa used to say "The only thing missing are portraits of Lenin everywhere." It was wild how quick everyone got swept up in it.

Private life was like, if you didn't attend Assemblies, if you didn't attend sanctioned events- people would start to think you were an UNDOX. People didn't go to parties, they didn't have barbecues, they didn't go to bars or clubs, they didn't go to shows. If you weren't at the Ter(mina)ls, you were working or attending a sanctioned event. That was it.

In the first year though it was funny- the **TACG** (*Traditionalists for America's Conservation and Greatness*) had a great strategy, honestly- because they recruited hundreds of retirees to come back to work and show people how things used to get done before the internet. Old-timers, Boomers- they were a prized commodity because they remembered how certain tools works, how things used to get done. My grandpa even found a job to help support our family for a little while. He cut granite. He used to always tell a story about a job he had done, and a guy who said to him, "I never knew a Chinaman could cut granite like that." He was proud of it, like- it was amazing. Lasers had put him out of business- but now without the lasers, my grandfather was called in by a **TACG** sponsored shop, a stone works contractor. He helped run that place for a couple of years, and it brought us plenty of food and credits. My mom was grateful. My dad was angry- super angry. My grandfather, he used to joke, "People still want nice kitchens, even if their appliances don't work." My friend Grace, her grandfather went back into work as a tailor. Apparently, the wealthy still wanted their clothes to fit, too.

Schools didn't open back up for a while, and when they did, because we were a poor family with no real affiliation, I wasn't accepted. I had a few books so I read a lot on my own in the beginning. I liked to draw, I liked to go outside, I hung out with my friends and my grandfather. Losing phones, the internet- that stuff didn't bother me as much because I never really understood what it was to begin with. I was alright with using my hands, my imagination. That was fun for me, like it wasn't a big deal. I guess I was lucky. My grandfather would sometimes like to say, "When all the 'smart' stuff left, folks should have realized how dumb they had gotten." I taught myself what an encyclopedia was, how to write an essay- my mother gave me **TACG** sponsored math books, I shared them with other kids- I also remember learning how to use the knife I was carrying- my grandpa, thanks to him. I remember lots of crime, like, crazy. Lots of folks were taken advantage of. Robberies, murders- vandalism. All sorts of dumb shit. Even with the **TACG**'s security cameras installed- they still had to triple their police forces to keep up with the crime, or at least that's what the newspapers said. Newspapers told us New York, or Freedom One by then, had been cleaned up. It was like, the model for Chicago- Freedom Six. We were next. Consolidation, right? But we didn't see anything change in front of us.

I think I have to stop for a second and explain something that is really hard to understand- like, throughout everything, even the worst of the worst days, right, people thought things would eventually go back to

'normal.' All of the refrigerators and remote-controlled cars and microwave ovens, all the golf-yardage gadgets and WiFi massage robots- they'd come back, like a miracle! Folks believed in this, no doubt. The infrastructure was there- the undersea cables hadn't been damaged- I heard about those cables, constantly. The cables. Wow. The internet can come back! We have the cables!

So- like, fast forward a little- my dad, in like a year and half he was on his deathbed. He had been having issues with his heart already, and because getting medical attention was so difficult- he couldn't fill his prescriptions, he couldn't get himself right- he had a stroke, and then another- I was with him when it happened. I'll never forget the look on his face- like, such a look of pain. So much pain. He really- like, you think I'm hard for saying this, but it probably was for the best. He couldn't make sense of the new world, without his job or money. He ended up hating everybody and everything. He couldn't adapt, alright. And the **TACG** had no place for him. So what was his purpose, you know? He felt worthless.

And after my dad died, my mother just worked- Chinese style, it was all she knew. Overnight shifts, doubles- cleaning the apartment, sleeping days, going to the neighborhood **TACG** meetings- it was alright with me. I guess she was a good nurse and that's what she wanted to do. So I spent more time with grandpa. I used to go visit his friends. His old-school Chinese friends were so funny- like, they had a sense of community. Almost underground community. They used to say that what had happened with the Knockout was for the better- that people had gotten too lazy, too stupid. We needed a lesson. I needed a lesson. My father needed a lesson. I don't know if he learned it or not before he died, but according to them he needed it all the same. They were harsh, right, but at the same time- they made a point.

I remember too my grandpa knew some other folks who used to play music every so often- they'd have to soundproof the apartment. It wasn't sanctioned. But there used to be alarm tests once a month, and when that happened, they would use the sirens as a cover. There weren't any electric instruments- there was a saxophone, a horn, a violin, a guitar. They were older guys, but they could play. A woman would sing old songs with them, with two of her sisters acting as back up- I remember watching them, I was like spellbound. My grandfather would take me with him- I never knew how he got invited. But we'd sit there for an hour, and it was beautiful. My grandfather would smoke and I'd sit on his lap. He would smile at me when he enjoyed a particular segment or run that one of the players took. If that band would have asked me for a name, I would have called them Riot Loveliness. I think that would have been a perfect name. I remember thinking that at the time. I don't know why it's coming back now, but-

I grew apart from my mother over the years. She was protecting her own turf. She was maintaining an image. I mean she did it to keep me safe, I'm sure- but- she was more interested in keeping the carpets clean. She refused to pay for the electricity a vacuum required so she picked over them with tweezers. By then that's how everyone got billed- by the minute, by the wattage- for every kind of utility. And everyone was poor, so no one could afford it. Like I didn't take a hot shower for three or four years. That's the way it was, you know.

That was sort of a funny learning curve- realizing what you really, *really* needed. Simple possessions, simple living- a couple pairs of jeans, some food in the icebox. I was alright with it- when you're young, like, you can adapt. You're resilient. Old people, they so used to having every need met, like, understanding the difference between desires and needs is painful- lots of folks couldn't get past it. But I did okay. Things got simpler. Easier. There were less options. There was less fuss. There was less information- which was almost better. There were less distractions.

And information became like, how can I explain- like more valuable, more personal. Nobody cared to memorize what year Henry Ford was born when GOOGLE existed. But if you happened to be twelve years old reading a book on him, like I was, right, you savored that information. You remember that date five years later- July 30, 1863.

College wasn't an option once I made it to the age when kids used to think about going away to school. There was no pressure because there was nothing to do. There were no entrance exams, no applications. My passion became examining old PC equipment- like, obsessive. I found some books on circuits, I found

a guy in the neighborhood who could teach me some of the math- I loved to mess around with old units. I dove into wiring, hardware. I was like an archaeologist, because obviously none of the equipment worked. But I learned all about microprocessors, welding chips. It was insane passion. And little things moved me along the way.

Time went on around me. The city filled up, more and more people were coming in from the outside. More and more people were dying. Ter(mina)ls kept accepting users. **TACG** grew stronger. UNDOX disappeared. I don't know, like- I saw good sides of human nature, and then not so good ones. Some people didn't do so hot. But people who had a community, people like my grandfather- they did okay. That stuck with me. And I wanted to be okay too because the apocalypse never came. Time kept on going. It's a trip thinking back on all this, like it brings back mixed feelings.

After my grandfather was killed I left for the Catacombs. I had heard about the underground from a few people- once he was gone, I didn't see myself sticking around above street level. My mother didn't care much. I heard about people in the underground who knew what was really going on. Who might have a solution to the **TACG**. Who might have a new way for folks to go. My mother's house was no place for me anymore- like, she didn't have any answers. I didn't even say goodbye. One night I got my documents in order, and headed out.

By then I was looking for answers to questions I heard my grandpa ask, questions I heard the old timers bark. They were skeptical little geezers, alright. They weren't afraid of the **CATG** (*Civilians for American Truth and Greatness*). They didn't believe the propaganda. Eventually, by osmosis or something, I started to think for myself. Like, it didn't make sense why we had to be living the way that we did, especially if electricity and technology were reappearing. They should have helped things along, things should have been better. Resources should have been redistributed. People should have been given a voice. Instead, like this monolith appeared, and that was the **CATG** - they controlled everything- the resources, the rules, the information, the plans. Nobody had a say in anything.

Like I figured out that the **CATG** operated like any other despotic regime. Secretive. Illusive. Ruthless. You couldn't speak out. There were no artists anymore. No opinions, like- parents warned their children about what they could or couldn't say in public. Any dissent was either censored or destroyed. Research institutions, universities- University of Chicago was swallowed up. Renamed- National Institutes of Education Number #370. What the hell was that? I remember thinking that to myself. But most folks weren't concerned about the Bill of Rights- as long as marauding gangs were kept off the streets, most folks were quick to forfeit whatever they had to. They wanted security.

When you treat it like a thought experiment, the Knockout could have like been this crazy reboot. We could, like, used it as an opportunity to wipe the slate clean, take a minute to evaluate where we had gone wrong as individuals, as a society. Maybe that whole social media thing wasn't such a great idea? Maybe all those wars, all those defense contracts- maybe we don't do that again? But folks didn't think that way. And really, like, there wasn't any precedent for folks to evolve- when you think back before the Knockout. Take the climate crisis. Gas cars, right? Folks should have abandoned their cars, we should have forced Ford to go back to production on electric vehicles- we should have pushed the Green agenda- but nobody did. They wanted their pick-up trucks. And now, to see the barriers of the city, the walls of cars, piling towards the sky stack upon stack, if that's not ironic, like, I don't know what is.

After I went underground, after I became more educated about the **GTAC** (*The Government Trust for the American Citizenry*), about politics, about history. In only a couple years, right, I got wise to some facts. And there's no debate as to what purpose the **GTAC** serves and what exactly it is: a fascist plutarchy. Our two-party electoral system of, I'll call it limited democracy, disappeared. Bye bye. The **GTAC** inserted itself as the dominant power. And who are they? They're the same billionaires who were in charge before. They're the same crooks who used tax safe havens- now they create a political safe haven. Those Forbes billionaires, those Republican kingmakers, those Nike executives- they all banded together with the weapons manufacturers and the military chiefs of staff to form this jacked up, uninhibited alliance. They

do whatever they want. They create conditions to prevent even the slightest bit of opposition. Like, it's no mystery. Everything remotely oppositional or defiant has been labeled as 'the other' and demonized. Racial and religious division became these hallmarks of the new doctrine. Xenophobic messaging, scapegoating, a campaign of hatred- and folks bought it.

Well, the majority of folks.

Not everyone.

See, my grandpa's father fought against Communism in China. He was an enemy of the state, a soldier, and he was killed. He was a hero by every account I ever heard. Like, a total legend. And my grandfather hated the **GTAC**- he called them fascist pigs. He would say "I didn't come to America to live like this. I didn't come to be pushed around. You have to stand up to a bully." Towards the end he became very vocal about it. My mother warned him about talking against the **GTAC**. She said he was out of line. I hear her say it to him one morning not long before he was killed.

And that morning- I remember that morning so, so well. The old man had been drinking. There were stretches, days on end, where he couldn't get enough of his homebrew wine. And that stuff, alright, it sent him off. It inflamed his passions. He would go on a bender, then he'd punch the brakes to recover, like, he'd force himself dry for a few months. Then he'd go off again. Like, for whatever reason- boredom, anger, frustration. And that morning, okay, he decided to ramble over to the (W)ard office with an American flag draped over his shoulders- the old flag, the stars and stripes. When he got to the alderman's office, my grandpa walked up to the front desk, asked to speak to the President of the United States, and then, this is crazy- he literally pissed on a hallway carpet. "I piss on you!" After that, you know- it happened quick. A nightstick came out. They cracked him across his temple. And then they brought his body back to our apartment building where- they left him on the sidewalk. We found his body face down like that. His skull had been cracked open- I could see the grey matter, his cortex gooey inside this like canyon of bone. My mother had enough credits saved to pay for a casket, but it was cheaper to pay off a Civil Services worker to sweep him away. And that's what she did. I waited there with him- I fought her on it- they tossed him out like the trash. I'll never forget that. It's like burned into me. And I left, like- I left two or three nights later.

It's no lie- I want vengeance. Like, if I could, right now- I would kill that **GTAC** alderman and his family, his son and two daughters and fat little wife right at their dinner table. I would burn down any one of those local offices. I would. But none of that would do any good, right? Killing a few of them- nothing would change. That's what I learned. I got wise. If you have a weed you want to get rid of, you have to take it out by the roots. You have to dig, right? And I needed to learn how to dig- I think really that's why I headed Underground- that's what drove me to where I am now. That and I finally realized- what else is there to lose?

My mother can go on working and saving her credits, worrying about what the neighbors think of her- that's her business. Nobody in the world gave a damn about me after my grandfather died- until I went underground. I found a community. I found an alternative. Whether your plan works or not- like, it almost doesn't matter. If that makes sense.

-O-

There descended a quiet, a collective reckoning... faces, memories... siblings, parents, cousins, friends... never heard from, disconnected... the violence of the purges, the DOX and UNDOX... brimstone, blood, fire... Mickey walked over to Martin's old gramophone. He had rigged up a crank, like the one her father had made for her. She took a minute, flipping through a box, a bin full of vinyl- everyone watched her. After deliberating, circumspect- a smile, an album, out of its insert and onto the turntable, a sound. "This is one of my favorite albums of all time. I can't believe you have this."

Her fingers savored the feel of the cover- Pastor TL Barrett and the Youth for Christ Choir SINGS!

Martin couldn't help but cry. He couldn't help but think of his brother, his family. "That's a beautiful record, Mickey."

Mickey sat back down. Her father- she saw a perfect image of Herb Gallagher, an astral vision. Incandescent, he looked wonderful. Young. A six-iron in his hand. A lightness in his eyes, a clarity, frank and earnest and childlike, twinkling- his spirit spilled outward from his loving gaze. Mickey felt his presence.

An organ lilted.

The room swelled with sadness, sadness and joy.

Li's dedication was never called into question again.

-O-

Muffled, panting, "They picked up Zevi."

"When?"

"This morning. A whole SWAT team. I watched from across the street."

"Why weren't you at your post?"

"I was."

"Why didn't you do anything?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Your job!"

-O-

Darkness, puddles of water, a door, a doorway- leather boots, military grade laces, damp flannel- rusted steel drain pipes, a siren in the distance- a lock- another door. There was commotion in the room. There were maps, there were bullets, there were hushed tones. A spider kept at a web in the corner. Backpacks, uniforms, disguises. There hadn't been anything of this magnitude assembled since the March 13th insurrection. All of Zevi's ammunition stores, all his remaining officers- everyone had shown up.

Before Mickey presented her plan- before she jumped on her last chance- a moment of conversation, of connection. A hideaway alcove like a cavern in the bottom of a lake. A pair of voices. Two echoes rising up from a well.

Mickey asked, "Where is she?"

"My wife?"

"Yeah."

"I have no idea. I haven't seen her since the beginning, right after the Knockout."

Mickey waited, then, "What happened?"

"My oldest son died- Robert. He got an infection. There was no medicine. Things like that happened. It seems so long ago- we just couldn't do anything- we- we were helpless. And after that- my wife blamed me. She said I could have done more. I- I don't resent her for feeling that way. She took our daughter and she left me I for a **GACT** (*Governance Administration of Compliance and Totality*) official- he had a team of workers come and pack everything out of our condo and they were gone forever. I was served a restraint order to never to see them again."

Mickey couldn't censor herself, reacting, "Jesus, that's--"

"It's okay. I- I had to change. I needed all the pain I got. Five years on the streets, you know? A dead kid. A lost life. But I don't regret anything. When I look back at that, at everything- whoever that person was, he was a fool. A jerk. The person who had all of that stuff. He wasn't grateful. He wasn't happy. It's funny, I can recall this one moment in particular, so distinctly- it was a nondescript kind of day- and I was taking out the trash, and I saw my family in the window- and I was like, 'How did I get myself into this?' I had turned into a miserable old man. I was stuck being this person. That's what I remember feeling. Like there's no way out of this."

Mickey breathed in- she could taste the farm, Tom Paynter's driving range, her room and the computer screen, her mother's buttery onions- "I can relate."

-O-

“You don’t know shit about it, nigga!” A step towards Mickey. “Look at you! Look in the mirror! You know what’s looking back? White girl, middle class, educated- you weren’t raised in no highrise tower stacked on the bones of dope fiends gone dead. You didn’t grow up with no phone, no computer, no toys, no this or that- hell no! What the fuck you think you know? I didn’t have shit. I lived up in a tower. My momma smoked her cigarettes like each day was *the day*, cool? My pops whacked her from the word GO until the day he didn’t come back. Cool? My whole life- chaos. Was pops coming up, or staying down that night- that was my world. And when he came up, he was drunk and he punched. My momma yelled and smoked and fought back ‘til he got her good. All up in the tower! Sesame Street? Looney Tunes? Shit! Teachers didn’t give a fuck. Police wanted to knock us worse than our parents. All we had was each other, and the dream to make it the fuck out- either hoopin’ or slangin’ dope. And I wasn’t getting’ out on no hoop dreams.”

Mickey didn’t respond.

He continued, “You think you lost something when the Knockout hit? You think you deserve it back? Nigga fuck you! I never had it! You coming in here all rowdy, but what’s the truth? The truth is you feel sorry for yourself because you lost all that privilege. Cool? Ain’t nothing’s changed for us! Nothing changed for me after the Knockout! Shit has (*slow, emphatic*) stayed the same. We still the oppressed. You were the oppressor- but now they oppressin’ you! The own hand that fed you- hell no! You late to the party! And the real shit is you want it to go back to the old ways. You want your privilege back! You want your new fuckin’ car, and you want my ass back up in that tower. Hell no! Hell no! You ain’t know shit. Period.”

Mickey felt her digestive acids bubble up into her larynx. She fought them back down. A room full of people, watching her, watching him. “You seem to know a lot about me.”

“Here’s what I know: we been livin’ this shit for four hundred years, nigga! This shit has been more real than you will ever know.”

“What do you want me to prove to you?”

He chuckled sardonically. “You don’t even know what you’re signing up for, nigga. Shit! Here- you fight. You kill or be killed. And you gonna be killed. You gonna be a casualty. You want some biblical shit? I got some for you- Moses never saw no promised land. And you ain’t seein’ it either. This ain’t no game. And even if it was, you got no play.”

Mickey remained silent. But she wasn’t scared. She wasn’t upset. She wasn’t defeated by his logic- she drew inspiration from it, from him, from the passion in his voice and the commitment in his heart- masked by fear, decorated in a crude layer of machismo- but underneath it- she took a step closer to him. “I never said I wanted to see a promised land.”

His eyes squinted, “Then what is it you want?”

Immediate, refined- Mickey responded, “I want to die knowing I did all I could to make it right. Even if it doesn’t make anything right, I did what I could.”

He was taken aback. “You’re bad then? You’re a bad bitch, huh?”

Mickey grinned, “The worst kind.” Her face froze, “Because I’m more like you than you realize- I’m somebody with nothing to lose.”

He stopped himself. His mouth slowly dropped open. He recognized something in Mickey. An allegiance- a friend in this war of attrition. “So be it.”

Mickey had shifted the momentum of the room. This was her opportunity. “Zevi’s gone. I need your help. I need all of your help. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Are you in or out?”

A grunt, then, “Where you need us to be?”

“Tomorrow morning. Six AM. North Avenue Bridge- wear civilian clothes. We prep nearby, at an undisclosed, and then we go. We need ammo, we need guns, and we need explosives. We need to breach and hold **GATC** Central Comms for about fifteen minutes. That’s all it will take.”

The man smiled in disbelief, "Fifteen minutes? That's it?" He shook his head. "You're gonna need everything then."

She put her hand on his arm. "Then we need everything. But even if we have everything, we don't have anything without you." She turned, she addressed the other faces, the other slapdash military characters, the other desperate pairs of eyes. "All of you. We need everyone. This is our last chance. They're planning on getting rid of all of us, everyone- a virus, a weapon- I don't know the exact details, but our time is running out. This is it."

-O-

Inrini had to say it. "Li, there's not enough time. We're not going to be able to stay here much longer. Come on. We'll be caught."

Li didn't respond.

Desperation beginning to sweat out of her, "Li- you don't have to do this. You didn't sign up for this. We can turn back- we can do this some other way."

"No. We're here. Let's do it."

"Bu Li. If they catch us-"

"If your girl can do her thing- if this works- then nobody has to be worried about being caught, do they? Now go. Cover for me. Help them. I need to run the patch and sync up to Martin." Li was fidgeting with the hardware- a wire here, an insert there- she had unwrapped it from a green silk scarf.

"I know, but-"

Li, concentrated on her work, "You don't believe in her?"

Inrini looked from one side to the other, honest, "I don't know what I believe in."

"Well- believe that I believe. Now go. Two minutes. That's all we need."

-O-

Mickey stared at her friend. "Did you ever think it would get this complicated?"

-O-

A series of explosions went off- the heat blew out a C(c)onvienien@enter across the street from the Labor Bureau. A coordinated attack. A suicide mission. Members of the 7EVEN FLAMES had been captured and killed a month ago. This was retaliation. There was no real mission- any damage would suffice, any casualties would be counted as points. Bricks, limbs, smoke- firecracker pops like gunfire pulses punctuated by shouts, yelling- more and more gunfire.

Mickey heard about it the next day. She heard it and immediately she knew.

She had let him grow so far away. She could see his pain. She could read his feelings. But everything had been happening so fast- she realized an incontrovertible truth about herself in a most inconvenient way: she needed Paul.

Martin assured her, "Listen, they'll announce the names. They always do. But there's no way. He wasn't a soldier. I know one when I see one."

Helpless, listening on a radio. Hours went by.

Then, finally- a broadcast, approved, censored, messaged and vetted- terrorist attacks, suspects apprehended. Order would be restored. The **GTCA** (*Governing Truth for the Citizens of America*) would not be intimidated by cowards. Arrests were made. Victims were identified. Several low-ranking officials, facility workers at the Labor Bureau, a few unlucky civilians. Martyrs. A moment of silence for the fallen heroes. The faithfully departed, brief candles... Mickey waited, updates, interviews... identification tags being confirmed... *and among the UNDOX terrorists- Elaine Roberts, Thomas Redfield, Dan Redfield, Andrew Chow, and Paul Nelson- known criminals who paid the price of their life for their treachery, who betrayed the trust of you, my fellow citizens- if any additional information is known at this time, please immediately head to your Alderman's office and file a report. These attacks are believed to be linked and related to the terrorist organization known as the Islamic Brotherhood. This group claimed responsibility for the attacks at High Flag Harbor two months ago, and was produced as an offshoot to the 7EVEN*

FLAMES which was responsible for the March 13th attacks which targeted the **GTCA** Central Office of Citizen's Affairs. Governor Riche of the Downtown District has personally committed to you, the citizens, that with these final arrests, the **7EVEN FLAMES** terrorist network is nearly eradicated. Only a few members remained after the March 13th attacks, and it is believed by **GTCA** officials that they will soon enough no longer have the means to produce further attacks. This terrorist network represents the most critical threat to our children, to our community, to our future. With insights from the **GTCA's** Office of Law and Abidement, we are pleased to bring you Lieutenant Maynard of the Sixth District. Lieutenant, can you tell the citizens... Mickey shut the radio OFF.

"Jesus." Martin's jaw dropped.

Inrini fell into a chair.

Mickey struck a match, inhaled, and wept. She had been able to keep it inside but couldn't hold the tension any longer. She wept and wept, her face buried into her hands buried into her body buried into the floor... buried... a burial... her hippocampus played out her last moments with Paul... they had said goodbye without gesture or word, instead a pair of eyes in acknowledgment... locked in acknowledging the burden, the responsibility, the sacred duty of one to the other, a pact of stewardship... as stewards, caretakers tasked paramount to hold and shelter pieces of each other... more than a memory, more than a vision, a literal segment of heart exchanged between the two... she wept like a sister, like a lover... she was all he had, and he was all she had.

But now, nothing.

Nobody.

Nowhere.

Her tears were Paul, at first- but then, for herself. That last piece of herself that she could connect to Mickey Gallagher, an over-achieving, scared little farmer's daughter from Indiana- that mousy-hair'd girl, that precocious teenager who could hit a driver further than most of the boys she knew. Soon it would end, one way or another, but tonight- it was already over for her. This was her death, in many ways. The end of who she was. The end of who she had been.

After a few minutes, she addressed Martin and Inrini. "I'm going to Zevi. I'm going to convince him, and then we put this into motion. I know we can do this. I know it."

-O-

Lesson of the Crucifix: "Look at this statue- we find them everywhere! The fish bellies hung themselves on trees as a sacrifice to the Mother Earth for everything they took from Her. But She did not accept their sacrifice. No amount of blood could replace what had been bled from Her veins. Can you imagine tearing into your mother's veins for blood, raping her, setting her on fire, eating her alive? No sacrifice can settle such a disturbance in the set order of things. Nothing could restore such dishonor."

Scholars would note that the survivors had denounced every vestige of the patriarchal systems which proceeded them. The historical process was completely unraveled. Any elements of Western culture, of colonialism or imperialism, of European Enlightened thinking, of rationalism or materialism, of scientific progressivism or reductionism- abandoned. The survivors did not view their predecessors with reverence, but they did view them with respect- respectful of their demise and the conditions which led to it. The survivors did not view those conditions as idiopathic or complex- there was a systematic, logical cause and effect progression. Scholars would also point out that various elements of the Enlightenment program could be used to account for its demise, such as Bentham's utilitarianism. If the "greatest good" was in fact the restoration of the natural world, and a shift in mankind's relationship with the planet, and the "greatest number" included all life forms- the "right action" indeed would have been the elimination of most of the

human race, particularly that segment which had created the crises and imbalances in the first place.

Lesson of the Television Screen: “See how the fish bellies became consumed by their own image? They were obsessed with watching themselves, with how they appeared on the outside, with the composition of their skin, the marks on their face. They did not know how to look inside, how to see with the heart. They neglected to take care of their spirits.”

Scholars would note the survivors rooted their new society in communal processes, focal events that indicated the passage from childhood into adolescence and then into adulthood. These events were imbued with meaning and took place within the context of ceremony. Accomplishments of psychic and spiritual nature were celebrated publicly. Spiritual health was measured by connections, by relationships- the health of the community was measured by its relationship to the land, by the relationships amongst individuals of the community. Isolation was considered dangerous- only the shaman, designated by the clan to act as a communicant between worlds, was granted total autonomy when it came to participation in the community. All other members were assigned designated roles, and were taught how their role impacted the larger ecosystem of the group, as well as their proximal neighbors. The family unit created by the survivors included the nuclear, classic, grouping, but placed an incredible import on lineage, as well as expanded outward to include various constituents of other nuclear groups. Disputes were settled by councils of designated elders, and were brought to public light immediately. All decisions made by the council took into consideration, first and foremost, the spiritual health of the individuals, and the spiritual health of the community.

Lesson of the Diamond Necklace: “The fish bellies they mistook power for beauty. They only cared about ornamentation, about decoration, and did not consider the real value of an object. They did not care who it came from, or where it came from. Gifts were not shared- they were hoarded and hidden away. They believed they could possess beauty and lock it up.”

Scholars would note the ironies pockmarked through history of European Christians claiming to convert the ‘savages’ in stolen lands, to save their ‘wretched souls’ on account of civilization- often times the ‘advanced’ or ‘sophisticated’ party would enact the most brutal tactics, would shed the most blood, would behave in the most ‘savage’ of manners. The final irony, of course, is that these ‘savages’ and their way of life would at the final hour represent the only tenable path forward for a continued human presence on the planet. The survivors did not forget these disparities, these paradoxes- men with beautiful objects, with impressive technology, with religious iconography and traditions, men who participated in the most brutal acts history had ever documented. Any sophistication displayed by Western culture, any indicator of civilization, was merely decadent fetishism. The dominator model was inherently loveless, absent of connection or of interconnection. All dignity, all symbols of development and progress, were cloaked in suffused with emptiness and despair. Appearance had replaced being. Power had replaced respect. Desire had replaced love.

-O-

THE LOST GOSPEL OF PAUL

Before the beginning shone the light, a light which shone unopposed without start or end, through all time and space, outside of time and space, before that which could mark time or space. The world of man came from this light, as did man himself. The soul, inside of man, contained this light. But mankind lost contact with its soul, and thus, lost contact with the light. And so in those days where the soul had been forgotten, the light had been darkened and only shadows remained.

There was one city of man, and that city was filled with fear and terror. The streets had turned dark. The people lived huddled, packed in tiny cellars. A group of rulers, the Plutarchs, made it their goal to destroy the true light or any notion of its existence, and darkness was their weapon against the people. The people's numbers were great, but they were without the light. The world had turned into a theater of screaming and terror, there was a great shrieking and a terrible nightmare across the world, and the Plutarchy held all of the power. The people suffered greatly.

All of mankind had been forced together in the last city- KaGo, the city like a cage. They were forced together without proper food or clean water. They had been walled off from nature, walled off from each other. The Plutarchy created a new light, a different light, and stored their light in precious boxes which they used to enslave the people. Prisoners to the boxes, to images of ghosts and pleasures of the senses, the people were under complete control. Men clung to the boxes. Women were not cherished. They did not wish to bear children, and they did not intend to raise up any more families. These were the days, too, when men would kill their children so they would not have to suffer life. What children survived were gathered up and put into workhouses, to keep the boxes working, to keep the false light glowing.

Many believed the end days had come. The moon was blood red, the land was barren, the waters boiled. Old books had prophesized the end and spoken of these things.

Old books spoke of a second coming- the light had been restored once, and the soul had come back to man in the form of one person. That man was named Jesus and he lived many years before the Plutarchy came to power. He tried to show others the light, but they killed him. In the books it was foretold he would come again at the end of days.

But to most of the men and women of KaGo, the old books were lost. These wretched masses who huddled in darkness could not read the old books or remember the old stories. There was no hope in those days. Sickness, hunger, death and suffering were all men and women had to look forward to- and maybe a glimmer of the false light.

In the two hundredth anniversary year of KaGo's founding by the old fathers, a man came out to the people and proclaimed the messages of the old books, the holy books from the source of true light. This man, whose name was Martin of the tribe of Sandoz, brought back the old messages. He would gather people in the streets and proclaim, "These are the last days, the days which our grandfathers' grandfathers' grandfathers once saw which would befall and consume us and here now they have befallen and consumed us. But in these last days our grandfathers' grandfathers' grandfathers also foretold of a return, the Deliverer who first came many generations before. The Deliverer died so that the darkness would be conquered and the true light might dwell in the soul. But now the light has been lost again, so the Deliverer will return at last to finalize the battle for the light. For the light is good. But we are confined to this darkness, and so we cannot feel the light or the good anymore until the Deliverer returns. Verily I say to you- this is the truth. It is happening. It will happen. It has happened."

Martin of the tribe of Sandoz spoke these words to the people, but the words fell on deaf ears. Men and women in KaGo slept in a dreamless sleep, in a darkness without the sun, with tongues that could not taste and eye's that could not see, surrounded by garbage and their own feces and the waste of so many things. The people no longer had faith or belief in their hearts- they had been ruined by the Plutarchy, by the false

light of the boxes, by the darkness. But still Martin went into the streets and gave the message of the Deliverer's return.

"You will see. A Deliverer will come and will preach to you. I am only a messenger. We were not meant to live like this. Man was not meant to die like this. There is another truth which we have lost- but it will come back to us when the Deliverer brings it."

And while Martin preached- from outside the KaGo's concrete and steel walls, outside of the reach of the Plutarchy- a girl was born. This child was prophesized by holy men from distant countries and kingdoms across the world. She had come first as a man, and now had come back as a woman. "I will be both man and woman. I will become all things. I am beyond that which is of the flesh." It had been written in the old books, and so it happened this way.

This child was born outside of the city in a secret temple where the secrets of the light were kept hidden away for safekeeping. As it was foretold, the child's mother died shortly after the birth. Priests who kept the holy customs and traditions took care of the child. Her name was Isa. Before the baby was born, the priests asked the child's mother who the father was, and the woman confessed she had not known a man for many years. It confirmed their suspicions, and affirmed another one of the ancient prophecies, "A woman who has not been defiled by the hands of men will give birth to a child. This child will save mankind, not having been a part of mankind's sin." This was written by men and women who had come before, who had understood the language of the light and the truth of the light beyond this world of shadow.

Martin knew of these prophecies as well, as his father was a secret member of the priesthood and passed the knowledge onto his son. As Martin preached, he began to reveal the good news of the child's birth to the people of KaGo. Everything happened this way, as it was long since foretold.

As the priests raised the child up they taught her the fundamental methods: balance through yoga, mental attenuation through meditation, dissolution of the self through plant spirits, and prayer. She was brought into adulthood in the outlands, beyond the city, in a small community. Her diet was vegetarian. She studied and practiced, and was informed of what had become of the world. The priests did not reveal the secret of her birth and her father to her. Instead they let the girl uncover the mystery and the miracle of her being. Her name was Isa. Isa was born from the light and discovered that it was her mission to bring the light back into the world.

Once the girl was a woman, and once the priests had taught her the old ways, she was sent away. The last of the priests had died, and on his deathbed he blessed the girl laying his hands on her head. He spoke to her and said, "Isa, you must go to the city of darkness and turn it into a city of light." Isa buried the body of the last priest and packed her belongings together. For forty days she wandered through the deserts of the outlands, up the valleys of Soursimi and through the open plains of Dianian to the dark center of the world. She made her way to the city gate alone. Along the way she had been fortified by the light, and the light revealed more to her. Her course had been set.

Arriving in KaGo, Isa found refuge in the home of an elderly man and woman who had bore no children. They welcomed Isa and prepared a meal for her. Isa told them, "Blessed are those who feed the hungry, for they shall not want. One day there will come a time when men do not want of food, but crave only the warmth of the light." The couple did not understand Isa's words at first, but soon it was revealed that Isa was of the light, and they were blessed.

Over the next days, Isa travelled through KaGo. She began to help the sick and the suffering of the miserable place, the land of shadow and ash, the terribly cold land of metal and stone. The green of

vegetation and the brightness of sunlight could not be found in KaGo in those days. But the poor souls of that city noticed the light in Isa, and all who met her were blessed.

After seven days in the city Isa came upon Martin of the tribe of Sandoz. Their meeting had been fated by the light. She approached Martin, and as she did, he began to weep without consolation. Men and women who gathered around the two were confused by Martin's weeping and asked, "Why do you cry and kneel before this strange woman?"

"This is the one who delivers. This is the one who I am not fit to lay mine eyes upon. Her essence is the essence of the light. All who know the truth of this will not question why my heart has been filled."

Isa put her hand on his head and beckoned him to her side. She hugged Martin and said to him, "Your faith delivers you. No man or woman is different than their brother or sister. No branch on a tree may call itself a tree, but each branch is necessary for the form of the tree to appear."

They spoke for many hours and all who held their company were blessed.

But as these events came to pass, one of the crowd alerted the Plutarchy. The fathers of the city were determined to find Martin so that they might also uncover the identity of this so-called Deliverer. "Bring this woman to us, so that we might destroy her quickly and without notice."

Martin was brought before the Plutarchy in short order. But before he was arrested, he made special arrangements for Isa to find refuge in the catacombs of the city, where she might find a place to lay her head at night without fear of capture. Martin was taken to the rulers of the Plutarchy and was tortured for seven days. For seven days Isa wept underground. She could feel the same pain Martin felt, as his fingernails were pulled from his body, his flesh burned, his blood spilled. Martin did not utter a single word in those seven days until his last breath, and with his last breath before his tormenters, he spoke truly, "There is no opposite to the light. Your power and your riches cannot prevent that which is good and true from occurring."

After her mourning, Isa went back out into the streets of KaGo and preached to the people. Soon a group of freedom loving men and women took her company and were called her disciples. On street corners and in small homes she preached to the people.

In the dwelling of Zachary the money-lender, Isa taught her disciples the truth about gold and riches. She told them, "Man has lived under the weight of gold for too long. Man has fallen out of the order of the earth. No other creature of this world pays for its food. No other creature of this world kills its fellow so that it may hoard more possessions. We must let go of money. We must let go of commerce, of selling and buying. We must share, and be more like the rabbit or the fox. We must learn to be like the fish, who swims and breaths and lives in harmony with the water."

In the dwelling of a prostitute named Regina, Isa taught her disciples the truth about the body and sexuality. "Our body and our impulses are to be celebrated so long as they are carried out in the light of truth. A man who wishes to love a woman, or a woman who wishes to love a man, should never be ashamed. Neither should a man who loves another man, or woman another woman. However, when a man wishes only to love the flesh of another, or a woman who wishes only for the excitation of her own flesh, lo those men and women act from ignorance. They misinterpret the point of love entirely. Such a man or a woman tears open their presents on their birthday, discards the gifts, and clings onto the package wrappings and twine. Union through sex is consecrated only when it is carried out on all levels, and true satisfaction is achieved only through these means."

In the dwelling of a learned man named Raymond, Isa taught her disciples the truth about worldly knowledge. "Any system of knowledge is merely a scaffold. To explain any aspect of reality through language is to reduce the facts at hand into metaphor or models. Models are useful, but they are not meant to be held onto. They are meant to be built then discarded. Wisdom does not take hold through language or knowing, but through feeling. We awaken to wisdom in our heart. We store up knowledge in our minds. I say to you the man of wisdom cannot fall asleep."

For some time Isa travelled between homes and areas of the fallen city. The Plutarchy officials hunted her, but they were not patient and did not stalk in silence. As more grew aware of Isa, and her friends multiplied, they shielded her from the reaches of the Plutarchy. The closer they believed they were to capturing her, the farther they became.

One night, in the network of tunnels under the city streets, a crowd had gathered in a safe area. They had come to listen to Isa, to hear what she might speak to them. The crowd asked her, "Who are you? Are you meant to save us from this place?"

Isa responded, "I cannot save you anymore than the night may conquer the sun. Your salvation is your own, you are your own lamp in a dark canyon. I am only a wick for you to use, so that your light might not extinguish in the cold."

The crowd plead, "But why? Why can't you help us? We are slaves and have nothing we can do?"

Isa responded, "You are slaves, but you confuse the identity of your masters. Your servitude is on account of your lack of faith. You do not believe in yourselves. You are not open to the possibility of another reality existing. Your fetters are invisible, I tell you! One need only look down at his hands to pull them apart, free from bondage. The steel links and lead balls are creations of a limited mind."

Still the crowd pressed her, "We only have the eyes in our heads, the heart in our body. What we see is what we see. Please, tell us what to do."

Isa reached into the crowd, took the hand of a young woman, and hugged her. Into the ear of the young woman she whispered words the rest of the crowd could not hear. The young woman left Isa's embrace and smiled, her face covered in tears.

Isa turned to the others, "Love. Simply. Love those around you. Love those near you. Love those far away. Love those you fear. There is no separation of bodies, there is no distinction of minds. There is only one. The one is the light. The light is in all. To live in the light is to live in love, and to live in love is to live in freedom. Once you see that there is only love, only light- then your chains will disappear, even your hands will disappear. Replacing them will be the hands of the cosmos. And replacing your mind will be the thoughts of the universe."

The crowd was startled by Isa's proclamation and many hushed remarks were made. The crowd was not satisfied. "This is all nice talk, but you change nothing for us. We will return to the streets in the morning and nothing will be changed."

"Nothing of the streets will change, you are right. But the burden does not belong with concrete or stone. You must change, in order to change them."

"We want to, but you have not told us how!" The crowd became displeased. Men grew frustrated. There were rumblings amongst the listeners.

Isa waited in silence for some time before the first miracle was given to the people. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, all that gazed upon her were transported. Their minds no longer inhabited

their bodies. Instead they felt and saw from Isa's point of view, and came into contact with a world unfathomable. For some time Isa brought many visions into the minds of those in the crowd. Then she closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, those in attendance were returned to the prism of their body.

There were no words exchanged after this. Most left amazed. Some left in fear. But all had been changed. And all were convinced Isa was full of a secret wisdom. More importantly, they were convinced they too possessed the wisdom.

On the first summer solstice, when the sun rose highest and levitated burning above the asphalt and the tired bones, Isa went with her disciples into the streets. Along the roads, a man was asleep and huddled between buildings, desperate to find shade and cool his body. His lips were cracked, bleeding, and his face was burnt red. Isa stopped and knelt before the man. She kissed his forehead. In that moment the man stood up, his eyes blue and piercing, transformed, and his lips moist and full. His hair had transformed from grey to brown.

Her disciples questioned her. "What have you done to this man?"

"I have allowed him to see his spirit for what it truly is."

Things went this way until the Winter Solstice- preaching, signs. She left her disciples to find peace, to find strength. She asked the great light to fill her soul, to show her the way. She agonized night after night, alone in the streets near the dark, frozen lake, Mickigeen. She had visions of water rippling. She had visions of a happy time that had long since gone before. She wanted to return to those happy days, but all of a sudden, she knew what must be done.

Once the rosy fingered dawn broke on the next day, the first day of the Winter, Isa walked from one edge of the KaGo city borders to the heart of the city. For three hours she walked past the people, the lost and the forsaken on the streets. As she walked, people became compelled to follow her. They did not know why, but whenever a man or woman laid eyes on Isa they instinctively stopped whatever it was they were doing and followed behind her. Isa walked silently, and so did the thousands of people behind her. By the time she reached the center of the great city, there were over one million people at her back. She stopped in front of where the Plutarchy ruled from, where its leaders waited. They watched her closely.

She approached the stairs of the building, but before she could enter a gun shot went off. A scared, lonely Plutarchy official named Jadus became nervous by the crowd. They began to sing a great song behind Isa, and scared of a possible attack, Jadus pulled the trigger of his weapon to kill Isa and stop the people. As the bullet went into Isa's chest, a great pulse of energy went out. The pulse rippled across the people in the city. Plutarchy officials, common men, the disciples- those in the shadows, in the light, and in between- everyone felt the energy. The energy changed all those who were touched by it- it was energy of the light, bleeding into this world across all the worlds and all the dimensions of existence- from the center of creation across all that had ever been created.

A light of love, of pure, boundless love.

A great miracle occurred in that moment. Isa shared that love with all the world of men, the fallen world. Her spirit escaped her body and entered into the hearts of all living men and women and children. Her final sacrifice connected the light back to the people's hearts, the seat of their soul. All were joined together, heart and light and soul, and the people bore witness to the fantastic visions. And these visions were not passing, they became the visions of a new future. The visions lived inside of the hearts of the people, all who were present. All were touched and all carried the feeling, the connection, to their own grave.

From a great flash of light where Isa's body had been, now there was nothing. She was in the Soul of souls, the light of light. Jadus began to weep, inconsolable- many say he wept until the day he died. The rest of the people began to sing a new song. Millions of voices- a chorus of freedom, of love. The people sang and sang. The Plutarchy was dismantled. The evil faction abandoned their plans- they gave all power back to the people. They were accepted as brothers. All were brothers and sisters. And so the world changed on that day- and it would remain changed forever. From city to city, land to land, people shared their visions and their feelings, their hearts spread the message and carried it. Many beautiful things happened in those days. Men were kind to one another. Women were esteemed and followed and revered. People were equals, equal in all things. Blinded by an incandescent light on our own shared journey, our own road to Damascus- mankind left behind her chrysalis. We emerged together, united- changed forever.

And so now, in these days almost fifty years since the great visions of light blessed our eyes, we continue to follow the traditions of love and equality. We are good to the land- we are stewards of the Earth. We produce what we need. We trade and share with our neighbors, within our communities. We bless every life- human, animal and plant. We tell stories. We sing. We dance. We remember the miracles, especially Isa's miracle. Our children are born without the direct experience we have received, we who were alive during Isa's sacrifice, so we teach them as best as we can. Music and plants- they suit us for now, they are our tools by which we have been equipped, thanks to Isa. They allow the next generation to come as close to the source of revelation as possible. Though Isa is no longer here to bless our children with the awakening we experienced, we pass on her wisdom to them, the next generation- the first generation of the New Earth, the new beginning.

The light of the soul is inside of your heart, it is inside of all things, in all times, in all places. It will forever be. And so will you, in it.

-O-

No good news would come from Mickey, Inrini, Martin- from Paul, or Zevi- there would be no chapters written about them or their work, or their world, for posterity to recall.

In fact not another word about them, or from them, would ever be spoken.

There was to be no salvation for the Faustian tribes, for the Western world, the descendants of Rome, the granddaughters and grandsons of Kane- no expiation could repay their sins. There would be no great white hope, no master race returned to the Garden, no Second Coming- there would be no more empty symbols, no more promises of salvation, no more Christ to be conjured up in name and employed as a justification for evil- no more plans, no more oppression, no more dominion or stewardship, no more Baptist churches or Bank of America, no more green initiatives or social welfare programs or we'll try better next time- only a muffled goodbye. The imperial agenda expired- in only a few short moments, it resolved a fate guaranteed from its beginning, from its inception. A fatal weakness since its birth.

Hundreds of thousands of tons of aerosol cartridges were detonated at the order of the **GCAT** (*Government and Citizens Administration of Territory*) quorum. Hundreds of billions of active viruses were released into the atmosphere above the Freedom Cities. Nine architects of the Compact sat and waited as their wristwatches displayed 12:00 PM CST- each with his own secret dreams, each with his own desires and plans, with his own branch of laurels adorning his bald head. By 3:30, all nine members of the quorum died. Their families died. The other one thousand nine hundred eighty-nine of the approved colony members died- men and women and children. Engineers and farmers. Millions upon millions died in cities once called New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, and Dallas. Millions more died in the spaces between. Death at the nodes, death interstitial. Bodies were silenced and brought lifeless across the country and across the world- within a week there was a near perfect silence across the globe. The virus functioned as designed- in fact, it functioned better than expected. It represented the most lethal substance ever encountered by the human body. Estimates had been far too liberal- there had been

enough agent dispatched to wipe the world out twice or three times over. In retrospect, it was understandable- overestimation, overindulgence- a key feature of that society. It had nearly been done once with nuclear warheads. The second time was a charm.

Mickey died. Martin died. Inrini died. Paul was dead. Their psychotropic-musicophile-transcendental-transformational blueprint to liberate the oppressed, to rekindle the revolution? A well-intentioned, but abjectly doomed lark. They failed. The hearts and minds of the **GCAT** officials did not change. Reflection journals, tarot workshops, recycling centers, new-age crystal therapies, tantric yoga parlors, Lao Tzu translations, podcasts on instant awakening, acupuncture centers, chakra healings, Terrence McKenna timewaves- all of it failed.

Beyond forgiveness.

Beyond justice.

Forsaken.

But a miracle occurred- one which wasn't meant to be for those who wanted to create it. The only men and women who were saved that afternoon in May, under a frog moon, were those deserving: a tiny group of indigenous Americans, original Americans, first Americans- the first shall be last kind of Americans- Americans by a name given to them, themselves neither manifest destined or aggressive, neither craving global domination nor an inherited Italian map maker's name stamped at the behest of Spanish royals- rather a group of living descendants who traced their lineages back through the first migrating humans across land bridges, down the continent southbound- the first of the first people on this side of the world- the rightful inheritors- the Algonquian and Sioux and Athabascan bloodlines, members of the Ojibwa, the Cree and the Blackfeet and the Cheyenne- Iroquois speaking tribes like the Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca and Tuscarora- the Lakota, the Pueblo, the Choctaw and Crow and Cherokee- the Apache, the Anasazi, the Zuni, the Navajo- Dine, the People, the true People- victims of countless indiscretions since Columbus' nefarious landfall on Haiti of 1492, from the Treaty of Fort Pitt, from the Trail of Tears and Bureau of Indian Affairs, subjected to generations of Reservation blues- the Miami, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Shawnee, Delaware, Eel River, Seminole, Arapaho- countless scarred faces and chalk outlines and unmatched bones, countless acres stolen, countless villages burned, countless sins committed in the name of progress, fortune, greed, expansion, destiny, delusion- the last keepers of the one true and absolute virtue: sincerity.

Because when the Compact was conceived, most of the People's ancestors lived as meek survivors in the Interzone- huddled clots of small communities far away from the cities- waiting- patient people with a history of perseverance, as well as a critical genetic anomaly which never manifested in Doctor Frye's test tubes. Their samples had never made it the **GCAT**'s high-throughput screening wells. The People hid out. They waited. They remained close to Mother Earth, and She protected them with a genetic permutation which was entirely inconsistent from the general population- from the descendants of the dominator culture, imported across oceans and bombed in from supersonic jets. The aberration was passed down through warrior mothers and fathers from long ago, from the first landbridge walkers and moose hunters and whale bone gatherers, a sequence which impacted antibody protein formation during exposure to the virus. Individuals with these genetic lineages proved to be extremely resilient towards infection. People who once received blankets filled with plague were, in a perfect twist of fate, the only ones on the face of the planet who would survive the greatest plague of history, the final plague- one self-induced by Western science, by *rational* men of industry and capital.

Justice had been served.

The Plutarchy's aims to become gods and goddesses, to return to the garden, to control life and nature at their whim- thwarted. Their legacy- deserving of the rational materialist hearts: a cold midnight expanse out into the horizonless void, nothing left to move no electrons to spin no matter no energy black and dry like salt death like forever a silence interminable, no children to dance the lila or play marbles, not even the ghosts of stars, not even the memory of an empire or a dream or achievement- gone beyond so far

beyond the past to a point where even the present is past and there has never been anything nor will there ever be- goodbye forever.

Their sin of pride- atoned.

The land had been returned.

Salvation arrived- not for a doomed race of beautiful nightmare nothings, the dull and the calculated and the comfortable- but for those whom it was rightly due and warranted. The entitled- those who had earned it, who had lived in a state of holy poverty for hundreds of years watching with bloodshot eyes, who knew a moonshadow was best cast on a blanket of snow, who held on with stretched fingertips to their stories because even a story is enough sometimes to bring you home- an entire nation of forgotten children exhausted from maintaining the illusion of a future, generation to generation, but in an instant now they had one. Ghost dance circles which had produced visions of exodus, of jubilation, of European settlers disappearing, the buffalo returning, the land restored all across the continent, the ancestors brought back to life- sincerity and patience had been the virtues.

Although the Earth had been eclipsed by sadness for so long, the cycle of light had finally shifted into a new phase.

Gone forever were the days of impetuous American cowboys romanticized by overweight Hollywood consultants hungry to sell more popcorn: or in reality, hungry to fortify a constellation of justifications for the weitiko-dominator culture. *Let's make it sexy. Let's make it fun. Let's make the Indians ugly- we'll have them kill off a homesteader or two, some kids. Sympathies will come. Lines will be drawn. We'll make a fortune!*

Nature has a tendency to be ironic.

Life has a tendency to persist.

A pyrophyte or two had emerged amidst the smoldering embers to begin a new project of unfolding.

Yes, it took Mother Earth many generations to recover from the devastation of industrial man. Ecosystems fought to regain balance, and some were never fully revitalized. Many species were permanently extinguished. But slowly, slowly, natural order returned and dominion over the beasts and the fowl, the land and the sea, was restored back to nature Herself. A perfect caretaker for those impoverished, for those who respected Her and yearned for Her care.

**EPILOGUE: UNBOUND BY LOVE
(Heart)**



*We sing the song of the world
whether we want to or not
whether we know it or not
-but it's better to know as
We sing the song of the world*

A cedar plank, stripped from a piece of deadfall- a boy carving *WAASEYAA* into the bark, repeatedly, over and over. "It is a beautiful name."

"I know." The boy looked up at his father. "I can't help it."

"There is no shame. A man is meant to love a woman. The Great Spirit put that in your heart. 'First light of the day upon the land.' Do you want to know a secret? I used to write your mother's name the same way with my knife. *NAMID*. 'Star dancing.'"

"You did?"

"I did." The man became flooded by images of his wife in those days, slender and graceful, her black hair- he paused. "Now, come and help your brothers build the fire. We must finish preparations with the deer before we put down for the night and say our prayers."

"Father- please do not tell my brothers."

Of a singular face, from a singular, authentic heart. "I will not."

The forest was alive with shimmering fireflies, the rustling of ferns, phalanxes of carpenter ants, the roosting birds- a sliver moonlight broke through the canopy. A band of men, three older and three younger, positioned leisurely around a fire, passing meat and drinking pine needle tea. One of the boys played a carved flute. After a little while, a request was made. "Tell the story of the fish bellies, father."

"Yes- tell of how the people won the day and ridded them of their fish guts!"

Quick to counter, "Remember son- each kill is done with honor. We do not take credit for the kill. We pay respect to each death, each part of the circle. Even the evil fish bellies. They came from the Earth."

"And we returned them to it!"

A father shrugged, biting his lip, pleasantly frustrated by his strong-willed son. "It was many generations ago when the fish bellies first appeared on their long boats from across the waters. Our people had been in this land since the first days. They enjoyed peaceful years, good years. Our women were strong, they wore beautiful braids, they picked vanilla scented sweetgrass and raised strong children. Our men were courageous warriors and hunters. We loved the land, took only what we needed from her. We followed the old ways of respect that had been passed down from the elders, passed down to them by the first people. We knew the names of the animals and plants. We knew the secrets of their ways. But, on that day when the fish bellies landed on our shores, a terrible black magic came with them. They were under an evil spell. They had been sent by greedy witches who boiled blood, who ate the flesh of infants and sang forbidden songs in mountains across the great ocean. Their magic was one of death, of pain, of torment and darkness. And their spell caused the fish bellies to disrespect the work of the Great Spirit. They did not acknowledge the sacred dream each creature sings. The fish bellies' hearts were twisted only for love of gold- the witches made them this way. They hated everything of the land that wasn't gold. The forests scared them, the animals scared them- the fish bellies were scared of all the creatures. Because they were so afraid, they killed the creatures and the plants, they stole from the land, and they killed our ancestors. The fish bellies did not understand our ways. They made us feel inferior- they made us feel bad about our skin, our braids, our language, our connection to Great Spirit. The witches armed the fish bellies with invisible dark magic, a very strong magic that our ancestors were no match for."

"Are there still black witches across the great ocean, father?"

"I cannot say. I have not swam across the ocean. It is possible."

"What if the witches are alive, and they send more fish bellies?"

“This is why we tell the story. So we will be ready. Because our ancestors were not ready. They only knew of their own tribes. They did not know the fish bellies were under a spell, so our ancestors were kind to the fish bellies, as was tradition. But the fish bellies knew no tradition. They had no story. Their stories were used to cheat our people. They talked about a holy man from long ago, Yesu, a holy man they prayed to and who allowed them to kill in his name, allowed them to do terrible things without fear. They tried to make us worship the holy man with them.”

The oldest son, “What holy man would allow this?”

“The witches stole a memory of Yesu from long ago and changed it. The witches transformed Yesu’s original medicine, then they turned it into their dark magic. Medicine can be changed if it is not protected, do not forget this.”

“What happened to the people?”

“Wars. Death. Hunger. The fish bellies took and took from our ancestors and gave nothing in return. Our ancestors fought, but they could not overcome their magic. Some of our ancestors even came under the spell themselves, and they became sleepwalkers. The arrogance of the fish bellies was attractive. Evil can be very attractive.”

“What is arrogance?”

“Do you know when we thank the Earth for food, when we thank an animal for spirit- do you know why we do this?”

“Yes. We thank the food spirits and the animal spirits for sharing with us. We need them. We are all brothers and sisters, and they give their lives to us so we may live.”

“This is humility. Arrogance is the opposite of humility. An arrogant man thinks he owns everything, has a right to take without asking permission, without giving thanks. An arrogant man does not acknowledge his brothers and sisters. An arrogant man puts his own life above all others. Do you understand?”

A blue center flame gyrated around oranges and reds. A bed of coals roasted, breathing. The children were warm, their bellies were full. “Yes father.”

“Good. Now, the fish bellies grew in numbers while our people disappeared. The fish bellies built iron homes and burnt the land, they cut down the trees, they filled the rivers with poison, and they brutalized each other in order to gain more gold. All they desired was gold. Their spells grew more evil. The witches laughed from across the waters. They celebrated each time a woman was raped, each time a child was killed, each time a member of our tribe was tortured. The fish bellies thirst was a hunger we call wetiko, a hunger which could not be satisfied. It had infected all of their people, and most of our people too.”

The youngest boy, captivated by the notion of an evil coven across the waters, asked “Do we have medicine against the wetiko now, father?”

The man considered his son’s question. “If you ever see a wetiko fish belly, you must either kill him or run. Right now you are not strong enough to kill on your own, so you must run to myself or your older brothers. But one day you will be able to fight with us. We always fight together to kill the wetiko. There is no medicine to save a wetiko, so it must be killed.”

“Then how did the fish bellies die if there was no medicine?”

“Well, the black witches were so happy with their magic, with the destruction the fish bellies carried out, that the witches forgot about the power of Mother Earth. Even though Mother Earth was suffering, even though She had no medicine, she was still alive. And so She said a prayer to the Great Spirit, and the Spirit asked the Sun to shake Her with a mighty power. The Sun, Her brother, agreed to help and drew back an arrow and shot a great wave of rainbow medicine at Mother Earth. Mother Earth was not harmed, but the Sun’s medicine disrupted the witches’ control over the fish bellies. The black spells were broken. And the fish bellies were confused, so they came to gather into the forbidden graveyards, where they were struck by disease. In those terrible graveyards, there was much suffering, and all of the fish bellies became sick and died. And so this is how the Sun saved Mother Earth. And Mother Earth protected the original

people during this final pestilence, and because our spirits were not infected by the spells, and we were spared from the disease.

“Where the women journey to, on the full moon?” The boy asked knowing full well the answer- everyone in the village knew about the council of medicine, about the women and their forays into the graveyards. Dark places with revenants abound, tortured spirits without ancestors and without purpose- only a special group of women was allowed to go there, and they did so only after a ceremony was performed. They wore woven garments that were blessed and smudged with sage, cedar. They would retrieve totems and artifacts from that lost world of the fish bellies- metallic tools, images- fossils unearthed from a dead empire. Afterwards, in public circles, the elders would discuss the relics and teach the people about wetiko hunger, about the witches and the evil spells.

Later on, back in the village around the great fire, the elders would warn the young boy, ““This is where the ghosts of the fish bellies now haunt. And we men must never go to those graveyards- we do not wish to make contact with one of the wetiko spirits. Only the women are strong enough for these ghosts. We must respect evil.”

“Why, grandfather, when we know good has beaten evil?”

“We cannot become arrogant. The battle is not over. So long as there is breath in your lungs, the battle is not over.”

The boy fell silent.

The elder considered the impression he wished to leave, and spoke slowly to the boy, directly into his heart. “Our people were saved, so we give thanks to the Great Spirit, to Mother Earth, and to the Sun. We were left to inherit the land, to restore the world. We must be humble, we must be respectful. Our job is too important. Now, the eighth fire has been lit, and we must keep it burning. Your job is very important. The Great Spirit has left it to you, to us, to bring respect back for life, for lives and dreams.”