

**OUR LAST CHINK OF SUNLIGHT
IN A GLOAMING CAVE OF FAREWELL
&
OTHER STORIES**



a voiceHOUSE experience

FOREWARD

Where are the places we meet?

Not in the checkout line or at a coffee machine, not in our matching jerseys or at family picnics- where do we express ourselves fully, open? Where are heard, understood?

When are we not strangers to each other, to ourselves?

Why is it so rare for us to be exactly what we are while in the presence of another person?

It seems to me that on the whole, we are a dislocated people, and ours is a dark hour. Our disconnection is marked by our everyday, ordinary existence. Cubicles. Parking garages. Television sets. Cellphone screens. Disparate, mutually unintelligible internal worlds- individuals, living for ourselves across secret lifetimes. No wonder the frustration, no wonder the confusion.

We play so many roles, days and nights and weeks upon months year after year- masked, hidden. Who is the person within? What does an 'authentic self' resemble? A search for authenticity is no different than a search for the sacred, the meaningful, the soul. The object of our search resides in a place beyond our contrived world, where we abandon our ridiculous facades and appreciate our fellow persons for their entire depth, and ours. But after so much conditioning, how do we disentangle our self from our establishments, these strange constructions of hierarchies, programs? Have we lost the ability to see beyond filigree, to peer into the truth of life?

Would we know the truth if we saw it?

The truth of paradox, the truth of interconnection and interbeing amidst flux and chaos, the truth of life between death, the truth of beauty embedded within tragedy, sadness.

Or are we products of an age in which we can no longer allow ourselves to feel fully alive, to bear the weight of 'being'? We who are on the forefront of time, alive- in our wake those generations of ancestors, a procession of planets and galaxies, a sequence of marvelous unfolding- unable to appreciate where we have come, or where we are going.

Our weakness can be accounted for by our strength.

Our assuredness. Our rightness. Our rational minds. Our mechanistic models. Our logical viewpoints. Our carefully crafted opinions. Our edifices, constructed by ego, coated in armor- so long as we cherish these precious mental constructs, we remain disconnected, captives in self. So long as we play the game, attain success, follow the rules, reap the benefits, acquire the possessions and the titles- we are hopeless. So long as we are able to prove ourselves correct, so long as we are able to believe in our ability to control the world around us, so long as things are predictable and work out according to plan- we are amputated

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from our true humanness. So long as we are taught to obfuscate our vulnerabilities, to belittle sentimentality and sincerity, our tenderness, and tenuousness- we are atomistic, isolated. We are produced by a culture which directs us to work hard, for ourselves. To make it our own. To become something, somebody, assertive in the face of it all. To construct a permanent symbol, to be an individual, in the face of time, evanescence.

But there is hope.

Our strength must necessarily emerge from our weakness.

Our frailty and misfortunes, our anxieties, our failures- where we stumble and fall, this is where strength blossoms. It is where contact happens. It is where relationships are built. Where we cut through the shroud of culture, of modernity, of capitalism and rational materialism and me-my-I. In places where we have fallen, where we have shed tears, lost- this are the places where intersection occurs. Expansion. Growth. The miracle happens when we are laid bare and broken down to our essence. When we confront death, trauma- when we suffer, we become ourselves. And when we come back to ourselves, we often find somebody (or something) else alongside, ready to accept us.

So, why are we so opposed to heartbreak? Why do we avoid suffering, doing whatever we can to escape it and remain comfortable? The perfect life- as we unpack glistening silverware from napkins, as we untie the bows on Christmas presents and sleep peacefully at night- it brings us satisfaction, but it doesn't bring us into communion.

The happy, contented life- this is our greatest barrier.

It is only when we are lost that we are found.

That we find others.

That we are released, free from ourselves.

Sunlight, between the cracks.

OUR LAST CHINK OF SUNLIGHT IN A GLOAMING CAVE OF FAREWELL
REST STOP
INCONVENIENT
CONTENT
REMOTE CONTROL
BALLED UP
SANCTUARY
OVERHEAD
EUGENE, OR
CENTERED
GOODNIGHT
LIQUOR STORE
CHOKE
DEPARTURES
A P<>ET
A CONVERSATION
STRANGER
OCTOBER
RIPARIAN
INDIGNATION
LAPTOP
SALIX BABYLONICA
RECOMMENDATION
NAIL
TRASHCAN

OUR LAST CHINK OF SUNLIGHT IN A GLOAMING CAVE OF FAREWELL

It had been so long since anything remarkable had happened to me- since I had done anything remarkable, since I had met anyone remarkable.

All I could remember was the comfortability.

An indistinct, apathetic, convenient stasis.

Leisurely.

Predictable.

The drop-off schedules, the television programs, the oil changes and the real estate taxes, an occasional night out with fancy cocktails and small portions- there wasn't anything special about any of it. There wasn't anything hard about it. There wasn't anything extraordinary.

There wasn't anything special about me.

I had been more or less like everybody else I went to college with.

I had done it the way we were all doing it.

There were no major illnesses, tragic unfoldings.

There were micro dramas, sure.

But they were peripheral.

Trivial.

Everything was trifling.

I was normal.

Everything was normal.

As a couple, my wife and I, we were petty, indignant.

Petulant.

Retirement savings.

Wardrobes.

Holidays.

We made a big fuss over our wedding. A two-week honeymoon, complete with beach cabanas and helicopter rides and scuba lessons. Plenty of "I love you" and toothy photographs. Suntanned and cheery. We were well positioned from the outset.

Old folks smiled when they looked at us.

We worked for large corporations, like everyone else.

We had two kids.

We moved to a respectable home in the suburbs.

We bought two SUVs.

We filled our living room with expensive, non-functional items to make it resemble one of those staged photographs you see in a catalog.

Though, those early years, raising babies, had been an assault on our nervous systems.

We had never been buffeted by life- we had never *not* had it our way. We were disrupted, completely, when my first son was born,

and it took a long time to unclasp even the most basic aspects of our selfishness. It was painful. But we had to make concessions to properly raise and take care of a baby. There were so many frustrations, short comings. The sleepless nights, the appointments, the colic, the loss of our social life- we weren't ready to let go, and we paid for it.

We weren't equipped to handle obstacles.

Modern, white-collar, middle-class Americans.

It had been a physical burden on her, my wife. I saw it. I appreciated her for it, the best I could. I tried to be supportive.

I tried to do my part.

But one thing led to another.

Our sex life deteriorated.

A growing silence.

Resentments.

We bought more furniture.

We hired a contractor and remodeled the basement.

When our sex life rekindled, briefly, she became pregnant.

Sooner than we had wanted.

Unexpected.

Another baby.

Another daycare enrollment.

We both earned promotions.

Birthday parties, excursions to the zoo- in time, the kids learned to read, write, and progressed into middle school.

We had recently returned back from a vacation, a trip to officially put an end to the summer.

Our hard-earned break from 'reality.' From 'work.' From 'stress.'

That's when it happened.

Something remarkable.

On the return flight, my sons absorbed in their computer pads, my wife watching a movie on a screen embedded in the seat in front of her- I thought to myself "It's nothing but Santa Claus." Pretending, everything. What had changed from our childhood Christmas mornings- we all knew it was a fraud, the fat man in the red suit and his team of reindeer, but it didn't matter. There were presents under the tree; that's what matters. Presents under the tree with red bows- a loving marriage, a corporate ladder, a family portrait, a rectangular plot with a marble headstone. All you had to do was pretend, and everything would be alright.

My wife chuckled at a swarm of pixels.

"I'm tired of pretending," I thought to myself.

Pretending- like I was a great father, like I had earned this life I was living, like we were happy, like we were good people, like I had made my mother proud, like any of it mattered.

I was frustrated. Out of character.

The plane landed and I pulled our carry-on items out from an overhead bin.

Herded down an aisle, into a terminal, waiting at the luggage carousels for more baggage.

My sons wanted to order a pizza for dinner.

My wife complained about her neck, about the smell in the taxicab.

I was anxious to see if the landscapers had cut the grass and laid down the mulch.

I didn't think about Santa Claus or existential crises and took a cold beer out of the fridge.

I sat down with the remote.

Everyone else was in bed.

Then it hit.

A migraine.

A fierce, terrible wave of shooting pain.

I thought to call up to Anna, but she had taken her sleeping pill and was unavailable.

I shut my eyes.

It persisted for maybe twenty, thirty minutes- then it disappeared.

"What the hell was that?"

-0-

I uncrossed my arms.

There was no sense in being frustrated.

The cashier hadn't noticed me. Her arthritic, bony fingers- struggling against the glue and the paper wrap of a roll of nickels, pushing with her thumb then gouging with the nail on her index finger- in her mid-50's, harried and exhausted in a way that reminded me of my mother around the time my youngest brother enrolled in college. Drained. Late nights waiting past curfew, checkbooks balanced then unbalanced, rides to and from practices and games, laundry detergent, bagged lunches, shift after shift at the hospital, Sunday dinners and holidays and goddamnit when will it end. Year after year, three sons, no father- her smile back then was so disingenuous. It was a grimace, her teeth clenched together- a smile like Job's. And when the cashier looked up at me, smiling- there was so much in my heart I could never say to my mother, despite how much I may have wanted to.

Yet, here she was.

"Sorry. I didn't see you there honey. These dang coins- is that everything?" She gestured at my pile of groceries.

I nodded. I didn't want her to think I was annoyed. "I'm surprised anyone pays with cash anymore."

"There aren't many. But it seems like whenever they do, I run out of nickels."

I smiled at her.

She began to scan my items.

Mom, I'm sorry.

I'm sorry we took complete advantage of you.

I'm sorry we never considered to ask how you were, how you felt, what you were going through.

I'm sorry we took the life out of you, killed you.

I'm sorry it wasn't worth it- I wasn't worth it.

But you died before I became a man, a father- I didn't know anything about raising a family, about the hard work and the sacrifice.

I had no appreciation for what you had to struggle against.

I know more, now.

I know you'd say "That's what a parent is supposed to do- give everything. And you did what any child does- take everything. There's nothing to be sorry about. You let me do my job. I died doing what I loved to do, being who I loved to be. I was your mom. I loved who I was. Who you were. Who you are."

She'd say something to that effect, tenderly, and I'd feel less guilty than I do right now.

I reached over and offered the cashier a hand, bagging up a few apples, bananas.

"My bagger must be on break. Thanks."

Did I love being a father?

Did it define me?

Maybe that is the difference between mothers and fathers. Women and men. Within, and without. For, and against.

I love my sons, but I hadn't sacrificed everything for them.

Not even close.

My mother never went on a date after my father left. A night out on the town. There weren't any men around the house. She had no romantic interests, and expressed no desire in anything related to the like. I am quite certain she never had sex again. Eighteen years without a physical relationship, from his departure to her death- a kiss, a tender grip on her hip or her shoulder, a hand gently pushing aside her hair.

No hobbies.

No fun.

Tommy was four.

David was seven.

I was nine. Going on ten.

I rejected my father immediately after he checked out. I excised him from my life, surgical and complete. I suppose that's why Thomas rejects me. Even so, I don't appreciate it- I like to believe I've done more for him than my father did for me, that I've been less of a disturbance and more of a scaffold to him, that I've performed my duties in a manner that warrants his respect, that he ought to want to make me proud. But of course, for him, that isn't the case. He's been fated to be who he is. I remember him as a four-year-old, defiant, denouncing me after I'd bought a plastic baseball bat and several oversized wiffle balls- "No!" He's hated baseball ever since that moment. It's like he understood what it represented, for him to play ball with me, me opening up part of my world to him- and he flatly refused. I'm not clear of hypocrisy, of failure and fault- he must sense it in me, whereas I never sensed it in my father until he left.

Mothers and fathers and sons- the woman behind the register offered me a receipt.

"Have a good night."

I didn't move.

"Sir?"

Jolted back to the moment- I reached out and took the flimsy paper from her hand. "Thanks. You too."

"Don't forget your card."

I remember asking David if he wanted to deliver mom's eulogy. He didn't say a word. He shook his head, a cigarette between his lips. I asked if he wanted any input, if I wrote it out would he be willing to read it- again, another shake of his head.

After the funeral, he pulled me aside. "I couldn't have done that again. I just didn't have it in me. I hope you understand. You did a fine job."

Her death was destined from within her, on account of her love for Tommy- more than David or myself, or my father, it was Tommy that killed her. After his accident- it was written in her eyes. She wasn't long for this world. She wasn't interested in bank accounts, the Sunday newspaper. She let go of anything that might have kept her connected, those things that the rest of us do, like commenting on the weather, cheering on our favorite sports teams, buying new tires for the car, brushing our teeth.

I remember her condo, boxing up her clothes and clearing out the rooms- next to her sink, a travel sized tube of toothpaste.

But I don't feel that way.

I don't want to let go.

I don't want to die.

I want to bag groceries, plant flowers, flip hamburgers at the grill, fold the boys' jeans and t-shirts.
Those are the only things that are holding me together.
Tiny acts of normalcy.
It's a delusion.
It's all Santa Claus.
And I'm alright with that, for now.

-O-

A spider web, a single strand near one of the recessed lights on the ceiling above his bed, floating, its movement dictated by an imperceptible current of hot air.
It hung there.
Dancing.
I couldn't marshal my defenses- any sense of comportment or control.
I began to weep.
"Dad, what's wrong?"
I couldn't explain it to him.
I bent down to tuck him in- a kiss on his forehead, then another on his cheek.
Walking away, the light switch, my fingers on the door handle- Nick whispered, "Dad, it will all be okay, won't it?"
"Of course it will buddy. Get some sleep. I love you."
Anna was on the laptop in bed.
I couldn't explain it to her either.
"I've registered you for another trial, in Boston. It's Stage Two. Gene therapy. Moderna. There's a ton of great press about it. Take a look in your emails, I sent you over the information."
She was committed to saving my life.
I didn't understand why.
It made me skeptical, unsettled, the way she approached my illness.
She wanted control.
She wanted her corgi, Freckles, from her childhood.
She wanted her college applications.
I felt less and less like a person to her, somebody having an experience, experiencing life after a terminal medical diagnosis- I was an inevitable conclusion she would have to accept, but was entirely unready to do so.
I was her own death.
I was our children's deaths.
I was the horrible truth of life- manifest, in front of her, blowing my nose into a tissue.
I became so charged with meaning, with valence, after my diagnosis- I wasn't a man she loved, a husband she married, a father to our

boys. I wasn't a scared, confused, helpless person. I wasn't a body. I wasn't a soul.

I was something to be fought against.

I was a problem to be solved.

I suppose she could have brushed it away, brushed me away- hidden, avoided me. She could have retreated into herself, into her world. She could have entered a state of denial. Of all the possible reactions- it was difficult, but simultaneously it was reassuring to see her so energized.

She'd be able to move on.

She'd be able to take care of the boys.

It hurt, but it gave me some hope for them, for their future without me.

"I will." I walked away from our bedroom.

Down the stairs, into the basement- more spiderwebs in the corners, more faint strands- crying.

-O-

In the grand configuration of time and space, I was nothing. Negligible. My life, compared to the billions of lives on the planet- the day I die, I would be one corpse of approximately one hundred fifty thousand worldwide. One of eight thousand in the United States. I would be converted into a statistic, a number-reduced, then forgotten. There would be a funeral. There would be tears. There would be memories- but those memories would fade, the people that knew me would die, and soon enough I would be nothing. It would be like I never existed.

I suppose we were all like that.

But it didn't feel that way.

It felt important, somehow.

On one level, sure, it was reassuring. In the face of those kinds of numbers, a vast spectrum of planets and galaxies- it helped remove the gravitas out of my predicament, to apply my thinking against the context of cosmic time- and disappear. It wasn't such a big deal.

But those games never worked for long.

The big picture wasn't a viable strategy.

Eventually, after a few minutes, a few hours- it felt important, somehow.

The numbers didn't alleviate my grief, my despair.

My life meant something, to me.

My life was everything, to me.

And soon, it would be extinguished.

I had no idea what would happen next. Heaven, hell. Rebirth. Transmigration. Angels. Planes of existence. New dimensions. Total

consciousness. Gods and goddesses. I had never formulated any concrete beliefs concerning the 'afterlife.' It never was a priority- it wasn't worth sorting out while I was alive. It never struck me as a useful expenditure of mental energy. I was alive, and that was important. It was important to do what made me feel good, what made me feel like me, what allowed me to live with myself. What came next was going to come, regardless of what I believed, or what I wanted.

But I started to become very afraid.

Terrified.

What if nothing happened?

What if it was blank, black, dead sleep for all eternity? Erased, with no one left behind to say "It was all erased." No one left behind to be sad it had vanished. No one left behind to remember it had ever been there in the first place.

That thought in particular began to disturb me, deeply.

Suffocated me.

Even after I listened to my neighbor across the driveway complaining about the service he received at a restaurant, complaining about the price of the food and drinks, complaining about the boisterous couple at the table next to him...

Even after I overheard a coworker making fun of a new mother for having to excuse herself from a quarterly review meeting...

Even after I wrote down on a piece of notepad paper *Nothing is genuine. Nobody cares. Everything is ironic and cruel. Abstract and skeptical. Everyone is afraid of confronting the mystery, and prefers instead there isn't any wonder to anything, isn't anything wonderful about any of it...*

Even as I became acutely aware of the backwardness, the stupidity of this world we inhabit- thanks to my new lens of a terminal cancer diagnosis- even then, despite everything...

This world of ours, despite its multitudes of imperfections, its invidious appearances, its iniquities and hypocrisies and filth and scum...

It still haunted me.

I couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

Losing myself.

For it to be snuffed out like a candle?

When my son Thomas was in pre-school, his teachers, at the beginning of the year, had him take a picture with a little board. On the board, there were different sections. His favorite color. His height. His favorite food. His hometown. His birthday. His favorite toy. There is a picture of him holding that board with a smile on his face, his unruly brown hair, his tiny fingers

clutching the sides. The only section I could recall was one that read 'What I want to be when I grow up.' He had answered GHOST, because that's what the teacher had printed in neat letters with a dry erase marker.

For some reason that made me feel better.

I went to the drug store one afternoon and had them print up a copy of that photograph. I didn't tell anyone. I carried it in my wallet.

Becoming a ghost seemed like a fine outcome to me.

I wanted to be a GHOST, too.

-O-

By the end of October, the shimmering brilliance of Autumn vanishes.

Late September is ethereal- there is a luminous quality to the tree lines, the overhanging branches, the way the sunlight reflects off the leaves, the way the colors vibrate- the world feels alive. Extraordinarily so. Manic. Explosive. Your senses are activated, enchanted.

But then, abruptly, that excitement disappears. It is replaced, by a feeling of decay. Death.

The quality of the world shifts.

Whether it has to do with the chlorophyll levels, the chemical signals between the trunk and the branches, the sugars or the water distribution along lines of xylem and phloem- regardless, a threshold is crossed.

It happened almost overnight.

I was out on a pedestrian walk, before dinner, and it occurred to me, 'There is lingering death, everywhere.'

The endpoint is revealed midway through a process.

Every leaf structure is dying, and there is no hope for life.

Naked boughs- stripped bare.

The oaks and maples become lachrymose, brown, cold, withered- soon to be trampled underfoot and returned to the dirt.

Inescapable.

No matter the overbursts of joy between rows of apple trees, cornmaze laughter or the warmth of flannel button-ups, football chilibowl Sundays: there's a harsh truth surrounding us which we cannot ignore. Summer is gone. A winter ahead of us. Darkness. Shivering.

Dead.

-O-

I had been feeling quite sorry for myself.

Could you blame me?

I was going to die.

Soon.

Much sooner than I was supposed to.

Much sooner than I had anticipated.

First I was bitter, then hostile, then mopey.

I went around moping for weeks.

I wanted to shout at people, "I'm going to die! Who cares about your parking tickets! Who cares about your clogged sinks! I'm a dead man!"

It didn't matter that they would all be dead, too.

Their death wasn't real to me.

My death was.

It was real, and it was upsetting.

But one afternoon, out with Thomas on an errand for something or another, inside the local mall, I noticed a mother pushing her child along in a wheelchair. The sight froze me. She was a little girl, maybe six or seven years old. She had a disability, maybe cerebral palsy. But she was smiling. And so was the mother- joking, laughing, pushing the girl ahead of her, the two of them. I stopped walking. My son kept on ahead without me, then noticed where I had been left behind. "Dad, come on." He waved me towards him.

I felt sick to my stomach.

I had been pouting and carrying so much negativity inside of me, so much entitlement- how I was being screwed by the universe. But here was the truth, right in front of me. That mother and her daughter- they were messengers. They reminded me of a very simple fact, but a fact I had forgotten. Everything had been a blessing for me. My life. My family. It had been such a blessing. I had been so fortunate to be alive, and this life, this ability to live, to walk around with my son- it was still here.

It was here for the taking, and I was wasting away my last opportunities to hold it, to be in it.

I shook my head, disgusted with myself.

I walked up next to my son.

"Dad, what happened?"

"I forgot something."

He gave me a puzzled look, then resumed his pace.

I walked alongside him, with my thoughts, with my embarrassment. How stupid, how selfish- I had become so childish, warped in my limited, self-indulgent perspective, playing the victim. It was abhorrent. It was pitiful.

I had been a most pitiful creature.

When we arrived back at the car, the purchases made, the plastic bags and the receipts- before I unlocked the doors, I put my hands on my son's shoulders. I looked at him in the eyes. We so rarely made this kind of intimate contact. He was jarred, it being such a public place- but I stared right at him without breaking our

connection. I noticed the brown in his irises, the dark brown- the black of his pupils, the faint lines of hazel around the perimeter- I looked at him, into him, then I hugged him.

"I love you. I love you more than I'll ever be able to explain. I'm sorry I haven't told you that more."

"Thanks dad, it's okay," he replied awkwardly. "I love you, too." We crawled inside the car and shut the doors.

"How about some hot chocolate?"

-O-

We finally caught a private moment between the two of us.

Dave placed an expensive crystal glass in front of me- two ice cubes, smoky brown liquor.

We were in the basement.

All the presents had been arranged under the tree. His wife and daughter were asleep in the guest room. Anna and the boys were also tucked into their beds, ready for the morning, for the rush down the staircase, the piles of wrapping paper, the bacon and eggs and donuts, the batteries and instruction manuals.

We had been talking before the holidays, Dave and I, and we decided it would be best for his family to spend the night with mine, on Christmas Eve- for all of us to wake up together in one house on Christmas Day. His daughter, Marie, was only two years old. She could barely make sense of all the procedures, the reindeers and the carols- but she understood enough. I wanted to be around them, around my niece, my brother.

It would be lively.

Fun.

I enjoyed watching her bounce around the church pew, the dinner table.

I danced in the living room to Bing Crosby with her on my shoulders. Her laughter...

David clinked his glass into mine then collapsed on the sofa.

"Drink up. Doctor's orders."

He had always been that way. Humor, levity- it was his coping mechanism. When our father left, he joked he would never have to do any more chores.

"It's good to be here with you, Dave."

"Likewise buddy. Thanks for having us. Dinner was great. And all the presents for Marie- you and Anna went overboard. I don't think we'll have room in the car for everything."

"I had to compensate, so- I promise, she'll never get another one from me after this year." I put on a halfway grin and took a sip from the glass.

I could tell my comment didn't sit well with Dave.

He sighed, "You look good Matt, you do. You never know."

I shot back, unconscious almost- "It's going to take a few more glasses of this stuff before we start talking miracles."

He shrugged, demure, "You never know until you know."

My chest tightened. Now I felt uncomfortable. "Dave, come on. I appreciate it, the positivity and all, I do. Being positive is great- but you don't have to do that. It's fine. It's me and you. We can level. If there's anyone I would expect to look at this practically, maybe even with a tinge of morbid humor- it's you. You don't have to put anything on, not for my sake. I'm okay with it. I'm okay with all of it. I'm going to die. And it's alright." A howling silence drafted through the basement, the air between us, between our thoughts and our secret hearts.

"No, it isn't."

I turned towards him and straightened up in my seat. "And why is that?"

He took a gulp from his glass, and then another to finish it off. His eyes were pointed straight ahead, unfocused- miles down the road. "Because if that happens, it makes me the last one. That's why. It's worse than being orphaned- it's, I don't want to lose you. I- with Tommy, it was tragic. It was shocking. But I wasn't shocked- you know what I mean? The way he was, the way he lived. And then mom- I was sad, but I knew it was coming, sooner than later. It made sense. She couldn't handle losing Tommy. Her heart broke, you know? She was ready to go. But you- we- we were supposed to grow old together. Raise our kids. Enjoy these glasses of bourbon. Complain about our wives, our prostate exams. You're not- you can't. I can't. I can't even- whenever I think about it Matt, I- I hate to tell you how this is making me feel, but I'm a wreck. I'm trying my best for Christmas, in front of your family- but I can't joke my way past this. I'm scared. I'm really scared to lose you."

I realized, right there, what this meant for Dave.

What I meant to Dave.

I had been taking it for granted.

Being a big brother- his big brother.

Of all the things I considered when I meticulously compiled my lists of what I would miss most- Anna's breasts, the smell of a baseball stadium, pancakes for breakfast with the boys- I had glanced over my relationship with Dave.

I felt exposed by his outpouring of honesty.

Being a big brother: looking out for him at the park while we played pick-up games of basketball with the neighborhood hoodlums,

buying him a case of beer for a high school party, taking his phone call after he proposed to his wife.

I meant something to Dave.

And he meant something to me.

He had formed my identity. Before the kids, before Anna, before the career, before school- I had always, first and foremost, been a big brother.

I heard her voice, "Look after your brothers."

His presence changed me, made me better, made me into who I was and who I would be through the course of my entire life.

I leaned forward in the sofa with my palms on my knees. "I'm sorry, Davey. I'm terrified, too. I'm terrified to lose you, to lose everything. And I- listen, no matter what, I'll keep fighting. Alright? I'm not quitting shit. I'll take it all the way to the end. All the way. Alright?"

He looked over at me with tears welling up in his eyes.

He nodded.

He slapped his hand on my back and choked out, "Good. Good."

I nodded back at him.

I wanted to cry, but I held it back. I heard her voice again. "You have to be strong for them. They need you more than ever."

-O-

I woke up this morning to a clear, singular voice, a voice that wasn't my own- with a wash of sunlight leaking in through the blinds- a phrase, "Prepare for your last breath."

A few months ago, I was forty-two years old, stationed in the prime of my life- a career, two healthy children, a house- a life marked by stability, accomplishment, happiness.

"Prepare for your last breath." I didn't know who had spoken the words, but I knew who they were meant for.

I had done everything I was supposed to do.

But now, none of it mattered.

The stakes had changed.

And I had to change.

It was time for me to pay more attention, to be deliberate. I had to let things sink in. I took a deep breath. I glanced over at my wife and listened to her faint snores.

I had been caught up in the adhesives, the worldliness of the world. Last night I read an article about our city's baseball team, their spring training projections, the newly acquired players through trade, the prospects hoping to break through and earn a roster spot in the big leagues- I had to begin to pull away. Unstick myself.

Make it count.

"Prepare for your last breath."

I had been building structures all around me, arranging, striving-arrogant- I'd assumed there would be years, decades, out in front of me. I'd assumed so much. I'd been wasteful. Absentminded.

I hadn't once considered my legacy.

What would all this mean in the end if I didn't leave anything behind?

And it wasn't the mere fact I had two sons. Their existing, in it of itself, wasn't a legacy. What was I leaving them behind with? What tools had I passed down? What qualities? The quality of my love? Would they even know who I was, what I stood for? What did I stand for? If they were tasked to take my ashes to my favorite spot, my favorite place in the world, and scatter them around- where would they go to dump me out? It wasn't about heaven or hell. It wasn't about death. It was about life, the lives that would succeed my own. Would they stand above one of the creeks at Nashoba Conservation Grounds, maybe the one that ran between the clusters of hemlocks and quercus albas, with ghost pipe sprouting at their feet in July - would they make their way to the banks of the water, and cry, while they told their favorite stories about me?

My last breath had come and gone- it wasn't mine anymore.

That was the secret.

Give them all the time and attention and love you have.

"Prepare for your last breath."

Then take it, while you were still alive.

Live fully.

Live in awareness.

Give her all the time and attention and love you have.

Maybe Anna was right to avoid the dramatic conversations, to pretend my death was a lie and that this whole ordeal would come out alright. Her affirmation to embrace life wasn't a defense mechanism. She wasn't the fool- I was. She wanted me to draw in as much as I could, for however long I had left. She wanted to curse the night, to refuse any acknowledgement of its impending darkness- I smiled at her. I reached over and faintly touched a strand of hair that fell off her pillow onto the sheet.

I felt my own lungs pull air in, then push it out.

The winter had enveloped us, in the midst of February- snow, ice, darkness. I used to complain about the winter. The salt, the shovel, the dirty boots and pools of water in the hallways- I used to curse the winter. But now, as I considered it, I was glad to be pent up, trapped, surrounded by harsh elements. It had forced me into myself. I had been forced to deal with this.

This winter had delivered clarity, by way of contrast- the crunch of snow in a silent meadow, the tightening of your chest with your first gulps of air after leaving the warmth of your home, the sunlight's violent reflections off matte sheets of ice- the winter acts like a grindstone, it sharpens you. It sharpens your perceptions, your sensations. You become pointed. A skewer. Aware. It had been a good time for me, once the holidays ended, once everyone stopped looking at me with their eyes weeping "This will be your last Christmas." February had been a welcome shift into focus. There was pain, and there was relief. There was a darkness which forced you to cherish the light.

"Prepare for your last breath."

I had found an anchor.

A mantra.

My simple thought to cut away the unnecessary, the superfluous.

No more punctilious "How's everything today?"

No more tantrums in traffic.

No more feel sorry.

Only live.

Life.

Authentic, fulsome life.

-O-

The migraines, the pressure against my forehead bleeding out through my eyes and my ears- day after day, week after week- the intensity increased. The marijuana had helped with the side effects of the chemotherapy, but the headaches couldn't be dampened.

I tried opiates for an afternoon and my wife had to mop me up from the floor.

I didn't enjoy the disconnection, the fuzziness of it.

I didn't feel alive.

The pain- as bad as it was- I was here.

It was singular- but I was here.

Until I wasn't- until it consumed me.

One night, awoken out of bed well before sunset, agonizing- after an hour of pressing my fingertips against my temples- absorbed by a sensation. Becoming the pain, merging into it. A perfect meditation- free from distraction, from disquietude- engulfed. Until it released, abruptly, and left me alone in the darkness.

I was back to being somebody.

I walked quietly out of the bedroom and headed downstairs to the kitchen table.

I sat down with a glass of water.

I felt so relieved.

Alive.

The chilly hardwood planks against my bare feet- I rubbed the stubble on my neck and grinned.

Then a notion struck me.

I dimmed the lights low then garnered a pen and a few sheets of paper from the printer.

Nick,

It's a January morning. The house is quiet, cold, drafty. You are asleep upstairs in your bedroom. There's no moon outside the kitchen windows. I can make out a few stars, but not many. I woke up with a headache, but now I'm feeling better. In fact, I feel great, as good as I have in weeks, months maybe. I'm clear. I'm present. I'm excited for the sunset. I think I'll bundle up and head outside to enjoy it properly. And I'm most excited for you to wake up. I can't wait for you to come running out of your room in your red flannel pajamas. I'm excited to fix you a plate of scramble eggs and toast, to pour you a glass of orange juice. I'm excited for you to tell me about your dreams, if you had any. I'm excited to tell you about the sunrise. Maybe I'll spot a deer out back by the forest, a doe nipping at branches. I'll tell you about the colors and the deer and you'll make me promise next time to wake you up, so you can be there with me.

I admire you Nick, for so many reasons.

You are such a warm, open person. It's beyond being open to the world around you- more so, you open up the world around you. You pull good things out of the world. Your enthusiasm and your genuine curiosity for life are contagious. You've always been this way, ever since you were born. You hardly cried at all when you came out from your mother. The nurses brought you to her chest, then performed the battery of tests any newborn receives, wrapped you up, then put you in my arms. I held you, and we stared into each other. It was magnetic, your gaze. Inside your gaze, I felt so many things. You opened me up. To love. To letting go. To being a better person. Locked together with you, I'll never forget that moment. It was joy. It was serenity. It was so life affirming. Wherever you had come from, you brought that with you. It's who you are, who you've always been, who you'll always be.

Your presence made all the difference in our family. Your mother and I were apprehensive about becoming parents again, having another child. We thought we needed more time to adjust, to secure a better handle on things before growing our family. We didn't intend to get pregnant so quickly after Thomas. But there you were, and you were exactly what we needed. I thought I knew what I

needed, what would be best for me, how the world should look, how things should play out, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

I hope I'm proven wrong again, with all this.

With me being told I have less than a year to live.

I don't want this. I certainly don't think it's best for me, or for you or Thomas or mom.

But I could be wrong.

And I hope I am.

My father left when I was nine years old, the same age you are right now. I remember being very confused. Then upset. I witnessed your grandma become so unhappy, so hostile. I saw how much grief and pain it caused her, so I began to hate him. I hated my father for a very long time. He abandoned us to fend for ourselves. He never visited, never told me 'I love you' again, he never sent any birthday cards or child support payments. And it was easy to hate him.

But recently I've come to the conclusion that his leaving, his absence, it helped me become the person I am today. When he left, he opened up a world of possibilities for me. A world where I had to learn right from wrong for myself, where I had to learn how to work hard, where I had to accept responsibilities and grow up quickly.

I like the person I became as a result of all that.

I like the person I am today.

I love being your father. I love being able to take care of you.

I love being able to tell you about the sunrise.

And I know for certain I wouldn't have become this same person, that I wouldn't be here today, if my father would have stuck around.

I suppose I'm putting this pen to paper and explaining my thoughts to offer you some hope, a different way of looking at things, in case you go through rough times. Moments of sadness, or anger, or fear. It's okay when rough times happen, but don't forget, you have everything you need inside of you. I saw it in you from the beginning. You'll become a man that you are proud to be, and I'm so sorry I won't be able to see it in person. I'm so sorry. It's my only wish, and I'm sorry that I can't make it come true. But that doesn't mean I won't be proud of you. I will be. I already am. And even though I won't be there in person, it doesn't mean I won't be there in other ways.

I will remain open to the possibilities.

I need you to continue to open up the world around you, so those possibilities can take shape.

I don't want to stop writing to you, this letter from your dead father. I want to fill page after page. It might be the only way for me to connect with you, once I'm gone.

But like I said, I will remain open to the possibilities.

Now, the sky is shifting from black to purple, and soon a few deep blues will bleed out from the east. I'm going to watch the sun come up. I'm going to pay attention to every color, to every change. I'm going to watch the fog of my breath and rub my hands together in the cold. I'm going to spot a deer, a beautiful doe, then I'm going to tell you all about it.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for being my son, for letting me be your father.

Thank you for your love.

Thank you for letting me love you. Because I love you so much. I always have. I always will.

Dad

-O-

"Anna, we need to talk about this."

"Not now, Matt. I can't."

"You have to. We have to. We've been putting it off. We have to come up with a plan."

"I can't. I can't think about it right now. I just can't."

"Listen. Just because we talk about it doesn't mean either of us isn't staying positive, alright? It doesn't mean I'm giving up, or you're giving up. It's not about that. It's about being practical. Being prepared."

"I can't, Matt. I just can't."

"At some point I was going to die. At some point I am going to die. This is about making sure you and the boys are alright, are taken care of- that everything is taken care of. There are details, arrangements, financial things- we have to get our hands around everything. I want to help you do it. But I don't want to wait too long. It's better for you, for the kids- we have to get in front of it."

"I can't! How many times do I have to say it? I can't, for chrissakes. I can't go there right now."

"Alright. Can you let me know, then, when you are able to?"

"Yes. I will let you know. I just can't right now."

-O-

Thomas had never once asked me, "What was she like?"

My mother.

I realized this one afternoon, driving in the rain- muddy pools of rainwater, wet concrete, lonesome construction equipment shut down for the weekend.

I realized I hadn't talked much about her to the boys.

I hadn't told them any stories.

It played out in my head- one day, somebody asks one of my sons a simple question like "Are you spending the holidays with your parents?" then either Thomas or Nick would have to respond "My mother is coming by this year for Christmas but my father is dead" and their acquaintance or coworker might offer the perfunctory "I'm sorry" to which they would reply "No it's alright, he passed away twenty years ago" and the coworker or acquaintance might relax a bit then casually ask "What was he like, your father?"

What was I like?

How would I be remembered?

What stories would they tell? What adjectives would they use to describe my character? How would I exist in their minds, in their hearts?

I hope people ask them what I was like.

I hope their wives, on first dates at candlelight dining room tables, force my sons to share a personal anecdote about me. I hope my boys marry women who care to ask questions like that, who are sensitive and emotional and aren't afraid of the past.

"What was he like, your father?"

I don't expect it to be a histrionic scene.

I don't expect wild narratives, tall tales.

I'd want my boys only to be honest, and to remember me as somebody who loved them.

Sure, I might have been impossible to please.

I might have been the kind of man that never celebrated an achievement. The kind of man who never looked at his wife from a secret post, watching her with a smile of delight, a feeling of unabashed pride.

Sure, I might have been thorny, cold. I expected too much out of everyone. And whatever it was, it wasn't enough- not enough zeroes in the bank account, not enough project delivery milestones or hours at work, not enough stock options or sunny vacations, the watches and the latest gizmos and the tailored suit jackets.

Is that who'd they remember me as?

What was my legacy?

What was my mother's legacy?

It started with her.

I saw her endure, bitter, hostile to the world. I watched her work her doubles and triples, vie for more overtime, a larger paycheck, more security. I listened to her complain. Denounce my father, her supervisor, the state senator- she blamed the world. She hated what the world had done to her, what he had done to her. To say

she had a chip on her shoulder would be a laughable understatement. But there were complications to her pride. One minute she would refuse to accept help from her older sister, say in the form of watching one of us, the boys, but then in the next minute my mother would complain that nobody cared about her. She was riddled with hypocrisy. She was intense. She pushed me, my brothers- she didn't accept excuses. She slapped us across our faces when we said something or did something she interpreted as an affront. She was tough. She was mean.

But she carried us through.

I never saw her spend a day in bed.

I never saw her take a drink and put her feet up on the couch.

I never saw her throttle down or crack a joke.

I saw her work, and pray, and struggle.

I wanted better for her, and the best I could do was make good for myself. Study. Go to church. Stay out of trouble. Earn a scholarship to college. Find a job out of school. Build towards a career. I tried to ease her mind. I tried to make sure she knew she didn't have to worry about me. I was responsible. I was considerate. I worked hard. I had an edge, a competitive nature underneath the manners and the mild appearance- and she helped me develop it.

I remember the lectern's voice at St. Juliana Parish, a crackle over the speakers, the tremulous bass voice- "Please open your hymnal to page number forty-three for our offertory song, Gather Us In. Page number forty-three." Then his throat would clear, the piano would start. My mother's eyes would be closed. I would glance up at her, to see. What was she doing? Who was she talking to? What was she saying?

A core memory: my father, yelling at her, "It goes wherever you put it! Why does everything have to 'go somewhere' with you! It doesn't fucking matter! Put it on the shelf, put it on the counter, stick it up your ass! None of it matters!" He was waving a scouring brush, the kind you use to clean a cast iron skillet, at her face. He waved it back and forth like he was making out to hit her with it but suddenly he smashed the wooden handle on the edge of our kitchen table. It split into two pieces. She was crying.

She must have told him to put it where it belonged, in the drawer next to the can opener and the potato masher.

But I don't remember that.

I remember him yelling.

Her crying.

I don't think I ever saw her cry again.

I saw prayers.

More eyelids shut tight.

I used to think I had it hard, my father leaving at such an early age. I was acutely aware that I was a victim, somebody who could gain sympathy, somebody who might deserve a break because of a situation outside of my control. I had something other people didn't. My dad left. I was abandoned.

But I was wrong.

It was easy for me.

My mother made it easy.

She was the one who had it hard.

If Thomas asked me, "What was your mom like?" I would tell him she was full of grit. She was a tough, loyal, determined woman. She expected a lot out of us because she always delivered on her end. She loved us more than anything in the world, and she made our well-being her top priority. She never wavered. Once she made up her mind, it was made up. I'd tell Thomas it wasn't easy raising three boys on one salary, under one roof, with only one pair of eyes, but she did it. Especially when my brother Tommy was one of the three boys.

"What was he like, dad?"

Tommy was a pain in the ass, but I loved him. He was my kid brother. In some ways, I was jealous of him. He was more athletic than me. Better looking. He had more courage, a fearlessness, that I never possessed. But he was inconsiderate. He made excuses. He drank and partied and took pills and one nondescript Tuesday in March he passed out on the floor of his apartment and never woke up. A coma for four months, life support- brain dead. Goodnight.

"Why would you name me after a guy like that?"

I don't know. A case of survivor's guilt? I wanted to make up for losing him. I wanted to lend his name a second chance, a second life. If I'm honest, I think it's what mom would have wanted. I think she would have been proud of me that I named my first-born son Thomas, in honor of her son who passed away dearly departed, his picture printed on one side of a laminated card and the prayer of St. Jude on the other, the white lilies and his friends dressed head to toe in black. There were so many young people- at his funeral I couldn't believe how many kids showed up, ostensibly his friends. Hundreds. They appeared distraught. Hurt. Heartbroken. They must have loved him. He must have meant something to them. Some of them even told me as much.

Tommy went first.

Then mom.

And now me.

And no matter how many people go, who have gone before, and no matter how many will come after, Dave and Anna and my boys and their sons if they have any- every person ever in the history of people- it doesn't help me summon up the courage. It doesn't take away the nerves.

I wasn't the fearless one.

I wasn't the funny one.

I don't know which one I was.

Someday, I guess, somebody will have to decide.

But I won't have a say in any of that.

-O-

What had I learned in all these years?

How would I answer the question, arriving at the pearly gates, "What did your life teach you?"

I was in the bathroom one afternoon, after an intense bout of nausea, vomiting- I washed my face, looking back at my reflection in the mirror. Bald. Gaunt.

What had you gained, in terms of knowledge?

Here's what came to mind: nothing good is easy, nothing worthwhile is immediate, everything that is difficult and time consuming is valuable, and ought to be cherished. Relish in the 'tough.' Delight in the struggle.

Also: the heart is real. The heart is more than an organ inside your body. It is more than a metaphysical concept. It is a piece of you, a locus, that is a primary constituent of who you are as a person. But it requires attention, cultivation- it's your choice whether or not to engage your heart. The language of the heart is love, and love is always an action. Every person possesses a heart, dormant or awake, and it's up to you whether or not you want to connect with it. You have the ability to access it if you're willing to. Every person has the capacity to be loved, but not always to love. Love is sentimental, it is fragile, it is sincere. It is selfless, in the sense that it is not self-oriented. It is other-oriented. Our culture, this world we've created, it has little consideration for the ways of the heart. We are too self-involved, self-absorbed. We ought to rethink our approach, and become more focused on the heart's intuition, the heart's capacity to heal, enrich and unite.

Also: we don't know what we see, but we see what we know. And what we know is what we believe. Our preconceived notions, our biases, our internal paradigms and worldviews and systematic models- these create the world around us. Reality is what we create, based on what we know and believe. If you begin to loosen your grip on the models, if you can open yourself up to impossibilities, if you can

let go- your world will take on new shapes. In the end, every model, every doctrine, is at best incomplete. Yet, our brains are designed to build these models and hold onto them. Our story will always be tragic, in this sense. Our governments, our religions, our sciences and philosophies- they mark progress, they prove our superiority and our intellect, but they also contain the seeds of our demise. There isn't any truth to hold onto- it's too complicated, too chaotic, out of reach.

Also: family is the essential influence on how we view the world, on how we learn to interact with others and how we view ourselves. The interactions with your family reverberate across the course of your life. It's not something you are in control of, but something you benefit from being aware of. If you are a parent, everything you do matters. Your children absorb everything. You impress such an influence over their life- it is the greatest responsibility anybody can take on.

I couldn't think of anything else.

I brewed myself a cup of chamomile tea and considered a few other ideas.

Suffering- what had I learned about suffering, about pain, from this experience of slowly dying, wasting away? I knew it was a part of my life, but that much was obvious. I knew that some people had suffered more than me, and some had suffered less. I didn't find that fact to be invidious. I wasn't looking for justice or equality. When I first received my diagnosis, I might have been indignant, irrationally upset- but not anymore. The facts are the facts. For now, I was alive. I was suffering, but there was still an opportunity to love, to be loved. I wasn't that bad off. And quite frankly, I came to realize that nobody is owed anything.

I hadn't learned much.

But what I didn't know, I was convinced of.

-O-

Rain streaks down the windows.

Melancholy.

I can't help but dredge through the past, what has passed me by and only exists in the form of echoes, dim lamplight shadows. I gravitate towards memories when the boys were younger, Nick and Thomas.

Swing set jubilation.

Thomas' first steps.

Nick, his plush animals like lions and seals and foxes and turtles lining the walls of his crib, most notably Crabbie the red crab.

I try to focus on specifics, the details.

My wife- her thighs, her smile, the strut of her evening entrance through the back door, emerging from the garage in a blouse with grocery bags in one arm a new plant in the other, keys on the table then "How was your day, babe?"

Soon we will make love for the last time.

The body of my touch will be incinerated in a crematorium, and I'll be handed over to her cock and all in an awkward brass urn with two handles and an oblong shape. A transaction performed with dignity, the funeral director at the ready with a box of tissues. Nearer and nearer I draw towards final stagnation, eternal goodbye- and my desire for flesh wanes. My body sickens me. And the medications, the side effects- my own skin makes me crawl. It burns, yet simultaneously feels wet, like its clinging to my bones. Maybe we've already made love for the last time.

What difference?

What moment isn't a wasted moment?

How many hours on the couch sedated by television blur? How many mornings, front to back with traffic honk and turn signal and nervous rush, an eyeball full of clock digits? How many days in selfishness? How many nights with books you can't remember? Trashcan bags, tying the plastic strings off neatly, satisfied- what does any of it amount to?

I am haunted by the past.

I would have done so much so differently, had I have known.

Turn off the cellphone.

Forget the World Series.

The fights, the arguments, the back and forth- what a waste.

This is one huge tragedy, this life of ours.

And my complaining! If I could take anything back, it would be the deep sighs in my sons' bedrooms waiting for pajama pants to be wrestled up slender waists, another book to read, dashing through hallways obstreperous and laughing at me with my dumbstupid curses about toothbrushes or hair combs- I would have enjoyed it more.

I wish I could have enjoyed it.

Relished in each moment.

Had I have known...

But there were perfect diamonds. There were.

Keep repeating it to yourself.

There was happiness.

There was love.

Find another picture, there it is- five years ago, a summer night with ice cream cones and chocolate stains and miniature golf scorecards- you loved them, and they loved you.

Remember the coloring book, a red crayon, at the kitchen table? One of these birds is not like the others. Why did you draw a circle around that one, Nicky? "Because I love him."

You did.

And in that last breath, all it will be is complete. It will end and be finished.

Nothing will have been wasted.

Nothing will have been superfluous.

It will have been your life.

-O-

Of all the things I would long for in this world, besides the people- it would be autumn.

In early March I panicked under a wool sweater, wrapped around a down comforter- a chilly afternoon, woeful and painfully aware I wouldn't make it to another October.

That's what forced me up out of bed.

A crisis.

My last October had come and gone.

I dressed myself up, gulped down a cup of hot soup, a packet of electrolytes- my keys, a bottle of water, a hat on my head.

Boot prints on one of the muddy trails in the Conservation Area, raindrops and I went out alone to trudge ground beneath an unconquerable sky of grey, dark and damp and cold- weaving out of a forest and across a meadow to one of the ponds. Bubbles, ripples on the shore- I texted Anna to let her know I wouldn't be home when she got back from work. I needed a moment, a few hours to collect myself.

It would have made fine weather for a funeral.

For my funeral.

A forest perfumed by rain, needles and cones, steeped and fragrant- it would be a fine place to conduct the affair.

I'd only be afraid of spoiling it for everything, everyone else.

The trails were quiet, vacant of human involvement or concern.

Inspired by the odors, thick and rich, I was inclined towards reverence, so I quieted myself down. Pushing back on those voices cranial like invasive belches bubbling up from who knows where, one after another, demanding attention and focus and running from one line to another- I pulled my concentration on the cycles of my breath. In. Out. In. Out. Then to listen. To listen to the gnarled roots of a giant *pinus strobus* above a sprinkled floor of saffron needles, the roots shrugged and sighed, "What's the hurry? We blink every hundred years, relax then choke stones." To spongy piles of beech and oak and red maple leaves, their vibrant reds and yellows eroded and eaten, brown and black and sludgy tar, mounds of them

in ditches and glens, they gurgled, "We are plucked off from our branches by the wind to feed the earth, so what?" To a clump of amanita mushrooms, working their way through the detritus of the forest floor, "Our secret is in the mycelium." To a drumming pileated woodpecker, "No grubs here, onto the next." To a brown trout, stationary in a flow of riffle water, pointed upstream in one of the brooks that fed into the river on the other end of the hills, "Did you see the size of that nymph?" Blue fescue and Appalachian sedge waved gaily in the meadow, "Isn't the wind grand? I wish we could hold it, if only for a moment, if only to thank it." Somewhere above us a new moon continued to spin herself in a delicate procession, dancing- she only blows a kiss to sing, "Time will take even me, too."

It's March and I can't help but wish for one more October. Children insane with plastic bags full of candy, who bound along sidewalks and asphalt lanes dressed in skeleton outfits and witches' hats, a frenzy.

If I could just have one more October...

A grey squirrel leapt past me, chuckling, "Rejoice! Soon we eat until our bellies burst out from our fur!"

A seagull cried out from a lonely distance, somewhere beyond the tree line, a death knell, "I've arrived too early."

A clump of moss squeaked, "Have you seen the wooly bears? We miss our friends."

To the dirt underneath, its famished teeth gnashing, too busy eating to say anything with its mouth full.

I tilted my neck up to the rainclouds to hear their chorus, "Everything is perfect and true, appearing as it should and as it has been destined to appear, rain and snow and sunlight, flood and famine, animals and plants and stones- it all comes from us then returns back to us but it's never sent or returned quite the same because change is the nature of the game. Don't be fooled by appearances and the external masks of things because the everchanging form of the world is the dynamic transient evanescence which governs all outward manifestations of the immutable inward singularity. Penetrating- some call it the void or the thunderhead or the Great Mother, others call it the most high or Brahman or eternity or God- whatever name, it is embedded in all, is all, the unifying principle of incomprehensible *ex nihilo*. And there's no need to lose sleep over those sorts of details, m' boy! Eyes open, look out, and don't ask for anything else. Nothing is permanent not even death so don't let old Father Death fool you with his black fingernails and gnarled bones! Oh, enjoy the bath."

I turned away from the pond and back up a hillside, then along an esker- I sallied about one of the ridges of sediment and gravel, a scar tissue remnant of ancient glacial wanderings- I kept my ears open, listening.

A miasma of petrichor, decay- yet somehow fresh, burgeoning with life.

There was life, alive- changing, transforming.

Even in the ground, what was dead- new life arose.

Would it ever stop?

My October would come.

I wouldn't be able to appreciate it with my eyes, in the sense of the eyes in my head which connected neuronal to the visual processing centers of my cortex- no, those eyes wouldn't register any colors, any carved pumpkins or bushel baskets of Macintosh apples or halfeaten dishes of candycorn - but October would come and present itself to the world, a world I would continue to be a part of. Yes. I would. I would be here, underfoot, in the ground. Burnt bones and crisped skin and ashes from eyeballs- spread out, mixed into the soil. Right out here. In this very land. Then it would begin- more transformations- cool rainwater penetrating then coagulating the ash and dirt, a mixture soon to be siphoned up by the root system of one of those majestic white pines, or even a coquettish sugar maple- delivered apical, finally unified with a photon of sunlight, activated and enriched and further rearranged into molecules of sugar perhaps to pulse along veiny networks of sap into the bellies of grey squirrels or carpenter ants into the bigger bellies of merlin falcons or red tail hawks, digested and processed so now the nutrients condense around avian synapses above cool October mornings, in flight, boiling up into the sky, everything in sight.

Was it so much of a crisis?

This death of mine?

I'll have my October.

-O-

I'll be another father who isn't around.

Who isn't there.

He'll be an anxious, confused young man.

But maybe it will be different. Maybe, if I can find a way, only for a moment or two, if I can appear in a dream, if I can haunt him as a benevolent specter- who can be certain of anything?

What's possible, impossible.

I pray for those kinds of miracles.

When he's hurt, upset, wounded by this world- if I can find a way.

Now that the tumor presses against my skull.

Now that my eyes burn.

My stomach froths with spume.

My bones ache.

My muscles wither.

Now that I'm closing in- there isn't any sense wasting prayers on my account.

It's him.

My boy.

-O-

I called Dave and explained it to him.

"I've got something for you I need you to take care of. Three letters. One for Anna, one for Thomas, and one for Nick. I want you to take responsibility for delivering them. The letter for Anna, hand it to her on the first anniversary of me leaving. Hand it to her and tell her I had you promise it to me that you'd wait. She won't need it right away, I don't think. She won't be ready for it. And the boys' letters, those are up to you. I'm not sealing the envelopes. I need you to read them, when you're able to, so you'll know best when they are ready to receive them. It might be decades away. It might be a couple of months. I thought it could make sense when they graduate high school, college, or something like that, to mark an achievement or a special occasion in their journey to manhood- but I won't be there to make the determination. Part of why I'm doing this is so you stay close to them, stay connected to them. You have to keep an eye on them for me. And when the time is right, you explain it to them and hand the letters over. This is what I'm asking from you, Davey. You're my kid brother and I love you and I am entrusting this to you because I can trust you and I know you're the only person in the entire world who can do this for me. It's a little heavy, but we're into the heavy stuff now. I wish we weren't, but here we are."

Dave promised he would take care of it.

I thanked him and asked how his girls were.

He said everyone was fine, and that he'd be by in a few days to say hello.

I told him if I didn't make it that long, the letters were in my nightstand.

He didn't say much after that.

"I'll see you soon, alright?"

"Goodbye, Dave."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

We hung up the phone.

-O-

She was at my bedside through the end.

She held onto my hand.

The days turned into nights, and she kept holding on. She told stories- our first date, her first impressions and what she remembered from that night; the first time we made love; our wedding day; when she found out she was pregnant with Thomas; sledding with Nick and Thomas in the backyard on a flimsy toboggan, karate classes, playing hide and seek, our New Years' resolution to do yoga together; conversations we'd had, long nights together both of us sleepless; different times she'd fallen in love with me, with our life; how proud she was of me, of what we were able to accomplish together. She held my hand and cried and kissed my cheeks. I cried, too. I listened and cried and held onto her as tight as I could before I had to let go. The boys came in and out, but Anna was there through the end. I had taken her for granted. I told her that. She assured me I was wrong. She had taken me for granted. But then we decided, mutually, we had done the best we could have. In spite of everything- we had done a fine job. We'd been lucky to found each other. I'd been lucky. It was the last thought in my head, in my life, before it ended.

REST STOP

Daisy Mercado shifted her weight from one foot to the other, set one hand to her hip, and yawned. Her position- three spots away from the register. An order solidified in her mind- grilled chicken sandwich, small French fry, Diet Coke. She was on her way home, the evening commute- her kids at practice, her ex-husband probably stoned in front of the evening news. The sonovabitch. She checked her phone. It had been a long afternoon with her coworkers- a team building event, a leadership seminar. The key attributes for a winning team- communication, execution, accountability, empathy. One of her teammates, during a roundtable discussion, remarked, "Empathy is not my strong suit. Just ask my wife. But seriously, it doesn't come easy. Being raised by a single mother, my three brothers and I, our house was very results driven. There wasn't a lot of discussion about your feelings. It didn't matter how you felt. What mattered is you did your homework, and you washed up before supper." Daisy was horrified by the man's confession. She was a self-described empath. At a dinner party several months prior, after her third glass of cabernet, she proclaimed, "I'm the most empathetic person I know. I feel too damn much for other

people. That's how I ended up in such a lousy marriage- I felt so bad for Dale, what happened to him as a kid." Daisy the empath who showed up two hours late to her godson's birthday party at the zoo because of a hair appointment she couldn't reschedule. Daisy the empath who never supported her best friend's charity foundation other than attending the annual gala free of charge. Daisy the empath who, later that selfsame evening with a Diet Coke in the cupholder beside her, would curse out her passenger side window with her middle finger blaring after a confused elderly woman indicated a right turn with her left signal. Daisy the empath who refused to acknowledge her husband's feelings of loneliness for several years then became indignant towards him after he lost his job and started abusing prescription medication.

Isaac Janson stood in line behind Daisy Mercado with a flat nose and a clean, pressed shirt. His friends described him to others as a "really nice guy." Isaac had met his wife, Christine Robards, through one of those friends- a blind date, then a regular date, then an anniversary date, then a marriage proposal. Christine's family loved Isaac- her sister, Jessi, was jealous of Christine's position. Isaac, because of his niceness, because of his wealthy family and Ivy league education, because of his rakish looks, his trendy hairstyle- because of all this he occupied a unique vantage point which allowed him freedom to spew vitriol at everyone and everything he deemed worthy of criticism. Isaac who had recently driven by an old, dilapidated house with its porch slouching, and on the steps of the house noticed a disheveled woman with hair down to her knees. Isaac who then told Christine about the sight, "It was so disgusting I almost puked." Isaac who watched a middle-aged man with a bulbous red nose trudging his bike in the midst of a sleet storm and muttered "What a moron." Isaac who told his buddies stories about his father-in-law, the retired car mechanic who had only picked up golf that summer and wanted to learn from Isaac, Isaac a lifetime long-drive sharpshooter and country club adolescent all grown up. "Playing with the guy is torture." Isaac who poked fun at waitresses and gas station attendants and airport security personnel, who noted little tics and quirks and abnormalities of flesh or personality and made sure to remember them for future conversations. Coworkers, anonymous patrons at the gym, friends, family, faces in magazine photographs- nobody was safe from his niceness.

Behind Isaac and Daisy harumphed an annoyed and exasperated Carl Webber. A man who rarely smiled, and when he did, it was as if it had been imposed onto his face, unnatural. Carl was importunate, slightly below the national average height for males, and consummately on edge with a sense of 'being busy.' Though he was no boondogger. Carl worked and worked and became a successful financial analyst, whose younger brothers admired him for his

wealth, for his titles, for his European cars, his perfectly manicured lawns and impressive vacation properties. The acquisition of money had always been the central focus in Carl's life, ever since his boyhood days in rural Pennsylvania eating ketchup and bologna sandwiches. It was his sole motivation that drove every action and decision- don't be poor. Don't live in a home like your father's. Uncle Rob, Carl's rich uncle with the new television- that's who you ought to be like. It didn't matter that Uncle Rob beat up his first wife and spent very little time with his children. It didn't make a difference to Carl. As a grade school hustler Carl made a small fortune in the trading, collecting, and resale of baseball cards. His snow shoveling business took flight when he had saved enough to buy a second snowblower, so he could hire one of his brothers as an employee. His first contract of many. Whatever the situation, he was quick to perform a quantitative assessment. Even his wife represented a high return- a woman ten years his junior, she would ultimately become his caregiver; a woman with average looks and intelligence who would never leave his side. Carl fidgeted, scrolling over his phone- a Fidelity Account, verifying the numbers, annoyed by the market's latest patterns- a bull run stalled out. He ignored a text message from his son. Then he shifted his eyes to the Menu Board, squinting, perturbed- a high forehead, demarcated by thin eyebrows and a receding hairline. In a loud whisper, "What's taking so long?"

Across the HIGHWAY OASIS lines of people flowed like polluted tributaries, red-eye'd and over-caffeinated, eager to engorge themselves on supersized portions of high cholesterol fast-food. Hamburgers, tacos, ice cream. Diet sodas, prepackaged sandwiches. Propylene glycol, sodium nitrite, ammonium sulfate, and potassium bromate. Poised, credit cards pinched in between their sticky fingers.

"Order number fifty-three!"

INCONVENIENT

"Do you have cash, for the maid?"

"Is that tomorrow?"

"Yes. Every other Wednesday. The past two years." She curled her tongue, like a tiger's, over her top lip.

"Doesn't she take Venmo?"

"We go through this every time. She's a friggin' illegal. I don't think she has a bank account. She only takes cash."

"If she's an illegal, can we get in trouble for using her?"

"Don't be dumb, Raymond." She walked away from the door of his office and back to the kitchen table where she had set up her computer.

A glass of seltzer water on a ceramic coaster- she clicked open a screen.

It was the end of the month, and she confirmed the transactions from her credit card: Timo's Landscapers, Netflix, BlueBird Coffee, DoorDash Premier, Amazon Prime. The monthly renewals- she verified each one, each charge.

She heard him coming down the stairs.

"Do we really need to pay for NFL Redzone in the summer? There aren't any games on. Your fantasy league doesn't start until September. Can you cancel it?"

"We've been over this. I got that deal at the beginning of last season for three years. The rate is locked in. If I canceled, then reset it in September, we'd end up paying six dollars a month more. Here- I have eighty bucks." He set the money on the table next to her.

"Can you check the door? I think our FrozenHealth meals are supposed to be here."

He harumphed, walked away, and returned with a cardboard box. "I hate unpacking these, can you help me?"

"Do you not understand I'm paying our bills?"

"The bills are paid automatically."

She shook her head. "And this is how your identity was stolen. Don't you get it? You're supposed to verify, Raymond. You're supposed to log in and check every day. Just like you do with your fantasy football. Except this is reality, of course, and actually friggin' matters."

She jerked her attention away from him, back to her screen.

He struggled with the packing tape on the box. Finally, he ripped open the top and arranged the pre-cooked meals into the freezer compartment.

"What are we doing for dinner tonight?"

"Let's order out."

"What do you feel like?"

She paused. "We did Chinese yesterday, burgers on the weekend, pizza Friday- what about Mexican? In honor of our maid."

He chuckled, a single chuckle, then responded, "Alright. I have a couple of meetings this afternoon and need to prep for the quarterly tomorrow with my boss. Can you put it in around five?"

She smiled, supercilious. "It's always a quarterly with your boss. The guy is obsessed with PowerPoint."

"I can't help it."

"Teach him how to figure out friggin' Excel!"

He cleared his throat. "I'll have a chicken burrito, with guacamole."

"Fine."

He walked out of the kitchen and back up the stairs to his desk in the converted guest room.

She clicked open another screen and checked their investment portfolio. Down \$300 from the previous day. The markets were cooling off. She cracked her knuckles. It stressed her out. The markets. The TIP selection screen at the coffee shop. The inaccurate orders from Etsy. The missed delivery dates. The news article on people taking advantage of Welfare. The cost of gasoline.

Another click, another screen.

Shifting focus.

Posts, pictures, reactions, memes- she spent the morning at the table. A former pop star had died. There was a war brewing in the Middle East. She left for lunch, and picked up another MOBILE ORDER cup of coffee. She made a note of the grates on the stove top- she would check them, tomorrow, after the maid had supposedly cleaned the kitchen.

They had better be spotless.

--

"Raymond. Raymond! Wake up!"

He groaned.

"Raymond! The doorbell. Did you hear that?"

"What?"

Her voice pitched up, whispering, nervous, "Somebody rang the doorbell."

"Jesus. What time is it?"

"Three AM."

"Are you sure?"

"About the doorbell? Or the time?"

"The doorbell."

"Yes I'm friggin' sure. Get out of bed and go check it out!"

"What?"

"Go and look!"

He turned over, facing her. "Look for what?"

"You're unbelievable. You're supposed to be the man in this relationship, remember?"

"What do you want me to do? Go beat somebody up? You're hearing things. Did you take your sleep meds?"

"Yes I took my friggin' sleep meds. I'm calling the police then if you won't get up and look."

"No you're not. What would you even say to them? Help, somebody rang my doorbell?"

She reached over to her cellphone. "I'm calling them."

"Okay. Okay." He took a deep breath, pulled the covers down, and set his feet on the floor. "If you don't hear from me, I love you."

She sighed.

He walked down the stairs to the door.

He flipped the front lights.

There was nobody there.

He debated on whether or not to open the door.
She would repudiate him, and send him back, if he didn't.
He peeked through the screen door.
Nothing.
Nobody.
He turned the deadbolt.
He labored back up to the bedroom.
"There's nobody out there. You're hearing things."
"The doorbell rang. I'm sure of it."

--

"Have you ever even used a screwdriver before?"
"Give me a second. This isn't the most intuitive thing."
"It's literally a two-step installation process."
He turned at the screw with a counterclockwise motion.
"You're turning it the wrong way!"
"No I'm not." He stopped. Then he tightened it, clockwise.
"See! You were turning it wrong. Come on, Raymond. What are you good for?"
"You don't say that when you need the mortgage paid!"
She shook her head and walked back inside the house. She clicked at her phone screen, and within a couple of minutes a picture came up. It was an image, a live video feed, outside their front door. He walked up to her with a Diet Soda in his hands. "How does it look?"
"Fine. If they come back, this will get everything on film. We have a month's worth of data storage with our package, so we don't have to worry about it being erased. Then we can go to the police with the evidence."

--

"I know mother... I know... I already did that... he'll be fine. The surgery was not life threatening! Don't be so dramatic about it... yes, I know it's not a quick recovery... yes, they assigned him a rehab facility... yes, he will be able to walk and run and everything... of course the surgeon was an expert... no, he didn't see them, he hardly made it down the driveway when it tore... I know it's horrible, I didn't say it wasn't... I know, I can't friggin' believe it either... well of course the police have the footage, but this isn't like a crime show on television, mother... there's not a detective on the case... I don't know how any of that works... of course we are going to press charges... Raymond's father connected us with an attorney... our plan is to recoup the hospital bills, and the emotional cost of all this, the last three weeks Raymond has been out of work... no we don't have any enemies in the neighborhood, are you friggin' crazy... I don't know... I don't know... alright, I'll speak to you then... alright, bye."

--

"Come back to bed, Raymond. What's the use?"

"The use is, when they come back to ring our doorbell, I'm going to be here, waiting for them."

She sighed. "You remember what happened last time, don't you?"

"Last time, I didn't have a gun."

She looked up from her cellphone and gazed at the blades of the ceiling fan. "Raymond, what are you talking about?"

He shouted up to her, "I'm not sure how I can be more clear."

"You don't have a gun, Raymond."

"Yes, *Monica*, I do."

She gulped. "Come up here, please. You're scaring me."

He shouted up the stairs, his hands warming the metal of the trigger and the barrel of a revolver. "There's nothing to be afraid of. I have it all planned out. They are going to come back. They are going to ring that bell again. We know their pattern. They come, then wait a couple of weeks, then come back. Three months now, they haven't changed."

She gulped. "Come up here, please."

"No. A torn Achilles tendon, the money we've wasted on the camera equipment and attorneys, the time we've lost, the sleepless nights, dealing with inept police officers- I'm taking matters into my own hands. I'm going to take care of this."

She walked down the stairs and saw him, seated in a chair, facing the front door. "I can't believe you brought something like that into our home."

He didn't look up at her. His eyes were fixed, pointed at the door. "Monica, you think I'm an idiot. And you might be right- I'm not good at much. I might not be good with a screwdriver. I might not know about cars, or fishing, or hunting, or anything manly like that. I was never any good at sports. I was never any good at being tough. You probably don't even think I'm a good lay. And you know what, that's fine. That's all fine. Because what you don't know about me, what most people don't know about me, is that I do have one talent- and that talent is that I can be patient. I can be very, very patient. I can be a spider. I can sit here, and wait, and wait, and wait."

His voice sounded different to her, distant, coming from the other side of a field or from across the street. She didn't know how to respond. "Is this worth going to jail over, Raymond?"

"Who said anything about jail?"

"What do you think will happen if you shoot somebody?"

"Somebody? I'm going to shoot a criminal, a trespasser, breaking and entering- a black one, at that. You saw the video. So let me ask you- what judge would convict me?"

She didn't respond.

He finally looked up to her. "What white man in this county goes to jail for shooting a black man who's breaking into his home? To

answer your question- no, this isn't worth going to jail over. That's why I won't be going to jail."

CONTENT

He clicked a button on his phone. He zoomed the camera towards his son. The ball at the boy's feet, the other children running around, the matching yellow jerseys, the parents shouting- the man began to narrate the scene. "It's our second game of the season, and we're doing so great! Good job Dylan! Kick it! There you go." The scrum of bodies followed the ball, a hive, short limbs, short arms, untied laces. The man kept the camera focused on the boy. The boy managed to set his foot on the ball, for a brief moment, then glanced up. The man waved at the boy. The boy waved back at his father.

The man clicked the same red button to end the recording. He reviewed the video as the game continued, as the hive changed shapes, shifting, a shoal of chaos.

One of the coaches limped out a perfunctory word or two of encouragement.

One parent on the sidelines remarked to nobody in particular, "They look a little better this week."

Another parent, one of the mothers, continued peeling oranges. She put the slices into a plastic bag, resting on top of a cooler packed with ice and Gatorade drinks.

The man edited the video clip, and then applied a visual filter. He added a caption underneath his son's figure- SOCCER!

The halftime whistle blew.

The two teams parted, untangled, and went to opposite sidelines as the referee took hold of the ball.

The man posted the video on his social media account.

The kids ambled, desultory, in front of their coach, who praised their effort, reminded them to have fun, then encouraged them to go find their parents and have a snack.

The boy found his father.

The man looked up from his phone. "Hi buddy! Are you having fun?" "Yeah."

"Do you want to see the video I got?"

--

He pressed the phone up to the window. His son was ready to approach Master Rick to throw two front punches, one with each hand. There were seven other students in the class. After they finished with Master Rick, they had been instructed to hop through a series of hula hoops on the ground. Then there were plastic cones to wind through. Then they were back at Master Rick.

The man continued recording his son through the first, then the second circuit of obstacles.

After throwing two front punches at the start of the third circuit, though, his son tripped on the hula hoops and fell onto the ground. The boy's face scrunched up in frustration and disappointment. In an instant, the boy ran off the padded mat to the door which led out of the dojo.

The man continued recording.

"Dylan, why did you stop?"

The boy began to cry and crossed his arms. "I hate karate!"

The man clicked the STOP RECORDING button on his phone.

The boy's face was red.

"Come on. You fell down. It's okay. Come on, don't pout." He put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Listen, I had a great video going. Do the circuit one more time, okay? We can show mommy how good you did, okay?"

--

At the dinner table the man and his wife were both on their phones, scrolling, flipping. Dylan watched a television screen across the room glowing with cartoons as he ate a microwaved slice of pizza. "Did you upload the pictures from last weekend, at the Petting Zoo?"

"No, not yet."

The mother checked her emails for a coupon, then spent the next half hour ordering socks.

The man disputed a credit card charge via his Banking App, then switched over to his Facebook account.

The boy continued watching television, silent.

Finally, after checking through a series of work emails, the man looked over at his wife. "We should put him to bed, it's getting late."

"I'm busy. You need to handle it tonight."

He snorted through his nostrils, unconsciously. "Okay."

--

"Ryan?"

The man, at the sound of his name, reached over for his phone. "We slept in."

"I know. I'm surprised Dylan's not up."

The time read 8:27. There were six new text messages. Three Microsoft Teams messages from his colleagues. Fourteen unread emails.

His wife continued, "I'm watching the camera right now. He hasn't moved at all."

"Did his sound machine alarm go off?"

Her voice was quiet. "It's been green since 8:00."

"I'll go check on him."

REMOTE CONTROL

"She ain't blood, Maureen." That was the last sentence Everett had spoken to his wife. The night she threw him out- their final night together, his last night with her as his lawfully wedded wife. It was hazy, how the events unfolded to his recollection, but he was convinced he had said those words. Those words resulted in another clear memory. She threw a dinner plate at him, piled up with the remnants of a re-heated lasagna. Then she cursed at him. She hit him. She called her mother.

Finally, he left.

A couple of years later, one rainy afternoon alone at a kitchen table, a table with one chair, by himself, he figured it was about the meanest thing he'd ever said in his life.

Maureen hadn't uttered a word to him directly since that fatal night. All of their communications had been facilitated by an attorney. She kept the house and the dog, he left with his truck and a partially solvent landscaping business.

He hadn't been sleeping well the last few nights in his one-bedroom apartment above Island Music. He would toss around in wrinkled sheets, then he'd watch some television on the couch before dawn broke. It would only be a few hours of rest before work.

That particular night with Maureen and the barking dog and the clothes from his closet, the smashed plate, the beer on his breath- it had been out of his mind for a while. He had moved on. Or so he thought. Until last Sunday, the overcast skies, when everything reemerged.

She had asked him why he wasn't crying.

Wasn't he upset, too?

She had been crying all night.

"She ain't blood, Maureen."

He clicked at the remote control. Who says something like that? Who says that to a woman whose little niece dies from a tragic drowning? Who constructs that kind of a rationalization for his cold, callous indifference?

Everett shuddered.

Maureen had every right to leave him.

Last he heard she was dating one of the teachers at the high school. A math teacher. The news hurt Everette at first. He was jealous. Angry. But now, as he thought about her, as he reconsidered everything- 'Good for her.'

Most people on the island figured the pair of them divorced because they couldn't have kids. Maureen and Everett married young, full of love and idealism. Years passed by, but no children came. People talked. People made assumptions. In private, Maureen and Everett had been trying various methods, but it never panned out. Maureen wanted kids desperately. She spent money on vitamins, on hormones, on testing kits, on injections. Maureen researched adoption

agencies, how to become involved in foster care. Everett spent more time working, played more 9-ball pool, stayed away from the house. He wanted kids, too, but he wasn't going to let it drive him crazy.

If anybody knew the truth...

The girl's name was Emily, Emily Rose. Three-years old. Her mother discovered her, lifeless, at the bottom of a pool. It happened in the morning- Maureen's sister had been cooking pancakes in the kitchen with their other child. Maureen's brother-in-law had put Emily in the living room with her dolls and then had gone into the front yard to check on the car tires- a tire light alarm had appeared on the dashboard the prior evening while they were on their drive home from a Mexican restaurant. Maureen's sister was frustrated by the light, by the tires, by the cooped-up vacation house, by the abnormally hot July.

The little girl had wandered out to the back yard on her own and had fallen into the pool.

Everett wasn't welcome at the funeral.

Everett imagined the screams his sister-in-law must have let out. He imagined the father running from the front driveway into the backyard, diving into the pool, performing CPR on the lifeless body. He imagined a little boy in a highchair in the kitchen, eating blueberries, oblivious to the horror nearby.

"She ain't blood, Maureen."

Everett shut off the television and went to the window. Main Street was quiet. A streetlamp hummed with electricity. An American flag blew in a faint autumn breeze.

It was the off-season.

The rain had stopped.

He began to cry.

--

"Everett?"

"Hi Maureen. I hope I'm not intruding."

"No, not intruding. I wasn't expecting you, but..."

"I wasn't expecting me either. Listen, I'm sorry to drop in like this. It's been a while. I... you look great. Really. It's good to see you."

"Thanks. What, what can I do for you?"

Everett scratched at his cheek. He looked down at the floor of her porch. "I only need a minute, and your ear. I came over here to apologize to you. I came by to say I'm sorry, for what I said. That night, about Emily- I'm sorry. It was cold. Heartless. And I've been thinking about things lately, about this mess of a life I've got- I owe you an apology. I'm sorry."

Maureen seemed confused. She had finished her coffee and was ready to water her garden. Everett appearing at her door was the last thing she would have expected.

He looked older, thinner than she remembered him. Everett felt awkward in the silence, with her gaze upon him. "I don't expect anything from you. I just wanted to apologize. And now I have, so I'll go. You take care, Maureen." He tipped his dirt stained baseball cap towards her and turned to the front steps.

"Wait."

Everett turned around.

"I accept your apology. I'm glad you came by. I won't think of you saying that when I think of you from now on."

"I appreciate that. It's not, it's not who I want to be. I don't know why I ever said a thing like that. And I guess the fact it took this long to make amends shows how dim I really am."

"It's okay. Lord knows I can be dim too." She liked that about Everett, the way he said dim instead of dumb. She smiled, nearly.

"Take care of yourself, Everett."

"You too, Maureen."

Maureen watched Everett leave down the walkway, past the yard, and onto the curb. He started his truck, waved, and pulled away. She had a feeling she would never see him again, and it hurt her to consider it. She walked back inside and opened the kitchen window. She poured another cup of coffee, tied her hair into a ponytail, and sat down at the table.

It was with her sister and brother-in-law, a few months after the funeral. They were out on the patio, the three of them, drinking, and her brother-in-law looked up like he was finally ready to say what was on his mind. He had grown terribly quiet since the morning of Emily's accident, and it was surprising for him to join in the conversation. "This morning, during the rainstorm, the car got all foggy. Before I turned on the defroster, I noticed her handprints on the windshield. On the passenger side, a whole smattering of them. She had squirreled her way up there, when she was in the front seat pretending to drive the car. She must have done it only a couple of days before the accident. She thought it was so funny, pretending to drive, sticking her palms on the glass. I remember when she did it. And there they were, preserved like that for months. I couldn't- I couldn't bring myself to turn the defroster on. I had to, to stick my head out the window, so I could see the road."

Maureen sipped on her coffee.

She realized that night she left Everett, when she threw the plate at him, when she cursed his name and vowed never to see him again- it wasn't about what he had said. It was about the hole in her own heart, her knowing she would never know, she would never feel, she would never be able to hurt like her sister or her brother-in-law. She would never be so in love or so connected to something in this lifetime of hers. She'd never have an Emily to lose. She'd never

be that vulnerable. She'd never be completely exposed. She'd never understand the beauty of those ghost petals on the windshield. Any torment or sadness she might have felt when the child drowned was negligible compared to what her sister and brother-in-law had to endure.

Her tears weren't warranted. They weren't justified.
And Everett, he was right.
She wasn't blood.

BALLED UP

She found it at the bottom of her purse.

Written at hospital after the ambulance ride from the barbecue, after the doctor had unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves, after the information pamphlets were handed to her, when all of a sudden the room turned empty and there was nothing to comfort her except for the faint sound of gurney casters rolling away- she had forgotten about that pad of legal paper and the pencil from the Nurse's Station.

It had been over three years.

She unfolded and uncrumpled the balled-up wad, then flattened it out on the table underneath her. She began to make out her handwriting:

*One day, nobody you see will be here
Live deeply in the moment
Life is a gift, this experience will never happen again
Forget about yourself
Forgive people easily
Cynicism is cheap
Love is an action
Let people who are close to you know why you keep them close
Remember people who you don't keep close are important to
somebody else
If it's hard, it's worthwhile
Be grateful*

Rita had intended to follow her own advice.

In less than a minute the words had poured out of her. It was as if she didn't write them herself. They flew out the end of the pencil. Then she folded up the paper to face the next steps.

Rick had died in an instant, nearly. Somebody at the party shouted that he was having a seizure, but there was hardly any shaking. His eyes drifted far away. He fell to the ground.

The autopsy confirmed it had been a brain aneurysm.

That bothered her, the autopsy report- imagining a doctor poking around in his cortex, treating her husband like a puzzle, like a game of *Escape the Room*.

She didn't have much time to be upset, though. There were arrangements to be made. Bills to pay. A headstone to order. Flowers. Phone calls.

She forgot about the piece of paper.

Three years passed.

Three years, alone- she didn't have any desire to date, let alone remarry. It didn't make sense to waste her money at the hairdresser's, with the dye, the curling irons. She stopped buying up outfits and shoes. She quit working out at the Community Center. Her son had moved from of the house, away to school.

It was quiet.

Lonely.

A widow.

Retired, financially stable.

A son in college.

It first happened out in the backyard. She was sitting on a wicker chair, reading a newspaper, listening to the sounds from the Forest Preserve behind the house, and she felt an ache in her calf. She clicked into her phone. ALS. She'd call the doctor. She'd undergo the tests. Everything was fine- the professionals assured her.

Shortly after that, it was a twitch in her wrist. She was convinced of an impending cancer diagnosis. Next, it was radiation exposure from her microwave. The fears evolved, morphed, grew. Pumping gas at the rest stop- dirty hands, fecal particles, lysed airborne viral vesicles, microscopic plastic fragments- she would shudder and log into her computer to search out more vitamins. Sleepless dawn hours spent plugged into the MyHealth portal on her phone, reviewing copies of blood tests, CAT scans, prescription instructions

This morning while gulping down the last of her pills she took notice of a mole on her chin in the mirror. An aberration. Brown. Small. Odd. Her mind fixated words like *squamous cell carcinoma*, *basal cell carcinoma*, and *melanoma*. It had been six months since her last dermatologist appointment. It would be another four until her next regularly scheduled check-up. She picked up her phone. The BlueCross MyHealth portal. A message. A picture. *Would it be possible to move my next appointment closer from its currently scheduled date? I can be flexible with whatever Dr. Ahern has available. Thank you.* At her last visit to Dr. Ahern's office, more than twenty-six pieces of her skin had been excised from off her body. Excoriated. Even when Dr. Ahern tried to assuage Rita's worries, there was little conversation- "Take it off. Please. Just take it off. I won't be able to sleep if you leave it on."

But here was this note in her hands.

An old purse, a random inclination to dig through the back of her closet.

So much time had passed doing nothing at all.

"Goddamnit," she whispered to herself.

Memories overtook her consciousness. Visions. When she was a little girl, her own mother would fade into nervous breakdowns. "She's having another episode"- that's what her father had called them, episodes. She recalled the way her mother's eyes turned inward, unaware and unable to focus on anything else other than her own torment. Hazel eyes, on fire. Rita was only a little girl with her harmless, natural questions like "What's for supper, mom?" inciting a torrent of shouts, then tears, then a slammed door. It went on like that all through her childhood.

It had been so long since she thought back to the episodes.

Rita walked to her bathroom with the note in her hand. She stopped in front of the mirror and peered into her own eyes.

Hazel, with a thick black ring around the periphery of her irises- same as her mother's.

Like a wolf's.

Rita whispered at her own reflection, "I've turned into you."

SANCTUARY

Before she was a person with a name, a daughter to a father and a mother, a citizen of a country, a young woman of a generation, a lifetime with its past and present and future- she was merely a face. A face I had seen like any pretty woman's face, say in a car driving past me. Cars with nameless faces and faceless windshields in the anonymous commotion of traffic surrounded by lights and signals, here and then gone forever lost like impossible galaxies we'll never catch in our telescopes- I caught a glimpse of her face in the cafeteria of the manufacturing plant, for an instant, before she disappeared.

I saw her, and she didn't see me.

I saw her, and an upwelling of conditioned response followed, primal, this biologic impulse, this urge- to possess, to inhabit. She was throwing something away at the recycling bins and then she was gone but I was there alone at a table, with my sandwich, and a napkin, alone with her and my animal thoughts.

Now, I was Claude Frollo.

I was energized, a volcanic eruption- but there was no channel, nowhere for any of my feelings or emotions to flow. Nothing to divert my passion.

I remember gulping.

A pooling lake of fire.

I remember wanting her, immediately.

I had never been with a woman, but it didn't matter.

At first, she was a face.

Then she was a co-worker.

She was Naylani, on B-Line. I found out during one of the monthly review slideshows, presented by our Team Leads and Upper

Management. She was a new hire. She liked cooking and hiking. Her face, her interests, her name.

Naylani- with her eyes that flashed like lightning. I saw her more often, during shift breaks and lunch. Naylani- with a smile I soon wouldn't forget.

I went home that first evening, on the train and then on the bus, and for the first time since I could remember, I felt hopeful. Hopeful, but at the same time impassioned.

There was something beautiful out there.

And it would be close to me.

But still, so far out of reach.

I had always been Quasimodo.

I had always been an outsider, ugly, distorted. My mother had drunk nips of bourbon during her pregnancy with me. My left hand was shorter than the right, and there were no bones in its fingers. They were stubs. Disgusting, fleshy- my eyes were too close together, my hair was never styled, my gait was awkward. Even my skin color was odd, mottled like a trout's almost, with that water over sand quality. Slimy. Adults, and children alike gaped at me with confusion, fear. I never did well at school, aside from English- I could always read. I loved to read. I had a 'vivid imagination' according to one teacher.

I would never be Phoebus.

My books had been my bells.

But now, I was Claude.

At the badge swipe, the timeclock- the next day, there she was, punching in. Right next to me. I didn't say a word. She didn't say a word.

But the silence between us- for a moment I realized there was something beyond my internal world. A world I had occupied for years. A gray space. A perpetual fog, this landscape of dead trees and stones, depression, and loneliness- my inner world, my charnel house- above this baleful sky of clouds, beyond these horizons of thunder, there lurked a sun.

Naylani.

She occupied my every thought. Days passed- I would step off the bus with her, I would eat dinner with her at my kitchen table, I would go to sleep with her on my single bed then dream of her in that space where the normal laws didn't apply.

Naylani.

More than a person- she became an ideal. She remained unblemished in my mind, unable to even consider duplicity, incapable of anger or vengeance, without any oblique motives or lousy schemes- honest, righteous, beautiful. She was a sunbeam, and I lived with her in my mind like that for weeks.

Then, we made eye contact. It was back in the cafeteria- she noticed me, passing by her, near the Employee Restrooms. I became

fixed like a stone by her mesmeric gaze, I nearly gasped- she grinned, and walked away.

Nights and days, awake and asleep, dreaming. Her touch, her skin, her lips- she became my touchstone for intimacy. No other woman would ever have a chance. Naylani with her black, shiny hair. Her bronze, aboriginal skin. I was comfortable with limitations, and mine soon became an aesthetic of repetition. Like an oil painter with his easel, his canvas, in front of the same jack pine at the edge of the same meadow, day after day and year after year, cleaning the same paintbrush each evening with his can of turpentine. An aesthetic of obsession.

Naylani.

I planned it for weeks, leading up to my monthly supervisor check-in.

A request for a transfer.

From C-Line to B-Line.

Five years on the same line- it came as a surprise, but Harold was receptive. He nodded when I gave my reasons. I cited professional development, a growth opportunity, a desire to learn more, to become more useful to the business.

Within a couple of weeks, the request was approved.

Training started.

"Most of the elements are the same, alright? You got your staging. You got your materials cart. You got your sub-assembly stations, your testing stations. You got your final release, alright? Then you got your packaging and transfer."

I don't know if she noticed me that first day.

That first week.

They started me on tube-cutting, while she was assigned to the pressure testing station.

At least we were in the same shift.

I was so close to her.

I saw her in the gowning room. I saw her at shift-change meetings.

I saw her in the parking lot, walking to her car.

I had to do something.

Naylani.

But then she was gone. A Monday, the first Monday of March. Her box on the shift lineup wasn't checked. Monday, then Tuesday. Tuesday, then Wednesday. On Friday, they took her name off the lineup card. At shift-change that afternoon, the announcement was made. "Naylani is no longer with the company."

I couldn't help it.

"No."

"What was that, Luckasz?"

I blinked. I shook my head. "Sorry. Nothing."

A few of the other ones looked at me.

The supervisor glared up from his clipboard, but he decided to continue on with the sheet in front of him- the announcements, the build schedule for the next week, the safety reminders.

She was gone forever.

I was back to being Quasimodo.

Except I would never have the chance to find her in the vault, the Gibbet at Mountfaucon. The sadness of dust. Crows overhead. Chains. Eternity.

OVERHEAD

Black cormorants blazed from Sengekontacket Pond across the road over to State Beach and out onto the open Atlantic waters. Their flight patterns were steady. Every five or six minutes a bird would dart overhead then cruise down to a few feet above the calm sea, its wings pumping furiously. It would glide out past the jetty and towards one of the dozens of sailboats on the horizon.

Eventually the cormorants would turn back and land on the water not far from the shore. Black necks bobbing on the lullaby waves, then disappearing in a sharp dive- I picked out one of them with my son and we counted how long the sleek bird remained submerged under the surface. It was after fish. Probably bait fish, guppies. Maybe even a striped bass, or a bluefish.

It stayed down for fifty-three seconds.

My boy and I counted out loud, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi..."

There were piping plovers, too, gangs of them, that also flew out onto the glinting sea. Ringed billed gulls. Spotted sandpipers. Whimbrels.

My son bobbed next to me in his red floaty. He told me to dive under the water like the cormorant. I grinned, then obliged him. After a while we kicked back to the shore. I watched my son's glistening hair as he trotted up to our blankets. Dune grass swayed in the background. He sat down next to his bucket, with his floaty still buckled across his chest, and began to dig into the sand with a plastic shovel.

He was so young, but in that moment he looked older than I could have ever imagined him to be. We had been coming to this beach, on the other side of the road from Felix Neck, before he could walk or talk or even crawl. And here he was. A little boy. A person.

I turned back to the murmuring waves and noticed another black bird out on the shimmering sunlit water.

It was a desperate, dreamy day, swollen with blue. The sea was calm. A faint wind blew in from the east. A lyric from a Bob Dylan song popped into my mind, dancing beneath diamond skies with one hand waving free.

My eyes had become adjusted to the sun, the glare, the overwhelming reflections of light off the water.

I focused my gaze onto the bird.
It soon dove out of sight, breaking the surface into a vast space of the unknown.
A July sun glade- everything felt so alive. The minnows that pinched your toes. An elegant purple jellyfish undulating near the faint shoreline breakers, pulsing against the rising tide. Blue crabs furtive and scampering along the rocks on the jetty. There was so much life.
My boy, his svelte body, his determined brow against the noonday heat.
I started to cry before the bird came back up for air. She had once been a part of all of this... this thing we are all a part of, until we're not. Apart. She had broken the surface, then disappeared underneath it.
Where had she gone?
How long would she remain?
My heart sunk, filled with ballast. My footprints dug in, deeper and deeper in the warm sand. I crossed my arms against my chest and put one hand up to my eyes. Before the summer began, I had decided that I had wanted to come back here, to this beach, to this spot. It seemed important, somehow.
If there was a part of her left behind, somewhere..
I cried silently.
I had left the fruit snacks on the kitchen table in the rental house.
I had forgotten to apply sunblock to the backs of my son's earlobes.
I could pretend to be a cormorant, but it was only pretending. Cheap laughter. Water in your nose.
"Dad! Dad!" I turned around from the inexhaustible, looming horizon. "Look at this shell!"
A bleached fossil- like Neptune's wooden angel, lifeless and paint chipped at the prow of the ship. Like gravestones and park bench memorial plaques.
I walked over to my son. I took a deep breath, then set my palm on top of his head. "Look at that. It's beautiful. Should we take it home?"
He looked up at me with eyes that indicated a clear idea had formed in his heart. "We should bring it to Mommy. She would like it."
Another tear ran off my reddened cheek onto the sand. I didn't say anything, catching my breath, until, "That's a good idea. That's a really good idea."
I crouched down and hugged my boy as another cormorant flew overhead.

EUGENE, OR

Nighttime would not settle in.

He cracked a tab loose from off a tall can of beer.

The opening rose to his lips.

It had been a remarkably hot day. By this time of year, in late September, during the twilight hours you could count on being able to taste the autumn approaching. A crispness. A welcome relief.

Not today.

Around two o'clock he had pulled his t-shirt off of his back. He remained shirtless as the streetlamps blinked on.

The summer refused to end.

He had been sitting, watching, drinking- a usual vantage point, a plastic chair, one of the two he had foraged from the alleyway behind the housing complex. On a second-floor walkway, a landing-traffic ambling in both directions along the street beyond the cramped parking lot.

He took another slug of cold, cheap beer.

He had only been inside to use the bathroom, and to refill his portable cooler with ice. That was an hour ago, maybe two.

A bead of sweat trickled down his neck and escaped into the grey and black hairs on his chest.

On the north end of the street, a block east, a police officer led a shoeless man into the back of a squad car. There was a blank look on the man's face- he showed no signs of displeasure over his apprehension. No sign of remorse. No sign of anything. Several beacons of lights flashed red and blue. Backup had arrived after the initial traffic stop- it had been about fifteen minutes from when the sirens first went on. One of the westbound lanes was blocked- a grey pick-up truck, a Toyota caked in mud, scarred with rust and paint chippings and a tarpaulin tied slapdash across its bed. The tarp was green and bulged outward in a strange configuration. The first police officer on the scene had peeked underneath the bulky mess after taking the operator's license and registration. The police officer stuffed the documents into his pocket, relayed a terse message into a radio clipped on his shoulder, and immediately turned back for the side window.

"Can you please step out of the vehicle."

Another squad car appeared.

Then another.

Nick tipped the aluminum can back above his head, near vertical, and finished off an aggressive pull. He belched, then wiped some of the beer from off of his lips. He looked up. The flashing lights reminded Nick of his last arrest. It had been over a decade. His ex-wife had called the police. There was a scene on their front porch. Nick remembered his daughter, a young girl at the time, peering down from her bedroom window as Nick was being dragged away. He shouted, cursing and struggling against a pair of steel handcuffs.

His daughter- Nick had made a promise to her when he was released that he would stop drinking. That night was the last night of his drinking. That's what he told her. There would be no more drinking after that night. After he had threatened his ex-wife with a kitchen knife. After he had punched a hole in a wall and ripped the microwave out from above the stove. But Nick never got the chance to make good on his promise, after everything else. After his wife packed up his clothes and threw him out of the house. After the divorce papers were filed. After he lost his job. After he left the state. After he filed for disability. After he sold his car.

As he sat on the second floor of the Veteran's Housing Center, waiting for dusk, he couldn't remember exactly what had brought him to Eugene. How had he ended up here?

A squad car, the one with the suspect in custody, pulled away from the scene.

The night couldn't seem to fall.

Nick reached his gaze away from the rusted Toyota and looked out above the street across from him, above the Auto Body Shop and the Mini Mart. A silhouette of pines against a bright, hazy sky. Clint would be out there, over at Pioneer Cemetery. Nick had met Clint at an AA meeting, maybe four or five months ago, in the springtime. Nick couldn't quite remember how long it had been, but it was the last AA meeting he had attended. Clint was in the church basement that evening, and he had extended his hand to Nick and offered him a cup of coffee. "I'm Clint. Welcome to the Serenity Group."

Clint had talked Nick's ear off before the meeting, and after it. The stranger lived in a RV camper parked in the middle of a cemetery, remarking "My neighbors are great." He had been at his post for more than twenty years. He told Nick that after taking care of his work during the day, then taking his dog for a walk after dinner, at night he would watch VHS tapes of Oregon football games from years ago. "How can you ever have enough of Joey Harrington?" Clint had boxes and boxes full of tapes. Clint detailed his duties as groundskeeper- he cut the grass, cleared away the headstones and the markers, pruned the shrubs, and made certain there was no litter scattered about. The University allowed him to live in the trailer for free and doled out a monthly stipend. It wasn't much, but it was enough to get by. "After I quit drinking, I gave myself a nice pay raise."

Clint talked about sunset in the cemetery, how peaceful it was as the tops of the tallest trees hung onto the last light of the day, the last glow from the western skies, while the ground filled with shadows and cool air. The cemetery plots would become shrouded in darkness while those towering pines and cedars remained lit up "like birthday candles."

Nick finished off the last of the beer from the can, crushed its sides together, and set the dented aluminum on the concrete next to his chair.

Nick pictured Clint relaxing in his trailer, a glowing television set, a black lab napping at his feet.

"Come by some time and say hello."

The dusk lingered.

The sky was hazy, a burnt yellow. Tawny almost. Smoky. Resistant. It must be the wildfires east of here, Nick thought.

The second floor of the Veteran's Housing Center was L-shaped. There were six apartments on the floor- one hall with four, the shorter hall with two. Nick was the only resident who had set up a chair in the open-air hallway, outside his door. He didn't talk to his neighbors much. He didn't trust them. He didn't trust anyone. Everybody always wanted something- a beer, an ear to talk off, a couple bucks.

He reached into his cooler, pulled out another aluminum can, and then looked back over the north end of the street. The silhouettes of the pine trees hadn't darkened any. There were several rolling hills out in the distance, part of the University campus.

He cracked open the next one.

He didn't mind the silhouettes of all those trees against the sky. Maybe that's what had brought him out here all this way?

Maybe it had been as far as he could go. Going and gone all the way to an opposite ocean. The end of the line.

Birthday candles- it would have been eleven years, Nick decided. And eleven years would make her twenty-three. Twenty-three years old this past March 19th. He wondered if her hair was still blonde. He knew plenty of girls who started off as blondes then grew up into brunettes. The world changed them. The world had probably changed her.

A tow-truck arrived at the scene, and a man in a greasy t-shirt began to fix several cables to the front bumper of the Toyota.

The night still refused to settle.

CENTERED

"Things are going really well."

He held the phone up to his ear. He talked about his gym routine, his books, his beautiful healthy children, a Korean Barbecue they'd enjoyed for dinner last night, a recent anniversary dinner that segued into a session of passionate lovemaking. A conversation with his boss that portended future success. His friend congratulated him, he was happy to hear that things sounded really good.

That night he told his wife he loved her, "You've given me the most beautiful things in my life." That's what he said before bed. He took her into his arms, kissed her forehead, and said that.

Before he fell asleep, he checked his portfolio numbers, his retirement account, the family savings fund. Growth. Prosperity. It was summer and the windows were open. He could hear crickets as he fell asleep. He woke up at 3AM to a screaming child. He fell out of bed, went to the boy's bedroom, soothed him for a few minutes, and came back under the sheets. He woke up again at 5AM. Then again at 6:30AM. When he opened the door to his daughter's room at 7AM, the floor next to her bed was covered in vomit. She had a temperature of 101.3 degrees. His wife yelled at him over breakfast. "Don't you see it's getting worse?" There was a leak in the roof. Water damage was visible from the living room. He hadn't called the plumber. "What do you want me to do?" "Check the attic!" He called her a "fucking brat" in front of his children and stormed upstairs. She gave him the middle finger behind his back. His son's swimming lesson was at 8:30AM. In the attic, confirming the extent of the damage, his wife's voice, "You're taking him to swimming, aren't you?" He shouted back to his wife from across floors, "I thought you were!" "I'm staying with Jeannie, she's sick. You take him." He helped his son into a swim-diaper then his swimsuit, hoisted the toddler into the car seat, and walked back into the house through the garage. "I'll deal with the leak when I get home." She was holding their daughter on the couch. "No! You have no idea what you're doing. Call the plumber. I told you to call the plumber this week. Schedule an appointment." "I can figure it out." "No you can't! You're being cheap. You have no clue what you're even looking at. Call the plumber." "Fuck you!" He turned and slammed the door in his wake. On the way to the Mighty Minnows Swimming, there was a stretch of backroads about three miles long. It was a Saturday morning, sunny, and several bikers were out enjoying a ride. He passed one. Then he passed another. The road was curvy, full of twists and sharp corners in a forested area, and he had to pay close attention before passing the bikers to make sure he was clear of oncoming traffic. He was nearly at the intersection out onto the main road. Then another biker appeared.

This rider was an older man wearing a neon blue jersey, high spandex shorts, and a matching neon blue helmet. Grey hair poked out in awkward tufts. The bike was shiny. A pair of thin tires glided over the asphalt.

Sam slowed down and watched the rider pedal. The man was in good shape, a solid build. His head was tucked in, his back was straight. He looked poised. He looked in control.

There was an empty coffee mug in Sam's cupholder.

There was an empty case of nicotine pouches on the seat.

Sam's boy in the backseat was quiet, contented.

Without premeditation or a thought in his mind, entering a curve, Sam gunned the engine and shot up alongside of the biker. He felt the eyes of the man through the passenger window as he bit into the road and pulled his hands across the wheel. He was tight along the outer yellow line. The side of the car clipped the biker, and Sam heard a muffled cry. He didn't check his rearview mirror. He pushed at the accelerator and carried his speed into the straightaway.

At the intersection he braked, flipped his turn signal, and made a casual left turn.

There were no police cars, sirens.

He pulled into the parking lot at the swimming pool. He noticed a father with a son, the two of them step out their car together- the other man was smiling, his boy in his arms. Sam turned off the engine and watched them amble into the building.

Sam didn't move.

He couldn't open the door.

He couldn't rotate around, over his shoulder, to look at his boy.

The class lasted a half hour.

They stayed in the parking lot, Sam and his boy, stationary.

He took a different route home, and when he walked inside through the garage door, he apologized to his wife and called the plumber.

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In a confident tone, reassuring, "I can have the motion drafted by the end of the week."

"What's the point? I'm guilty."

His attorney removed a pair of designer glasses from off the bridge of his aquiline nose. "You'll spend a year in jail. You'll get out early, but it won't be before a year."

Sam adjusted the handcuffs on each of his wrists. "I can do a year. What's the difference? I've got no family, no money- nothing. What's the difference if I'm in there or out here?"

His attorney stood up from the seat across from him. "It's your right to file an appeal. I won't do it unless you tell me to, but as your legal counsel, I advise you to appeal."

Sam chuckled. "I appreciate the advice, but it's alright. I'll be alright."

His attorney gathered up some paperwork and stuffed it into his briefcase. "You have my number. Call me if you change your mind."
"I will."

--

He walked over to her.

He didn't know whether to wave, or smile, or nod...

He sat down on the chair and adjusted the uniform collar.

"I never expected you to visit me in here."

She took a deep breath. "I never expected it either. But here I am."

"Here you are. You look great. Really. It's good to see you."

She blushed slightly. "Thanks. I, I'm trying my best. It's not easy with the kids and everything. My mom and dad have been around a lot, but it's not easy."

"How are they? The kids, I mean."

"They miss you."

Sam choked up a bit before, "I miss them. I miss, everything."

She looked down at her shoes. "What's it like in here?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Besides, you didn't come here to ask me about what it's like. Tell me more about the kids."

"They're growing up quick. Marty can talk. He speaks in full sentences now, not just words like 'mama' and 'ball.' And Casey is in pre-school. She loves it. She rides a little bike with training wheels with my dad. He's trying to get her to swing a golf club, can you believe that? He says she'll get a scholarship for it."

Sam smiled. "That would be something."

She took his hand in hers. "I came here to tell you that I was wrong. I was wrong to leave you like the way I did. I never even gave you a chance to explain anything."

He looked down at his hands in hers. "You did what you had to do. Anybody in your position would have done the same thing."

"No. Nobody is in any position to do what I did. I had no right. And I came here to tell you that."

He looked away from her.

She squeezed his hands. "Do you know what made me realize it? Last week, I was trying to put Casey to bed, and do you know what happened? I slapped her right across the face. A five-year-old girl. She cried and I cried and it turned out alright, but I did it. I hit our child. I don't even know why. I was frustrated, I was tired- and I just hit her. I did what I said I would never do. And I realized that I had no right to hold any judgement against you. We're all capable of doing terrible things, every last one of us. And when those awful moments happen, when something takes a hold- there's no stopping it. But that doesn't make us monsters. You hitting that man on the bike doesn't make you a monster. Me hitting Casey doesn't make me a monster. It makes us people. It makes us sad, unhappy, frustrated, angry people. But not monsters."

GOODNIGHT

She was a disrespectful little cunt.

She needed to be taught a lesson.

He grunted, "What did you say to me?"

Before she could respond he reached over and grabbed her hair behind her head with one hand, and with the other hand he squeezed her cheeks together, pinching her face inward.

"What did you say?"

She was unable to reply. She began to fight him. She swung at his head, but he only squeezed harder.

Then she let out a terrible squeal.

In a mocking voice, "You never respond to me! You never listen! You never do this, you never do that!" He pinched harder into her face, "It's always my fault! It's all me! I'm the problem! What about you? What if you're the problem? Are you the problem? You! You're the fucking problem, you stupid little bitch!"

He pulled her head further back into the pillow, yanking her harder, and in the same motion straddled himself on top of her. The ceiling fan, the glow from the nightstand lamp, his red cheeks and unkempt beard- her eyes were cloudy, watering with tears.

She sensed his hostility might escalate further.

This was as far as it had ever gone.

She began to scream.

Crying.

He pulled harder on her hair as she slapped at his shoulders, his chest. She couldn't reach his face with her hands.

His eyes reduced to pinpricks of molten anger.

Suddenly she gave up. She quit, and let her arms go slack.

She shut her eyelids off from the bedroom.

He yanked her one last time then let go of her. He remained on top of her, upright, and pointed his index finger at her face. "You never know when to drop it. You never know when to let go. You push me and push me and push me, and this is what you get."

He brought one of his legs over her and slid off the side of the bed. Her eyes were still shut tight.

"Your problem is your mom and dad never smacked you in the mouth when you talked disrespectfully to them. That's your problem. No one ever smacked you upside the head and told you to shut the fuck up. You think everything you say, everything you do is justified. It's not. You can't run your mouth like that. There are consequences. You treat me like shit, well I'm gonna start treating you like shit. If you were a man, I would beat the living hell out of you, you know that?"

Her eyes remained closed.

"Did you hear what I said to you?"

LIQUOR STORE

I shut the car door and groaned. My insides were burning, bubbling up and down in sharp vertical columns- I didn't have confidence my bowels would hold up. My head ached. My eyes were thin, unfocused. A wave of dread clung onto me- a tourniquet, tightened and turning me purple.

I opened up the brown paper bag, pulled out a bottle of orange juice, and uncapped it. I lined up the nips next to the gear shift lever. A pull of orange juice, then a nip, then another pull of orange juice- I capped up the empty nip and deposited it back into the paper bag. I repeated the procedure again. And again. And again.

Three shots.

One.

Two.

Three.

There was a stick of gum in my breast pocket. I had placed it there in the morning, on my way out of the apartment, and I unwrapped it and began to chew. I opened up the car door and walked over to the garbage can.

I discarded the evidence.

Back in the car, with the keys in the ignition, I happened to look up from the dashboard and noticed an SUV had pulled in a couple of spaces away. A foreign model. A sport rack on the roof. The parking lot was mostly empty. It was 9:04AM. The liquor store wasn't a popular destination this time of the day.

There was a woman in the front seat of the van, one of those suburban types with highlights in her hair, a black North Face coat, her nails painted red. She was covered in the same dusty, frozen light of February that covered everybody else that particular morning.

She must not have noticed me, because I peered at her with impunity. First it was a glug of ginger ale, then a glug from a half-pint of vodka. She had that furtive, fixed look of desperation- she needed to get it down, quick. I knew that look. At one point she rubbed her temples with her index fingers. I watched her go at it for another minute or two, then I clicked the ignition and started to reverse out.

As I was leaving, she had escaped out of the car and made it to the sidewalk. There was a cigarette burning between her fingers, and she looked like she was shivering.

I wondered if anybody called her 'mommy.'

I wondered if she was due for an island vacation.

I wondered if her husband made calls from the largest office in the complex.

Of all the people in the world to be starting their day with a drink in a liquor store parking lot..

But she wasn't exactly like the other privileged women from those gated communities along Rt 14- there was something different about her. Cadaverous. For all the ornaments- she made an impression on me.

On my way to work I thought about my father. He used to drink cheap beer by the case. He'd wake up early on a Saturday morning, with an Igloo cooler packed full of ice and cans, and he'd cut the grass and pick out the weeds and lay down a couple bags of mulch, with his little trips to the garage scattered in between. He was what you'd call a functional alcoholic. Functioning, until he died from acute liver failure at fifty-three years old. I watched him moaning on his death bed. A sight you don't soon forget.

As long as I could remember, I saw through him for his weaknesses, his frailty- despite his authority, his position, his title, his being an adult and my being a kid. I knew there was something penetrable about his incredible strength. I knew his muscles and his relentless self-assurance were a façade he hid behind. I sensed it in all the fathers, all the mothers I met. Even as a young kid- I knew they were faking it.

They were lousy fakers.

My coaches, my teachers, my bosses- phonies.

But my father, by the end, he quit faking it. He became more and more self-deprecating. His muscles waned, like his hair, his energies. He knew it like I always knew it. Like that woman in the expensive car knew it. With his bulbous red nose, he made no claims on being anything, being anyone. He was a sick old man with chronic diarrhea. He was a drunk. He was a divorcee. He was nearly broke, and he never offered me a word of advice.

I had loved him for that vulnerability.

I loved the shell of what he became.

Maybe that's why I was the way I was, doing things the way I had been doing them.

Genetics, environment- it made sense for me, drinking. I had always liked it. I liked not pretending. I liked being a shell, cut open, vulnerable. It reduced me, and it allowed me to make sense of a senseless world. I was happy to be a man with little ambition, a man who didn't need to conquer anyone or anything or build an empire of his own. A man with little to offer, and very little to lose.

But that woman...

A wife. A mother. A mortgage. A school board. A church group. To live in that world of privilege and advantage, but still find herself on a Wednesday morning at the liquor store? To live in a state of utter contradiction? The sedition, the sabotage- to play the part, to pretend on that level, with the methods and focus required, the suburban upper-class lifestyle- yet simultaneously to undermine its inherent principles?

That took guts.

I left the parking lot and drove to the office complex.

I slid my badge over the scanner, and I decided what I had seen that morning was beautiful, and I was glad to have been there to see it. That beauty revealed something to me. I realized my father, before his decline, in the midst of his yardwork and paychecks and barking at me to clean my room- he was still a man worthy of admiration. It took guts to fake it. More guts to fake it than to quit. It took courage to pretend, and keep on going, even though you knew it never was going to work out.

CHOKES

"Listen, I never had an example for how to do this." Nick said that as a justification to his wife one evening after he had snapped at her in frustration, washing knives and forks in the sink.

Nick Houston and his wife Marie decided to stop having children shortly after their daughter's first birthday. Two children were plenty. Three would be impossible. As rational people, they made a rational decision on the matter. It came down to dollars and good sense- the rising costs of childcare and household necessities thanks to inflation, the mortgage, ballooning projections on what a college tuition might come out to in fifteen years, their interests in traveling. It was a logical decision they came to, together.

Behind them were the days of newborn sleep routines, breastfeeding, pureed baby food, sun exposure freak outs.

The kids would only grow older.

Things would only become easier.

Their son was almost in kindergarten.

Their daughter was almost potty trained.

The intense years of childrearing and constant surveillance were nearly behind them.

But then one night in late July, Luca, their boy, ran out of his bedroom screaming at 2AM. He screamed and cried and exploded into his parents' room. He tugged on their comforter and begged for his mother to sleep on the couch in his room with him.

"What happened Luca? Was it a nightmare?"

Weeping, "Yes!"

"What did you see?"

A red face dripping with saliva and tears, "Bad guys!"

Marie Houston reclined on the couch in Luca's room until the boy fell back asleep. She quietly shut the door and walked back to the master bedroom, where her and Nick discussed the situation for a brief moment.

They both fell back asleep.

At 4:30AM, Luca came running in, again, down the carpeted hallway, thumping in a mad sprint, "Mommy! Mommy!"

The next morning, with a cup of coffee in front of him, Nick had trouble concentrating on the day ahead. He had slept through the time allotted for his morning workout. He hadn't read any of his sports articles. He blinked, and tried to make sense of it with his son.

"You know it wasn't real, Luca. You were only dreaming. It was a bad dream."

Another bite of Cheerios, a glance at his father, then at his sister. "Okay."

The day passed. Work. Dinner. Television. Nick flipped the lights out, and Marie remarked, "I hope Luca sleeps better tonight. That was so weird. He's been such a good sleeper for us."

Nick adjusted himself under the sheets. "I know. It had to have been his imagination. We shouldn't let him watch those Spider Man cartoons."

Marie sharpened her voice, "I never do. He only watches the Kids Playhouse with me."

"Alright. Well, I won't let him watch it with me anymore."

The parents fell asleep.

Luca came running in at 3:15AM. Nick picked his son up and walked him back into his bedroom. He fell asleep on the couch, staring at his little boy in the cool glow of a nightlight. Luca began rustling at 7AM. Nick's back hurt. His arm ached. The couch was too small for his frame, so he had been forced to curl up awkwardly. "Hi daddy!"

After dinner that night, Marie and Nick discussed their options. They had been strongly opposed to ever allowing Luca to sleep in their bed with them. Nick heard horror stories from his coworkers—once the kids come in, they never leave. One coworker cited the cause of his divorce as his daughter co-sleeping with him and his wife for seven years. Seven years with a roommate. Seven years without true intimacy. Seven years. "We can't let him in with us, Marie."

"I know, I know. But what are we supposed to do? How is sleeping on his couch any better?"

"We can't do any of it. He has to learn how to self-regulate, calm himself down. It's a valuable life skill. If he wakes up again tonight, we'll walk him into his room, kiss him goodnight, and shut the door. We have to hold firm."

"It's easy for you to say, he comes in screaming my name."

"I'll walk back with him. I did last night, didn't I?"

Neither of them went to sleep easily. They tossed and turned. They debated different strategies on how to handle Luca if he had another nightmare. They continued to analyze the source of the

nightmares. Nick was sure he had it figured out- it might take some time, but they only had to be patient and firm.

Finally, they settled down and were off a little before midnight. Luca came charging in at 1AM.

Nick walked the boy back into his room, tucked him in, kissed him, and turned to walk out.

Luca jumped up and chased after his father.

"Luca, you have to go to sleep."

"No!"

Nick woke up on the couch, sore, several hours later.

At the breakfast table, his wife glancing up from her cell phone, "I don't know what to do, Nick. This isn't working."

"We need to get to the bottom of who these 'bad guys' are. We need to show him they're not real."

Their daughter, Aliana, drank milk from her pink sippy cup.

On the car ride to the daycare facility, Nick tried to uncover more information. "Luca, what do they look like? The bad guys? When you have your bad dreams?"

"I don't know."

"Luca, you have to try to think. What are they wearing?"

The boy was frustrated. "I don't know!"

Nick glanced in the rearview mirror. The boy was reading a picture book in his car seat.

After the kids were in bed that night, Marie reached for a tissue, blew, and vented her frustrations, "I'm getting sick since I'm not sleeping enough. This is terrible."

"It's a phase. He'll pass through it," Nick offered.

"What four-year old has a sleep regression? I thought we were done with all that."

Nick didn't respond.

4:00AM.

Nick walked Luca back into his room, tucked him in, and tried to leave. The boy chased after him. Nick turned, grabbed the boy's shoulders, and brought him back into bed. Luca screamed, crying. Marie came into the room. "Luca, you have to go to sleep. Mommy and Daddy need their sleep."

"No!"

Nick's voice shifted, "Luca, this is your bed. It's safe. There are no bad guys! None! Mommy and Daddy are right down the hall. You have to go to bed."

Marie crouched down next to the bed.

Nick left the room.

After a few more nights, after the continued unpredictability, the sleeplessness- an anger began to mutate Nick. One night he had punched the pillow next to the boy's head. Another, he had lifted the boy off the ground and slammed him into the mattress. Marie began screaming at the boy. Nick used profanity.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Each morning, Luca woke up and began his day without any notion of the previous evening's drama. He didn't talk about the bad guys or the nightmares. He ate his Cheerios, went to pre-school, and came home to play with trucks or dinosaurs. He colored in his Activity Books. He took baths with his sister Aliana.

Each morning, Nick and Marie evaluated the previous evening. Nick held firm. Marie came up with a new strategy.

Now, it was going on eight weeks.

In their bed, with the kids asleep, Nick began thinking out loud. "In grad school, we had a class on depression and anxiety. When researchers try to 'model' depression in animals, like rats for example, do you know what they do? They put them in cages, and over the course of a couple of days or weeks, they shock them with electricity at random intervals. There's no rhyme or reason, no stimulus, no pattern. A random jolt of pain. And that's what turns the rats depressed."

Marie turned away from him. "Are you saying Luca is turning us into lab rats?"

"I'm not saying anything."

"He's a good kid, Nick. He is. He's only four."

Nick sighed, then he stated his truth, which had been kept hidden and secret up until that point. "He's a monster."

Marie tried to explain it to Nick, how it wasn't Luca's fault, how it wasn't a choice, how it wasn't conscious and why he was too young to understand. But Nick didn't want to hear it. Their conversations had become so repetitious. Each night had become an awful replay. Circuitous. Nick wanted to sleep.

That night, Marie caught Nick shaking Luca violently in the boy's bed, his massive hands grappled on to each of the boy's tiny shoulders.

She had decided it was better if she took care of things.

There was something breaking inside of her husband.

She tried to remind him, "He's your son. He's our guy. Our boy. We just have to love him. That's it."

Marie told him she would sleep on Luca's couch the next few nights.

Nick would be able to get some uninterrupted rest.

Nick didn't say anything.

It went on for a few more days, Marie in Luca's room, Nick alone in the bed- until Marie decided to sneak out one of the nights.

"Maybe if I start the night with him, I can leave once he falls asleep."

She was right. Luca stayed in his room the whole night.

He did it again.

And again.

Things were okay.

Within a month, Marie and Nick had forgotten the episodes. New dramas unfolded. Aliana was constipated. Their car required an unexpected repair on the transmission. The roof was in dire need of sealing.

Marie had planned to spend an evening at her sister's house in Connecticut.

"Everything will be ok," Nick said to her in the garage, as the door pulled open, before she climbed into the driver's seat and pulled away.

There was a frozen pizza for dinner. There were boats in the bathtub, and bubbles. There were board books on the couch in Luca's room, with Aliana on Nick's lap. There were kisses, last sips of water.

The kids were in bed, and Nick watched a baseball game on the television.

He drank a cold beer.

He reviewed his bank statements, then scrolled through his phone mindlessly.

The last out was recorded and he walked upstairs, took a shower, and went to bed.

2:00 AM.

3:30 AM.

At 5:15AM Luca screamed at his father, a third time- "Daddy! Daddy!"

Nick opened up his eyes.

All of Nick's beliefs and conceptions of who he was and what he stood for were shattered in the next few minutes. He walked out of Luca's room in a state of utter confusion. A pit festered in his stomach, an uneasiness, a bitter foam seemed to bubble up his throat and into his mouth. He regretted what he had done. He would never be able to tell Marie, or anybody. He would never do it again. Ever.

Luca was panting, unable to relax his breath or his heartbeat. His eyes were closed, and his body shivered underneath a dinosaur blanket. A realization entered his young mind, his impressionable mind with its synapses and connections, a mind built to make sense of an incomprehensible world- his father was a bad guy.

DEPARTURES

I glance out the window.

The driver, he scans another ticket, then he picks up a large woman's bag. He bites his lower lip. His neck drips over his collar, starched and white, as he pushes the luggage into the cargo bed. He turns around. The next passenger approaches him. A heavy brow, a wrinkled countenance full of vexation- he navigates his mobile device, scans a ticket. A word is exchanged. Another

passenger. Another piece of luggage. Then another. He wears a grey mustache. He is balding.

It could have been my father, this man, this state employee- a parolee, divorced, a crummy studio apartment, closing up an empty mailbox each night, working doubles and weekends because what else is there to do when you lose your family and reputation and business and have to start all over in a world you've been removed from, excised from? Taken out of, locked away, then tossed back into five years later, alone, to make sense of?

A rush of sympathy washes over me.

"Goddamn" I think to myself. Is this where lost fathers end up? Curbside, Terminal 3, beads of sweat, loose socks, wearing red neckties issued by nettlesome supervisors? Is this where they go to die? Battling the morning and evening commutes, parking at the Shuttle Transfer Station to watch passengers jump into the arms of loved ones, returned home back from work trips, vacations? What airport was my own old man pointed towards in his diesel windjammer?

The bus fills up.

We sit quietly in our seats.

Our eyes pointed out windows, into screens.

I glance around.

What kinds of thoughts are they occupied by?

Young men, gawking over secret fantasy commuters in the lanes passing by, furtive plans and designs, a thigh below a steering wheel- what I'd do to her if I had the chance. An old woman- mumbling prayers to eternity, a minor adjustment to grocery lists, an unpaid bill for the dry cleaners. My father, the driver- television programming, microwave dinners, cold beer.

The bus lurches forward.

My own thoughts shift.

A father myself, thinking about my daughter, how excited I am to see her, to hold her, for her eyes to connect with mine. I think about her smile. Her eyes. I think about how many words she has learned, her personality. How much she has changed in the last couple of months. Two and a half years old. Her precious life. I look out above the highway bulwarks and notice the sphere of the sun behind a cloud, screened, dampened- my eyes are protected for a moment from its imperious dangers, and I am able to glance up at the source, a perfect circle, for several seconds. It's exactly the size of the moon. I can't remember ever being able to see the sun like this, to make out its shape clearly, to take hold of it. I think of her golden curls, this world of ours, this life, alive. I'm alive. I'm here. She is alive. I think about her fingernails and her fake jewelry and her pink shoes with the Velcro buckles and the way she says "bluebees" when I ask her what she wants for breakfast.

Underneath a tunnel.

Soon enough she'll be gone, taken from me. She'll grow older. She'll never look at me with those same eyes. She'll never waddle over to me. Before she could talk- the hugs she'd clamp onto me, my God. To be hugged by those arms, it was like a religious experience. Such a rare, tender moment. But I'll never be hugged by those same arms again. Thieves of time, stolen- I take a deep breath. We all will disappear, forever, washed away in the dream. But not now. Not yet. I am alive. I exalt life. This life of ours, of hers, my daughter- we live with the certainty of our disappearance, but we continue to breathe.

The driver rubs at his neck and shoulders.

My father has never met her.

Will probably never meet her.

Do you think he intended that, twenty, thirty years ago?

We pass through a series of toll gates.

Why don't I appreciate it more, make a more concerted effort to be present when I'm home? Why does it take five days away from my baby and my wife, herded through airports, surrounded by adults and business objectives and conference presentations- why do I always forget, until I remember?

More thoughts, more windows.

One day she might ride on a bus like this one and notice an old man cinched to the drivers' wheel and think of me, of her father dead and gone, her father who left her mother for another woman, her father who forgot all about her. Who can tell? What is certain? She might fall in love, she might not. She might find success in the world, she might find heartbreak and pain. For now she is only a child, a baby, my precious angel- but where her story travels to is beyond my control. I'm not haughty enough, delusional enough, to pretend that I have much of a say. Her hair, those curls- my wife's hair, her eyes and her calves and buttocks and can you believe what we've done? The audacity, to bring life forth, to call a soul across worlds across the void- to put somebody into existence? It is an audacious act. A gamble. A leap of faith. And if I know anything I know the good times will get worse, and the bad times will get better, and right now is a good time, so I want it to last. I want to hold it and lock it up and secure it and preserve it forever so in my darkest hours it is there, ready, to save me.

But nothing will be saved.

No one will be spared.

I will go, like my father before me.

Like all fathers, their lonely bus routes, their silly uniforms and exhausted eyes.

The air brakes exhale.

We have arrived, the Shuttle Transfer Station. I glance up. The door opens, and in the oversized rear-view mirror I can see the driver is chewing gum. He stands up from his seat. He has one hand clutched on his headrest, the other hand on the rail for the steps heading out. He is facing us, like he is about to address a congregation from his pulpit. He clears his throat, "You are responsible for your own luggage. Please do not forget it. Thank you, and good day." He walks off the bus. Then a man, a young man with his backpack and headphones, he zips up the aisle. More people begin to rustle in their seats. The driver has disappeared. The concrete and the steel and the vending machines in the Waiting Area have swallowed him up. The sun is gone, hidden behind more clouds.

I have left and returned.

I have returned, soon to leave again.

A P<>ET

The route.

The wheels.

The asphalt underneath us.

The repetition.

Back and forth.

Commuting between lives, lifetimes on the road.

Lifetimes lost.

Time wasted.

But who's in a position to call it a waste?

Who are we to judge our own existence? Or anyone else's for that matter? The woman unzipping her purple coat, the man clutched to his briefcase, the teenagers on their headphones?

Sitting here, calculating the number of hours per week, the weeks in a month, the months in a year- what could possibly be wasted? What is lost?

I wrote a poem this evening, on the ride home.

Two days of rain.

Going on a third.

A poem about rain. About isolation. About darkness. About light.

WINDOW P<>EM

These prisons of fear

Prisoners

Lucky to find a window

A view

Raindrops

Cloudbursts

Outside of this place

These places

We lock ourselves into

*Afraid
There's something beyond
A lightning bolt
Thunder
Where the light explodes out from the night
For a moment
A flash
Until the tidal weight of darkness
Covers our eyes again
A curtain
Black
Latent figures on a sunrise
Echoes
The iron bars
It's out there
If you're lucky, if you let it find you
A sharp contrast
New qualities emerge
Visions
Love*

Pock marks of rain on the plastic windows of the bus, opaque streaks- like my shower door, the beads of steam coagulating, building mass, then rolling down the tempered glass. Gravity. Weight. Death.

Not long afterwards, a few stops, I opened up my notebook again and I jotted down another poem- a dash of quick scribbles. A poem about death.

My mother died in her shower, between Christmas and New Year's. The water had been running for almost two days, pelting down on her body.

The landlord called the police.

A stroke.

Instantaneous.

The doctor reassured me, "She wouldn't have felt a thing. It was over in a flash, like a lightbulb flipping off."

A paramedic and a firefighter found her like that- a stiff, damp corpse. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Naked. Alone, left to the hands of strangers.

TRUTH OF DEATH P<>EM

*The silence of dust
We all go, together
But an impersonal fact cannot provide comfort
Everyone you have ever known
It's different, easier to accept
Keep pretending*

Until, it's you

My mother- she doesn't have the luxury of time to waste.
Her time expired.
Her light cut out.
She exited off at her stop.
But was it a stop too early?
A stop too late?
Who's to distinguish a complete life from an incomplete one? What
more could her life have contained? Or mine? And wasn't that
perfect? Where was the waste in that?
And now I have to pull the cord and walk down the aisle and make
my way out the folding door to the sidewalk curb.
Right on time.

A CONVERSATION

I had been distracted on the boat ride over- the seats, the
tickets, the ferry whistle.
But I came to my senses once we were gliding over the water.
Activated by a shimmering expanse, this field of dancing light
made possible thanks to a dynamic arrangement of crests and troughs
and permutations of wind across the surface of the ocean, the
position of the sun, the direction of the steamship, the angle of
my eyes wandering far off from the gunwale- it was beautiful. I
felt myself breathe. My daughter hung one arm onto my leg, the
other on the railing. We stood together as the elements around us
conspired to chink more and more sunlight onto our eyes. It was
midday. A clear sky. A crowded deck, full of tourists. Summer peak
season.
I couldn't help but smile, no matter how unnatural it felt.
I breathed in the salt, the iodine, the diesel.
I peered down, my hand on her golden trusses of hair, her gaze
transfixed out onto the water.
I was reminded of June bugs, childhood Mason jars with punctured
lids, holes from a screwdriver or the point of a pair of scissors-
the backyard, the interminable dusk.
There was a time when it had all been magic.
On the ride home it would be different. There would be no
delineation between the surf and the sky- the horizon would
disappear. Disembarking off the island on a grey afternoon, a week
later- wilting, overcast, the occasional whitecaps and bellows of
spume.
Those perfect conditions would be lost, maybe for good.
We returned to the hull, back to our SUV.
I buckled my daughter into her car seat.
"I love you daddy."

She said it unprompted. Out from nowhere- from her, from a place so new, just forming. A person within.

I smiled.

I kissed her, closed the door, and returned to the driver's seat. My wife was on her phone.

She didn't say a word.

The massive doors of the boat opened and cars began to file out. One row, then another. I started the engine and followed the procession in front of me.

We reached the rental cottage, unpacked, and set our daughter down for a nap.

I volunteered to walk into town for groceries.

On the way, passing by an old graveyard- names on headstones like *William Budd 1842-1863*. The markings had been eroded, and soon any trace of those faithfully departed would be ablated. The salt air will win. The ground will sink. The sea will rise. Every memory, every bone in every mausoleum- evanescent, everything, here for a moment only to disappear. "I love you daddy."

Maybe it was best to wait.

That night, after dinner, in the bedroom cuddled up on the bed, my wife with my daughter in her lap, they page through a book while I gazed upon them, coated like angels in milky lamplight. The air conditioning wasn't working properly in the cottage, so we were sweaty, uncomfortable. My daughter's fingers on my wife's cheek. Despite the humidity, they laugh. Their image sticks to me. These two people- I'm with them. I'm something to them.

One day I'll disappear.

But today, tonight, while it was here, while I was here... heartbreak and beauty.

Tragic beauty.

--

Under a ceiling fan, the television turned low, both of us reading and absorbed in our own worlds.

"Don't you think we should talk about it?"

She set a bookmark between the pages in her lap.

We talked.

My wife cried.

I shouted.

We stopped talking.

I apologized.

We talked some more.

We finished talking.

My wife opened up her book, but quickly shut it. She stood up, headed towards the stairs, the banister pointed to the bedroom next to our daughter's- while I remained on the couch.

She stopped after a few steps.

"No matter what, we'll have her. It couldn't have all been bad. She came from us."
My wife disappeared and I heard a door close.

STRANGER

"Dad, come here. You have to smell this. Here- do it like how I show you." She bent down, put her nose into the flower, inhaled, and closed her eyes. Then she moved out of the way and made room for him. She waited for him to mimic her procedure. Her father crouched down, sniffed, then came back upright.

"To be honest, I didn't smell anything."

Bursting out, "Exactly! The yellow trillium doesn't smell like key lime pie this year! It's supposed to smell like key lime pie!"

He looked at her cross-eye'd. "Really?"

"Really! I wonder why. I have to look that up when we get home."

She walked through the conservation land, pointing out flame azaleas, witch alder. She clutched onto his hand and made him feel the ruffles of a lilac bush- he realized it was the same plant next to the garage, a pair of them, the ones redolent of laundry detergent, the ones that bloomed for a couple of weeks in May and made for a nice sensory juxtaposition while he took out the trash to the curb.

He realized he loved that smell.

Lilacs.

There was bullseye mountain laurel ready to bloom, each flower compressed into a beautiful geometric figure tight and exacting. There were green breasted hummingbirds, painted turtles in the pond.

She made him promise to take her back in a few weeks, to check and see if any ghost pipe had started to bloom.

There was excitement.

There was energy.

"She really loves that place." He said that to his wife on the couch, the pair of them watching television.

His wife responded, "Ever since that bean sprout project in her science class. She loves plants now."

"She knows so much about the flowers, the trees there."

"Well she's been there five or six times already this year."

In that moment, he was confronted by the fact he had lost contact with his own daughter. He had forgotten about her. He didn't know who she was, or what she was. The baby with blue eyes who never slept through the night. The toddler who loved to turn light switches off and on. The little girl who pretended she knew how to read before she actually could, who would spend hours braiding the stringers on her bicycle handles.

He gulped.

He'd lost so much of her.

So much of her had passed him by.
But this afternoon, her enthusiasm, those cloudy, light blue eyes- she was heading towards becoming something beautiful, wasn't she? He couldn't believe he had anything to do with her, with what she had become. With where she was headed.
Something truly beautiful.

OCTOBER

She had forgotten everything.
Outside, walking past the neighbor's front yard, her feet on the sidewalk and her eyes pointed slightly upward- the golds, the ambers, the deep reds on the maples, the purples of the ash, tawny browns and faint greens of the oaks- it was October. Her legs moved step by step without an inkling of pain. Full strides. Her neck wasn't sore. Her stomach was calm. A wool sweater, her favorite pair of jeans- she inhaled, deeply- the sunlight glowing, a late afternoon dusk, ethereal.
It was October and the world was an amazing place to be alive inside of.
The summer had ended, but glacial winter hadn't descended yet. There wasn't a tumor in her lungs. Or her liver. Or on her spinal cord.
There wasn't any medication to swallow, prescriptions to fill. There weren't any doctors' appointments.
A minivan pulled into the driveway. Children, backpacks, pumpkins on the front porch, spiderwebs pulled across the bushes- there was an entire world, alive.
She felt good.
She felt like herself.
The surgical ward seemed impossibly far away as Mrs. Driskell called out to her, the car door sliding, all the children inside the house, "Hi Colleen."
"Hi Louise."
"How are you feeling?"
A thumbs up, a smile.
There was a wave back.
A wave of good luck.
A wave of goodbye.
Over the last six months, the question she heard more than any other, 'How are you feeling?'
She suddenly remembered.
That question- she never answered it honestly. She never barked back in response, "My skin is on fire. I want to vomit, but I haven't been able to eat in days. My stomach is turned inside out, and I diarrhea constantly. My limbs ache. My head is pounding. I want to move, but I'm completely stuck. I'm foggy. I can't remember anything. It's like a daze, but everything is so acute, and sharp-

pricking at me, everywhere. When I try to sleep, it's like I'm on a bed of nails."

She hated the attention.

She hated how cancer had turned her into a car horn.

There was so much fuss about it.

Colleen decided to move past her home and continue walking. Past the steps to her door, the little stone walkway- there was no reason to head inside. There weren't any test results coming due. There was only more 'How are you feeling?' From her brother, her friends at church, her Uncle Otis, her co-workers. She appreciated their concern, she did. She was grateful to them, for them.

But this was her life, right now.

She felt alive.

And that was important.

She knew it wouldn't last.

And that's what made it important.

RIPARIAN

I take a deep breath, light the end of my cigarette, and stuff my Zippo back into my pocket. The smoke is refreshing. It flows down my throat like a rich beverage. I suppose it's the heat of the late afternoon, the humidity- cigarettes always taste fuller in July than in February. I hold as much as I can in my lungs. Then I exhale. Rich. Lush. I take another breath in, and I can taste algae blooms and industry, restaurant trash and catfish, diesel fuel and plastic, fire and salt, life and death.

I clutch onto the iron railings alongside the Riverwalk.

Satisfied.

There had been rainclouds earlier this morning, but now the sky is clear. The water sparkles as kayak paddles and boat engines cleave out wakes. There are people in loose cotton undershirts jogging on the brick path behind me, exercising.

I inhale another long drag from my cigarette.

There are geese, ducks, various waterfowl establishing their silly hierarchies no different than the businessmen crossing the bridge. Children's laughter, deliverymen honking from hidden streets invisible but nearby, like the voice of your dead mother- it is a Thursday, near quitting time, and here I am.

All of a sudden a shadow creeps onto the muddy water, not far from mine. I casually look down. There is nothing particularly striking about it. Near the shadow, all of a sudden appear some pieces of bread. The waterfowl rush to the scene. She calls out to them, like she is inviting her friends over to dinner. Soggy bread, squeaks, quacks. She rebukes the aggressive ones for their behavior. She reminds others of a special place they hold in her heart. Nothing about her is shy- her procedure, the volume of her voice.

She stands out to me.

She isn't on a cellphone, taking pictures.

This isn't a performance.

But I keep my eyes pointed down towards the water. The lily pads, the structural concrete wall, the quay down about a hundred yards near the Canoe Rental stand- I watch the ducks and the gulls feast. I probably don't exist to her.

Is the bread stale, or has she bought them a fresh loaf? I wonder. She apologizes to them when she runs out of food and says goodbye.

I turn slightly. I don't catch much of her features, but there is a silhouette, an opacity against the orange sunlight. I look for curves, for hips, breasts- dusky sweat. She's younger than I would have guessed. There's something to her. Years ago I would have quit looking, but I keep on looking as she ambles away. It reminds me how long it's been since I've been intimate with a woman.

She finally escapes my view and I yearn for her to come back.

I want another look.

I'll take anything.

The smell of the river lingers. I finish my cigarette, and out of respect, extinguish it in one of the designated ashtrays along the brick path. I usually throw the butt end into the river, but not today. Today it's the river and a train whistle in the distance, jettisoned from beyond the bridge, past the shops on Main Street, the Commuter Rail Stop- I walk away back towards a meager apartment.

Footsteps.

Daydreams.

Trainwhistle climaxes... a knock on the door "Is everything alright in there?" as she nibbles the tonsil of your earlobe then sighs inward- "Everything's fine"- a squeeze, her sanctum of inner holies around your piston of outer conquer once and twice and once more only for you to burst in embarrassment and shock and pleasure and fuck- a department store changing room where prospective buyers would fit themselves into this season's denim jeans before delving them into bedroom closets- a neat arrangement of bills on the counter, a receipt in hand, a beleaguered woman with her exacting coin purse due next in line- here we are, seventeen years old, tired of making it in the back seat of her father's cherry red Buick so why not- she was half naked already- hang on angel- a used condom dangles off you, a t-shirt and socks- a giggle shared in conspiracy by conspirators who are oblivious to their revolutionary advances- she pulls up her skirt, grips a set of hangers from off the hook- youth wasted, but at least spent- do you remember her legs? Her thighs? Seventeen years old and all yours. Wasted, but at least it was spent.

Door handles.

An old man with a newspaper.

Trainwhistle abruptness.. you find yourself frustrated by this living death of a decadent culture, the pixels and memes and abstract, heartless, skeptical cruelty, broadcasted nonstop- our gloaming broadband age where people are reduced to avatar consumers only to be consumed by the economic apparatus itself, eaten alive while Kali's teeth gnash, unaware amidst the clicks and votes and more to buy so let's buy some more - where people are anything but human. You are frustrated that children will turn seventeen in a world without Buicks or department stores, a world where nobody remembers how to reach through another person's eyes, a world that becomes an exchange of character strings with soda pop belches in concrete basements convinced the fantasy is reality, is enough- as simulation replaces experience- lied to, but convinced- inexperienced- a world without blood, without feeling, without impulse, without physical dimensions- a world where nothing gets into you- a homogenized flat world of Nike gym shoes delivered to your door- a lousy world where teenage boys never make impromptu love to teenage girls with moans and giggles while underpaid store clerks balloon up secret hard-ons listening intently behind plastic doors with hearts full of prayers to be so lucky on a summer afternoon with nothing better to do except toot toot.

Television.

Oven lights.

Trainwhistle murmurs... plaintive, outside a bedroom window- nostalgic but painful, returning home- you remember the trip back after the phone call, before the funeral, you remember parking on the street and entering a lost world of elementary school pockets full of quarters and baseball cards, a world like a myth which probably never happened the way you remember it but nevertheless that idealized past it tantalizes you from beyond the horizons of time- a childhood washed on shore and receded, sold to the highest bidder, the front yard torn up, a new driveway, the basketball hoop uprooted and junkpiled. Your mother is dead, your childhood home is occupied by new residents. Her stories and memories are dead with her- despite the notes you scribbled on a cheap notepad unclear and unreal, despite her soft voice as she spoke her memories back to life for those few hours in the hospital, you and your feeble attempt at her bedside- for posterity's sake, or something like that- you became so engrossed furiously asking questions, documenting answers- stories of a neighborhood with Krantz's Corner Store where gallons of milk and loaves of bread were purchased, a neighborhood with a local baseball team called the Glens, a neighborhood with 4th of July parades and Christmas Midnight Masses where your grandparents tidied up their brood of children in little red dresses and blue neckties. She told you about her childhood, her college graduation, the day you were born- born on a Wednesday in the rain, the afternoon, balloons and

bottles of champagne- born only to die- damn me, you think to yourself, it was a foolish waste of time and I should have capped that itchy ballpoint pen and held onto my mother's hand with both of my own and gazed into her eyes and prayed and told her 'Everything is going to be alright.' Your mother is dead. Mortal follies like blue ink scribbles, like you could preserve her, save her from the thieves of time- a piece of yourself- you reach into the nightstand drawer, its charcoal finish, the drawer handle nearly fallen off- you flip between pages- you stop. Your mother is dead. Gone. Departed along the OUTBOUND lane of tracks. Maybe she's returned home, to the source, the homeland of souls, of spirit. At the funeral, several of the mourners were convinced she was in heaven, Paradise, Pearly Gates and apple pie, department stores and red Buicks- but the more you reflect, the more unsure you are. Heaven seems as unlikely as Hell. And at least if Heaven isn't real, then neither is Hell- in terms of it being an eternal sentence doled out after this life, a Bosch triptych, a place for corporeal souls to writhe in pain as they are disemboweled by black angels, plumes of sulfur and howling, meat hooks and scythes- yet you know for certain there are aspects of hell which exist in this life and we're responsible for their creation and maintenance because we're the ones hiding behind masks of devil horns. Heaven and Hell. Your mother is dead. She's gone- maybe, you think, she's beyond concepts of place and space and time, returned to a beginningless beginning, between lifetimes and incarnations, the interstices surrounding each of our existences- suspended umbilical between suns, outside of consciousness. Blown out poof like birthday candle Nirvana, the smoky wicks of delusion and illusion and limitations snuffed goodbye, strawberry frosting- where does the flame go? 10PM and the freight cars jangle eastbound in clanking processions towards the city limits through an indistinct suburban corridor. Are any of your neighbors awake, are any of them consumed by thoughts of dead mothers, confronted by fatuous notebook pages, searching for meaning- heaven and hell- those yellow finches in their cages in the window of Hanson's Pet Shop, how do they feel when that whistle sounds?

Washcloths.

Nightmares.

Trainwhistle goodbye... at night you wake up with the sheets soaking wet- desire- that's how your story began, an impulse of penetration, the primal lust of creation and the coaxing of form from emptiness, the dance of maya emergent from the abyss of eternal blankblack- your mother who bore penetration who bore sweat who bore the consequences of two cells fusing together- who abided, who swelled at her ankles and walked gingerly up frustrated railings to fourth floor apartments- who bore you- burdens like clay jars balanced on rigid heads down to the river, a grimace of

concentration, then work to be done. A life wasted- wasted opportunities to tell her you loved her, to tell her how grateful you were for her love, your unworthiness. Instead there were lies, there was importunate foolishness, there were outbursts and childish selfishness and by the time you began to appreciate her she was nearly lost. Scribbling notes- you fool! You saw so much of yourself in her, a mirror on your own psychic malformations- to think, you once blamed her for your inadequacies, your hardships, the woman who gave you life! You rejected her because you rejected yourself. You hate yourself. You hate the owner of your car because he is a dumbstupid exhauster of fumes like everyone else in this modern squall of waste and profligacy and indulgent stupidity. The state of your soul is one of self-loathing, so you are unable to love or accept anyone else. You were unable to look upon your own mother with tender eyes like she was a fellow sufferer, a fellow lost wanderer on this planet of wanderings about the sun- you were so dissatisfied with your own depraved self, you could only see her incompleteness and her terror. You could only complain she sprayed too much floral perfume in front of her bathroom mirror each morning with her curling iron and toothbrush on the counter when you should have been grateful for those decocted clouds, that scent on her bedsheets while you cleaned out her room that last time- you held those sheets to your face and smelled them for an entire afternoon. Myopic. You could only see the pockmarked craters of ugliness inside her because you were consumed by your own ugliness- scarred, broken, and rejected left to act busy at train station platforms, crowded, schedule boards illuminated, briefcases hurrying to make the sliding doors, engines turning over and wheels churning along the tracks- alone. Lonely. Unable to find that common ground where any sense of 'togetherness' can spring- you are alone and loveless and are no longer connected to love so you make furtive looks at women tossing bread to ducks at the river and dear God maybe she'd like to fuck me. What sort of a man are you? What sort of way to live is this? A dead mother, a broken heart, an orphan between lifetimes with an indent on his brow thinking about what a damn insensitive fool he has been all his life. You can't sleep and there won't be another freight train on the tracks tonight. And the saddest part of it all, you can't allow yourself these simple tears of pain because you're too scared you might never stop crying once you start. The train clammers, the gears kick. Motionless.

INDIGNATION

It had all started on their honeymoon cruise, out to the Mediterranean. His wife had been prattling on- the price of a drink at port, the amount of cream cheese on a bagel from the breakfast

buffet, a harsh word from a coworker three years ago, the neighbors' habits as they related to watering the lawn, recipes from the newspaper, a trip to the post office she had to make first thing when they disembarked fo home, a dispute over an online purchase, a restaurant's menu. She kept talking and talking, a nothing world of everything.

He couldn't believe it.

He had married a terrible, boring woman.

Boring people tell you everything that's on their mind. Every thought. Every detail of the story. There's no silence. There's no mystery.

All he could mutter back to her was, "Yep."

"Do you think this sunblock is strong enough? I think I'm getting red in my cheeks. I'll have to go back to the dermatologist again before the summer is over." She was the kind of woman who researched carcinogens while on vacation. And after they sailed home, he realized her silly errands about the house and the town- they complimented her other tendencies. Anxious, mindless activity for activity's sake. Frantic.

Many years had passed.

Time expired.

He thought back on things. Parties, rainy afternoons, weekend mornings, fancy dinners, casual barbecues- countless events were tainted by her histrionics.

Her self-concern was pernicious, camouflaged by ulterior motives like protecting the kids, like saving money, like taking care of her health, like making everyone 'aware.'

As he thought more about it, he realized there was nothing different about her than any of the other people he knew. She was a typical, upper-middle class woman of her time and place.

That last Saturday night- in the darkness of their bedroom, on her cell phone, a blue light revealed a sickly pallor across her face- wrinkles dug into her forehead and eyes like vicious scratches, the dead blackness of her eyes- he looked over at her with a lump in his throat.

"I should have known better," he thought to himself.

--

Seventy-four years old.

Two children.

One grandchild.

Married for fifty-two years.

Retired for seven.

A Tuesday morning, in February. A clear, crisp day.

In the study.

A self-inflicted gunshot wound.

A suicide.

No letter, no note, no explanation.

No detailed revisions, full of annotations, to his last will and testament.

No warning signs.

No cover-up. No embezzlement. No mistress. No secrets.

"He had been taking an antidepressant for years, a few heart medications, for his blood pressure. I checked all the pills. I called his doctors. I just- we were supposed to go to Florida next weekend."

That's what she had told the detective.

The coroner's report: a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

She couldn't take her eyes off the form, the stamp, the signatures and the official typescript.

A gunshot wound, to the temple.

He had blown his brains out.

All over the curtains, the rug, the desk, the chair.

The detectives asked her if they could check his computer, and the Internet Search cache revealed he had done some research. There were several options he wavered between- a running automobile engine, a poisonous combination of pills, how to tie a noose.

At the funeral, more than anything his wife felt embarrassed.

Almost two weeks ago.

Front pew of the church, pretending to look sad.

Now she was alone, on the couch. Vexed. If he'd only been patient, natural causes would have prevailed. He was a diabetic. Overweight.

The blood pressure medication.

The detective had asked her if his behavior had changed, had she noticed anything unusual. "He was on the couch, watching television- I went to bed, changed into my pajamas, came back out to say goodnight, and he said he would join me in a little bit. It's how we spent most nights. I always went to bed first. There was nothing special about it. There was no, no warning."

It had been more than twenty years since they had made love.

The priest, Fr. Nick, consoled her with an assurance. He made it clear to her that despite his sin of committing suicide, she could very well meet him again in heaven.

The women at the Church Guild would talk.

The women at the Senior Center.

Her own sisters.

Her neighbors in the building.

"If there's anything we can do Patricia, let us know." It was the tone of her voice, Kathleen Murphy. It was the way she said 'we,' meaning Kathleen and her husband, Jack. Kathleen's husband Jack who was still around to help with the dishes. Her husband Jack who was still around to cook hamburgers on the grill by the community pool. Her husband Jack who hadn't been driven to self-annihilation by a nagging, silly, annoying little wife.

She folded up the paperwork.

She would have to sell the condominium.
Her daughter had offered the guest room of her home, to move in-
but that would be too much.
Self-inflicted.
For all the years, the memories- he hadn't considered what would
happen to her. "Thanks for everything, Paul."
She hadn't cried since that Tuesday afternoon, after she parked
the car in the garage and walked to their building and rode the
elevator to their floor and called out his name.
"Paul! Paul!"
Plenty of folks would talk.
It was no unnatural- to blow your brains out at his age.
Why couldn't he have been more patient? Why couldn't he have waited
for pancreatic cancer, a hospice center, for oxygen cannulas and
Last Rites?
Selfish.
"Paul made his decision and there was nothing you, or anybody,
could have done. Sometimes people we think we know do things quite
out of character. He decided, and that was it." Fr. Nick had said
that to her, outside of the funeral home.
But it wasn't about motivation.
For her, it wasn't about trying to figure out why.
There was so much to do, so much to clean up. Lawyers. Real estate
agents. Their trip to Florida. There was his closet, his work
tools, his car, his boat. Hiring a cleaning service. There were
stocks, accounts, savings bonds.
"Thanks for everything, Paul."
He blew his brains out because of me, she thought to herself.
I killed him.
I might as well have been the one to pull that trigger.
And right now, I wish he would have given me the courtesy.

LAPTOP

He adjusted the position of the headphone in his left ear and
turned the volume up on the computer. A baseball game flashed
across the widescreen television, though the immersive experience
Dolby surround was set on MUTE.
Hank was eighty-four years old.
He had four children, seven grandchildren.
His wife Margie was at the other end of the living room, reading
a book.
They had finished dinner.
She had to wake him up to get him to the table.
"Will you go to dinner with me tomorrow, with Leah and Dan?"
"No."
"Why? What are you doing?"
He took a sip of lemonade from his glass. "Golf maybe."

"You haven't played golf all winter. You sit on that computer and watch your videos. You sleep all day. Don't you understand how odd it is, how it looks to everyone in the complex when I'm out all the time and you're never with me."

He wiped his lips with his napkin. "I don't care what those people think."

She shook her head. "How about what I think?"

He didn't respond.

There had been multiple inflection points in their relationship. Their first child. Hank's big promotion. An affair. Margie's cancer scare. Freddy's drinking problem. Maddy's first husband. Moments of conflict, of realignment- reprioritization.

Margie could sense they were upon another one of these inflection points.

Hank did not.

Hank switched medications, to help him sleep more. And he slept. He slept and slept and slept. And when he was awake, he watched golf tutorial videos. He studied swing planes, angles, arm position, grips. He took detailed notes in a Word document on his computer. He spent hours and hours analyzing.

"Do you want to be with me anymore, Hank?" She had asked him that a couple months ago.

Hank told her they were too old to file for divorce.

Margie cried that night, alone in her bedroom.

Hank watched a series of lessons around the short-game.

When they visited their son for Thanksgiving, while everyone else was picking apples at the orchard, Hank was at home asleep on the couch. His daughter-in-law opened the door and woke him up taking off her shoes with the kids. "Tell Grandpa Hank about the orchard, kids!"

He motioned them away and walked to the upstairs guest room, where he fell back asleep.

He didn't want to hear about the rows and rows of trees- Golden Delicious, Zestars, Macintosh, Granny Smiths. He didn't care about the hayride, or how they were overcome by a pungent smell of vinegar, the fallen brown orbs smashed and squished and covered in black flies beneath their feet. He didn't care that Ricky had been stung by a yellow jacket. He didn't want a glass of cider.

It's not that he didn't like apples and children and holidays and conversations.

It's not that he didn't love them, his family.

It's that he was sad.

Terribly sad.

And he couldn't help it.

Margie closed her book and left the room. He checked the time on the computer. 8:24. She'd be asleep by 9:00.

Everything had changed.

The kids had grown up.
They left the neighborhood.
He had retired.
Margie had whiskers on her cheeks.
His bones ached.
Everything was different.
He was an old man.
And he would have to die.
Soon.
Alone.

SALIX BABYLONICA

"Emily! Thank God!"

She shut the door behind her to the conference room and motioned with five fingers in the window towards one of her colleagues.

"Dad, what is it? What's up?"

"My tree! A gang of mongrels are outside right now cutting down the willow tree! They're hacking her to bits! I need help!"

"Did you call the police?"

"The police? Come on! You know as well as I do how useless the police around here are. The police? No, I'm about to load up the Mossberg and fire a couple warning shots at these bastards, get 'em to scatter. What do you think? Can't I shoot these renegades if they're trespassing on my land?"

"Dad, calm down. Who are they?"

"How the hell should I know? They got these yellow uniforms, official looking and such- they showed up this morning with a bunch of heavy machinery, a couple trucks, a front loader, a cherry picker- and now they're going at the willow with a six-foot circular saw attached up on an extension arm, hacking her to bits!" She took a deep breath. "It's the easement, Dad."

"The easement? What in the hell is an easement?"

"It's a segment of your property that technically falls under another party's jurisdiction. In this case, the pipeline company. Tennessee Gas & Oil."

"Jurisdiction? It's my land!"

"Well, technically Tennessee Gas & Oil can send a maintenance crew whenever they see fit. On that segment of your property, they can do whatever they want."

"On my land? Like hell they can!"

"Dad, there's an easement because an oil line is buried underneath the ground out there, by the yellow markers. You knew all this when you signed the mortgage papers. We talked to the seller about this, remember? The oil company does maintenance every couple of years. We went over it. I explained it to you. So did the realtor. We talked about it."

"That was ten years ago. How the hell am I supposed to recall that kind of detail?" He exhaled deeply out from his mouth. "And they can just come here, unannounced, and do whatever they want?" She twirled a pen in her left hand, cracked her neck, then lowered her voice deliberately, "They probably sent you some formal notice in the mail. They're probably clearing the ground above the pipeline, keeping it up to code, that sort of thing." "They're cutting down my willow! My beauty!" "Dad, when's the last time you went through the mail?" "Nothing but scams in the mail. I don't check it anymore." "Check it. I'm sure they sent you a notification." "Who cares about a letter! Can I shoot at these coyotes or what?" "No, you cannot." "They didn't even ask me, Emily. Didn't even knock on the door. Went straight away to hacking away at my tree. Who does that? What kind of a deal is that? That's my favorite tree. She's my beauty. And they didn't even ask." "I'm sorry, dad. It's one of those things." "Yeah, it sure is, ain't it?"

RECOMMENDATION

"What if you let it go?" "How do you mean?" "Your commitment to yourself." "My commitment to myself?" "You're obviously upset about all this, about what your girlfriend told you, but why? Why are you so hurt?" "Because I care about what she says, how she feels about me." "You care about you." "I care about her. About us." "You care about your pride. About what's yours. Your expectations. What you deserve. What you think you are in this world." "What are you saying?" "Pride." "Pride?" "Vanity." "Okay?" "You're attached to certain beliefs about yourself, the world. Who you are. What you represent. You put a stake in it. You're the handsome one. You're the smart one. And when those beliefs are threatened- that's the ballgame." "So I have to stop believing in myself?" "In a way. You should ask yourself, why do you have to be so into it?" "Into what?" "Believing what you tell yourself." "Like the voice in my head?"

"Like everything in your head. Why do you have to be so into it? So clingy?"

"Clingy?"

"Clingy. It causes you to be upset. It causes you these outbursts, these bitter tears. Why do you have to be so invested in being you?"

"Okay?"

"What if you dropped it. What if you consciously said to yourself, 'I'm going to let it go. I'm not going to be so into it, what my brain tells me. What the voice in my head tells me. How my emotions make me feel.' What if you tried that?"

"I understand what you're saying, in principle."

"Your brain offers you nothing but bad information. It's defective."

"Defective?"

"See? You're taking offense! You don't want to hear me say that. You're insulted. You think your brain is pretty effective. Right?"

"Well..."

"Once you drop it, everything is simplified. Once you drop your affiliation with yourself- your defense mechanisms, your list of grievances, your problems, the voices in your head that are always right- it opens up. You have to practice though. It's not easy. Once you start to realize how much baggage you have- your notions, your adjudications, your ideas on how this should be or how that should happen- it's a lot. You start small. A little at a time. But as you work through it- you won't believe the space. It will change everything. A levity will come- you'll feel lighter, literally. Floating. And you only need to start it five minutes at a time. Try it for five minutes."

"If I drop everything, what happens to me?"

"You find out who you really are."

"What do you mean?"

"The drama of self disappears. The effort around maintaining the drama disappears. All the burdens we go through to ensure the stage is decorated, the lighting arranged, the actors with their lines, the director at his post- that's what you're dropping. The whole performance, which is performed for an audience of one."

"Alright?"

"Once the drama ends, your true life can begin."

"You've lost me now."

"Try thinking about it in these terms: matter versus spirit; mind versus soul. We invest so much into the former, the transitory illusion. The whims of our mind, our desires- we grant them the dominant role. It's natural. It's how we develop as humans. It's reinforced by everything we're taught. But we need to unlearn. We need to reorient. Does that make sense?"

His phone buzzed. It was his girlfriend. "I think so. Give me a minute."

NAIL

"Oh shit," he muttered to himself.

This was the last thing he needed.

Flashing lights- he wiped the dirt and sweat off his brow and decided to finish loosening the nut on the tire. Three down, two to go. He twisted at the lug wrench. He grunted.

A car door opened.

"Everything alright?"

He looked up at the police officer. A stout man, sunglasses, a mustache- hands on his hips, gun in its holster.

"Caught a flat. A nail. Almost finished getting the busted one off. Luckily I have a donut, and I'm only a couple miles away from my daughter's house. I'll be heading back there once I'm set."

"Who is your passenger?"

The man stood up. He looked into the backseat. His granddaughter had unbuckled herself and was in the front seat.

"My granddaughter. Seems to be getting a little antsy. Like I said, we're headed to her mother's once I'm finished up here."

"She should be buckled in her car seat."

"Yes she should. Let me go take care of that. You know how kids are."

"You also should have your caution lights on. It's dangerous to be doing this kind of work on the shoulder without any indicator signals. It'll be dark soon."

The man sighed. "I'll take care of that as well."

The highway breakdown lane after a full day in the city- a July afternoon of admission tickets, cotton candy and stuffed animals, an excursion at the zoo. It had taken years to broker, to earn the trust. He created the possibility for it that previous Christmas, at the dinner table, "Maybe this summer I could take Justine to the zoo, just the two of us? I used to take you, you know."

"Let me think about it."

He had been going to meetings.

He had been showing up, behaving at the holidays.

Things had changed.

He hadn't drank that morning.

He hadn't stopped on the way to the zoo, with the little girl in the back seat. He had made it between two yellow lines in the parking lot. Hand in hand, him and his granddaughter, at the gate.

He had been clean.

He could do it.

He was doing it.

After the Primate House and the Savannah Plains, chasing Justine from viewing window to viewing window- after they had seen the parrots and the snakes, they decided on dinner. A cheese pizza. He knew of a restaurant nearby, along one of the main thoroughfares of the city. They walked together, the sunlight radiating off the asphalt and the pavement- at the table, disarmed, a reaction to a simple question.

"What can I get you two to drink?"

A Coke for her, and a cold one for him.

Just one.

On their way to the pizza parlor, July's heat had activated a zephyr of decay to flood along the urban alleyways, rich and arresting- he caught a wave festering odors, miasmas, which choked on him as they walked together, her small hand in his.

First that smell, then a series of images: a single-room apartment, his father and mother at the kitchen table. Stickball. Newspaper stands. Radio broadcasts.

The images shifted into an intense melancholy.

It had been such a good day.

A good life.

There was so much to it.

It was too much.

Only a couple of beers, to settle down..

"Please buckle in your granddaughter and get your license and registration."

The man nodded.

He opened the passenger side door. "Justine, come on sweetheart. See the police officer back there? We need to buckle you into your seat."

"No! I want my mommy!"

"We are going to see her right now, honey. We just need to buckle you in."

"No!" The girl wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Please?"

"No!"

"Justine, please sweetheart. Pappy will buy you an ice cream if you do."

The little girl looked up into his brown eyes, bloodshot and red, squinted and nearly shut- the old man, the sweat under his armpits, at the base of his spine- she took no pity on him.

"No! I want my mommy!"

He took her by the shoulder.

She screamed.

His face reddened.

More sweat.

"Justine, please. I'll get you some ice cream, okay? We'll go right back to your mommy?"

The girl screamed- a shrill, piercing yell.
The man reached into his shirt and adjusted a medal, a chain- St. Michael, the Archangel. His lips pursed together. A grimace.
Maybe he could call his daughter, have her talk some sense into the little girl?
Maybe he should take her by the waist and force her into the seat, buckle her in?
A tap on his shoulder- "Is everything alright?"
He dropped the chain onto his chest. "Yes, it's just my granddaughter, she's giving me some trouble right now. I need a couple minutes. You know how kids get."
The police officer looked past the man's shoulder to the girl, still folded over herself in the passenger seat. "Excuse me, do you know this man?"
"No!"
Inflamed, his cheeks and his forehead, biting the inside of his lip, a terrible nervous pit in his stomach forming- "Justine, now this nice man- you tell him I'm your Pappy, alright?"
The police officer motioned the man aside, and shut the car door. "Can you hand me the keys please, sir?"
A couple hundred yards down the highway, an overpass tattooed with graffiti, letters and figures and even a Celtic triskele- above the commuter frenzy, a landscaping truck bounced along, the driver flicking a cigarette butt out the window and down onto the eastbound traffic.
The man took the keys out of his pocket. "We can call my daughter. I'm her grandfather. She's just acting up. She's a kid."
The police officer locked eyes with the man.
"Have you been drinking tonight?"

TRASHCAN (or OBSERVATIONS OF A DEATH RATTLING AMERICA NOT TOO LONG TO GO THANK GOODNESS FOR THAT)

He pulled the phone receiver closer to his ear, "What?"
His sister's voice, "Do you want any of Nigel's crap?"
"I hadn't really considered it." He applied the car brakes and sighed, "I thought he was poor? What did he own?"
"A few things. A trunk. Some clothes. They also found a notebook."
"A notebook?"
"They weren't comfortable opening it. They thought it might be better for us to have it."
"Why?"
"I don't know, that's what the lead guy said."
Traffic began to move, "The Abbot?"
She took a broom out of the pantry, "Yeah, the Abbot. Brother Joseph."
"Unrelated question. If Brother Joseph took a vow of silence, how did he talk to you on the phone?"

She tucked the phone to her ear and began to sweep. "How the hell should I know."

Her brother adjusted his sunglasses, "Maybe phone calls to the family of a dead monk are an exception to the rule."

Moving a chair, "Maybe. So, do you want the notebook?"

"Not really."

"Well I don't want it either."

"So tell Brother Joe to throw it away."

She bent down to the pile of crumbs, "I can't do that."

"Why?"

Before opening the trash can, "Because how will that make us look?"

"I don't care what he thinks about me. He's a priest, isn't he? They're not allowed to cast judgement."

She closed her eyes. "One of us needs to take Nigel's stuff."

He inspected the driver of the car next to him. "No, you need me to take Nigel's stuff, because you don't have room for it, or the time to deal with sorting through it and throwing it out."

She closed the pantry door. "Can I have them send it to you?"

The light changed. "That's fine. Send me the trunk and the secret notebook. But if I find any buried treasure, I'm not sharing it with you."

"It's a personal notebook. They should have buried it with him."

"Well, they didn't. And now, the treasure is mine."

"Thanks."

Shifting gears. "Wait a second. Can't you tell him to donate Nigel's things? Tell them to donate it. Religious folk love donations. Donate the trunk and the notebook and the clothes. Donate it for the poor. Case closed."

"What about your treasure?"

He chuckled. "I have a couple other leads, don't worry about me."

Arrival, my flight to Louisville:

I assumed I would miss it. I anticipated a certain difficulty, a feeling of regret upon leaving the world behind. I anticipated a wave of second thoughts and reservations that would weigh me down. But it couldn't have been more different. I walked past the front gate of Gethsemane and breathed a sigh of relief. I was relieved to be done, to be locked inside the monastery, to take my vows as a novitiate and to begin. My situation might appear to be a form of imprisonment- I look at it as freedom.

Freedom from the worldliness of the world. Free from airport terminals. Free from the anonymous tedium of busyness. Busy doing what? I was seated at a FOOD COURT. I noticed two children and their mother at a table adjacent mine. Between them there were three cell phone screens, six empty eyes, a credit card and not a word exchanged. Click, buy, stare, fuzz. Not a word. She kept on smiling at her screen, the mother. And the boys didn't blink once.

Spittle gathered at the corners of their mouths. I couldn't watch for very long. I reached into my pocket, felt for my rosary, and prayed.

I kept to myself at the airport. Each time I glanced up, everyone I saw was the same. Products of the monoculture. The same designer yoga pants, the same tennis shoes, the same hair-gel stylings, business suits, backpacks, the same in-flight movies, the same headphones, the same moving walkways headed in the same direction. We all talk the same. We all look the same. We all want the same things. We all think the same thoughts. The irony of course is that despite our similarity, we are wholly incapable of connecting. People have been replaced by cellphones. People are television commercials. People are little more than nodes of self-concern and fear. We share no common humanity. There is no soul!

Are there souls in all these bodies?

Does He love all of these people?

His love is unfathomable to me.

My own love has diminished to the point where I don't see individuals anymore. I don't sense personal stories. I want to believe in a college graduate, blind, top of his class from the alleyways of Koreatown Los Angeles poised to become a PhD candidate... a lonely woman forced to bury her mother, surprised to inherit an estate of wealth, homeward bound to sign the last of the paperwork... a cancer patient's last vacation, Europe, for kicks... a starving artist out to make his debut show, a breakthrough... I want to believe, but in my heart of hearts, I don't. I don't see any of them in this place. I don't see anyone. As I sat in the terminal amidst the flux, it reaffirmed a conclusion I had come to long ago: we have built a society that warps our minds in such a way that we can only be quelled by constant stimulation and continual distraction. Relentless, our anodyne is clicking and clicking. And this is America, this is the land of freedom? It seems to me we are anything but free, anything but independent, anything but determined. A British officer of the 18th century once bespoke "these people are panting for freedom"- what distant relatives those colonials are, buried in unmarked graves along Battle Road whose ghosts roam lonely hills. It's nearly impossible to conceive we are of that same bloodline. The blood has thinned- thanks to marketing firms who volley advertisements at us, messages designed to confirm our biases, prey on our fearfulness and guarantee another purchase. We are trapped in stasis, tricked into believing we are doing so much. Paralyzed by our own busyness- this email and that email, taking minutes for this meeting and planning the next meeting and the next birthday party where we have a moment to relax and talk about the next vacation, the next soccer practice the next report card the next retirement plan.

Is it the work of the devil?

Are we denizens of the endtimes?

Why have we granted our consent?

Since my undergraduate days I been opposed to the socioeconomic model of 21st century, namely the system of global corporo-capitalism. It is a system that oppresses. It is a system that creates the slums of Haiti, the junkyard towns of third-world countries. But it is alluring. And we are swayed by convenience, by recreation, by ease. We are happy to root on the home teams, drink our cocktails and smoke our cigarettes. We are happy to stream infinite content while posting on FaceBook impatient for our food to be delivered anonymously and set in the lobby next to a dozen other packages that were shipped to us via overnight express- we are lazy and are addicted to convenience. We are averse to hardship. We are feelgood junkies, sedated and fixed, controlled by reptilian synapses. We merely pretend to suffer, and even do that without the faintest sense of grace. Weighed down by the apathy of luxury, of comfort.

I want to be uncomfortable at Gethsemane.

I want to work, and sweat, and be irritated.

I want to suffer and pray.

That will be my freedom.

A part of me might one day may yearn to return to the world, but today that part of me is silent. Today, that part of me is disgusted by airport terminal visions of greed, desire, appetite, lust, craving. I am happy to leave behind America, the adamantine state of Id. America, the soulless dead land of instant gratification, of meat and sex and flesh. America, now boarding our first-class passengers.

Goodbye.

-0-

First week:

I came here because I always felt different. I always felt like I didn't receive the same set of instructions as everyone else. I don't look like my brother or my sister and I don't resemble either of my parents, I never played on sports teams, I never cared to focus my attention on 'making it' with the opposite sex, I didn't see the allure in drugs or alcohol, I couldn't picture myself as a breadwinner or as a big-shot executive. There was no path that seemed to fit. I had no vocation, once I learned what a vocation was.

But somewhere along the way, I turned away from the world. I turned to scripture. I turned to song. I turned to writings, saints and scholars- I found a faith, a religion. I found something that fit. But whoever I confessed my interests to would gawk at me cross-eyed. "You're doing what?" I told people I felt 'called,' that I felt like there was something I needed to be doing and I finally

uncovered what it was. Even the kindhearted ones couldn't fake their approval. "You're going where?"

Funny enough, this path to Christ, this path to devotion and solitude and ritual- it started with hate.

I hated that I never belonged. I hated that I didn't fit in. I hated the people who did. I hated them secretly for years and years. I hid my hatred and my anger remarkably well, but it festered and ate away at me. Hatred is what began this journey.

But I made a crucial discovery which altered my course: anyone or anything I hate reflects a hatred I carry about my own self. All my outward facing frustrations and condemnations, there were internal causes behind them. I hated who I was and what I was doing- namely, that I was continuing to participate. I was a consenting member. I was in the world. I ate fastfood. I shopped online. I was mired in excess.

Once I made that first discovery, more truth opened up to me. If I wanted to do anything about the world, I had to do something about myself. That's where the work came in- I had to confront what I did not like about myself. I was weak, greedy, distorted and not quite so different than everyone I criticized. I hated that I was acquiescing. That I was pretending, and not fighting back.

I needed a worthy cause.

I needed a rebellion.

Once I resolved to follow that rebellion, a contrarian path against modern priorities- to kill the worldliness of my own life, to end my participation- things started happening. Things that brought me here. Things that have allowed me to release my anger, that have allowed me to begin to feel like what it means to operate from a place of love, and not hate.

Does that mean I'm happy?

No. I don't think happiness matters in the least bit. My mother asked me once, after I had graduated high school, "Why do you seem so unhappy?" It made me feel like the problem was with me, that there was something defective about how I approached the world. But I came to understand what happiness actually represents. Happiness makes the process easier. Happy children are easy to deal with. Happy students don't ask difficult questions. Happy workers don't join the mob, set fire to a warehouse. Happy spouses don't step out of the marriage. Happiness is about control. It's about maintaining the status quo.

I don't need to be happy.

I don't need to be anything.

I came here because I felt different. And now, I'm in a place where I can slowly dissolve into the ranks of the other brothers. I can be a simple monk, undistinguished, singing in the shadows. I can

be nothing. Nobody. Entirely lost. Entirely in the possession of God. Without identity. Without vanity. Entirely in His care.

-O-

Second week:

I experience flashbacks throughout the course of the day, bits and pieces of my life I had forgotten, images and sensations that wash up onto the shores of my consciousness like jetsam and flotsam. I don't know what they mean, or why they appear to me when they do. One memory resurfaced: I was on a walk, Baxter State Park, in the autumn. I had been on the trail, a meadow trail that wasn't very difficult, and I passed by a woman and her son. The boy had a mental handicap of some sort, he had a slackened look on his teenage face, and he wore thick glasses. His mother had him hand in hand, and whispered something to him before we passed. They were headed one way, and I was headed another. I offered her a faint grin as we made the perfunctory eye contact, but she did not respond in kind. Her eyes did not soften, and in fact she seemed to respond to my greeting with a look of contempt.

I'm thinking about her now. What might have been on her mind. What she might have been thinking. "You have no idea, my burden- look at you! Walking with your easy life, with your happiness, with your normalcy- your life is a joyride compared to mine." I will never know or understand her suffering, I could never know or understand her pain, her confusion, her sleepless nights, her dreams as a little girl for babies one day of her own to replace the plastic ones in her dollhouse and here she is with her baby though her innocent visions betrayed her, none of her dreams came true like how she dreamt them up because her son isn't like the other dolls so they bully him at school and on the playgrounds, he is harassed and mistreated and none of it is what she expected.

It is a deep mystery of life, our pain and suffering. Any notions of 'sharing our burdens' or 'together we suffer' or 'everything is connected' are flowery nonsense. I gave up on Buddhism because of this mystery. I gave up on believing it was all in our heads. We are stranded on islands of our own hearts, doomed to suffer as castaways. Alone. At least, seemingly alone.

Because even when we are alone, He is there.

He is with each one of us.

He is everywhere, all the time.

On the cross, hanging, dying for us.

There are no accidents in His world. There are no mistakes. His imprint can be found on everything, on all of us. But why then, must we suffer? If He is good, why must we live in pain? Why must some of us receive heavy burdens, bear the horrors of this world, while others walk by on the meadow trail with oblivious grins on their face?

It is a great mystery, and I do not believe it is one we are designed to understand.

But our suffering does bond us. It does not merely isolate us- the fact that we are stranded alone does not negate the fact that others are stranded on other islands out in the sea. And often, it becomes a very powerful experience, once we acknowledge the suffering of another person. Once we acknowledge that they, too, are a person suffering.

I think back on my countless judgments, my character assassinations of other people. Occasionally though, after declaring so-and-so to be an 'idiot' or an 'asshole,' after I had made my assumptions, a new piece of information came to my attention. I found out they had a sibling in the hospital. Their spouse had recently been diagnosed with cancer. They had buried a child. Immediately, my mindset would shift. I would retract my previous remarks. Their suffering somehow would qualify them for my sympathy, for my understanding.

Obviously it had been there all along, their inherent humanity- but it would take this direct shift for me to acknowledge it.

Why is that?

Why do we need to confirm somebody is suffering before we offer them any credibility? Why is suffering a prerequisite for decency? Why must the benefit of the doubt be earned, and not awarded upfront? Why do we need proof of another person's pain in order to validate their personhood? Why can't we just assume it from the beginning, that they are human, so they must suffer, and suffer with the same quality of tragic despair as we ourselves suffer?

When I see these other men, I pray for the gift to see them as fellow sufferers. Not as 'the one who eats like a slob' or 'the one who sings off key during Matins' or 'the one who never smiles.' I hope God grants me to see them as fellow sufferers. They, like me, suffer too.

Suffering, in a way, binds us together more closely than happiness or joy.

The survivors of a shipwreck- they cling to their life rafts and look in each other's eyes and never forget those perilous hours as long as they live. They never forget the faces of their companions. They never forget the feelings of reassurance, in sharing that fear and terror and doom with another person.

Suffering, maybe, unlocks the secret for our humanity, and our ability to connect with one another.

To connect with Him, on the cross.

As I said before, it is a great mystery. And great mysteries are not meant to be understood, but rather, experienced.

-O-

Third week:

"In the beginning was the Word..."

I have taken a vow of silence, in a world which began with the Word. But it isn't a word of speech, a word uttered. Logos is the underlying truth of reality; it is a pattern of higher order which permeates our world and allows for our existence.

It is the Divine plan for our life.

It is perfect unity and harmony.

"The Word was made flesh..."

-0-

Fourth week:

I imagined there would be some kind of psychic residue from picking up and leaving everything behind. The memories continue to wash over me. Glances. Whispers. Handshakes.

I don't miss the grownups of the world- those vicious little children, prone to outburst, with fat wallets disguised in adult exoskeletons. Looking back now, it's as if I can see through them. Seeing through the masks, the artifice, the contrivances, the performances. I can see through them like it's February and the leaves are stripped from the boughs, driving along on a familiar road and you glance off to the side and notice houses far off that were hidden all the rest of the year by the overgrowth of spring. They are exposed in my heart, for what they are, for what they were: monomaniacs of singular monism, rooted in self, selfish and self-interested. Pitiful.

I pray for compassion.

I feel as though I am coming from a place of judgment, but I cannot help it. I see them, I see their ways, I see the product of their hearts at work in the world and I cannot help but chastise. They love nothing more than themselves.

Bilious men and women who love nothing, who hate everything good, who act only on their own behalf, stupid and dumb and blind with lust and greed.

I hate them in one moment.

But in the next I am reminded.

I must learn to stay humble before Him.

His love knows no bounds and extends everywhere to all people, we sinners through and through. His love encompasses them, these shadows and ghosts who haunt my mind, who stir my heart to anger. He loves them equally, all of us, together. I want to be different than them somehow, but I'm not. I am a sinner, all the same.

His love is what holds everything together.

In a world of cheap love- cheap love in a world boiled soft by its own inexorable cleverness, its low tolerance for pain. Movie theater love, carnal, sensational. Drawn up by a production company, histrionic and over the top, coated in lipstick. A warm blanket that unravels, disintegrates, that is easily split in the face of adversity. A cheap love which multiplies in air-conditioned basements across suburban America, outraged, posting anonymous

internet messages from secret midnight posts. Cheap love leaves no lasting impression, it is undiscerning and dulcet, simple and distracted. Cheap love, contingent- contingent on the brand name, on the kids' grades, on the bank account printout, on the make and model of the car in the driveway. It is a love of neat schemas on what life is supposed to look like, outlined by our shallow expectations. It is the love of little children pining for Christmas morning, their letters for Santa Claus clutched in their hands.

In a world of cheap love, His love is easy to identify. His love is patient, kind. It is just, firm. His love is an active love, a love of forgiveness and acceptance. His love is truth.

His love calls us.

Darkness illuminates the light.

Ugliness illuminates beauty.

Better to light a candle than to curse the night.. even though nothing can escape the dawn.

-O-

Fifth week:

How much time did I waste, needing to be right? Arguing points, arguing and arguing- an insane notion, now. To be right- right about what? The world is pure mystery, it is His creation. Under the guise of rationality, bolstered by our models and our science and our grand explanations- we try our best to escape the fact that His mystery defies our ability to understand it. His mystery is immense and terrifying and utterly beyond our comprehension- yet we spend lifetimes proving our 'rightness' to each other.

What did I ever know?

What do I know now?

I am humbled by the silence of this place. It has laid bare all of my concepts, all of my beliefs. I can hear echoes bouncing off the empty shell of my previous life, of who I thought I was, of what I thought was important.

The silence is consuming.

There is so much truth in the silence.

The truth of my decaying bones.

The truth of my sin.

The truth of my dependency on Him.

On my way to the chapel last night, I looked up at the sky and noticed the shadowy greys and dark browns and crystalline hints of yellow, bleeding in striations across the sky like a Dutch Renaissance painting. Before, I would have looked up and said "It's dark" and been done with it. I would have complained about Daylight Savings. I would have been wrong.

There is so much truth in the silence.

-O-

Sixth week:

God's love is transcendent, yet I cannot help but think of those unloved in this world. Children abandoned by mothers. Beaten. Molested. Where is God's love, for them? What can we expect from them, as a society? How could they have a chance? How can we blame the murderers, the thieves, those sick unfortunates who lash out, who perpetuate the cycles which they are stuck in, cycles they did not choose? The seeds of terrible actions planted long ago, tilled by destiny, not by choice- by negligence and unlove and hate and terror and chaos- how can we blame the children who arose from barbed wire playpens, gang stash playgrounds, razor strap lessons, hide-from-dad-he's-been-at-the-bar households? The children who are sedated with medication, who are thrown in front of screens to be raised by cartoons, as cartoons?

What a pitiful mess of a world.

And it's all our doing.

Or maybe, the devil's?

Are we playthings to an apparatus? Has our twisted society morphed into an entity unto itself, a rapacious monolith concerned only for its own proliferation, independent of human interest? Is there any 'one' who directs the show?

What I see is people are being reduced.

Reduced to behavior patterns, unconscious and furrowed deep. Reduced to addicts, reduced to animals, reduced to impulse and waste. No difference, wealthy or poor- everyone is in a state of poverty.

I remember a line of Highway ON ramp beggars, dejected and moping around the intersection red light for spare change, emaciated arms fixed to weepy cardboard signs- a home under the bridge, under the concrete overpass a colony of lepers. Was this the dream born from their mothers' love in the first moment of their existence? Was this a vision of their fathers', kissing their mothers' pregnant belly?

Reduced.

What about those cars driving past? What have the 'accomplished' of us in fact accomplished? What sort of world do we allow for? What sort of world do we leave behind? For all our hard work- what have we actually done?

We reduce.

We discard.

We hollow that which ought to be treated as hallowed. We undermine the inherent beauty of creation, for what?

-O-

Seventh week:

I used to believe in theoretical frameworks. I used to believe we could fix things if we only reconceived them, if we started fresh, with everyone on the same page. I used to believe in my rational mind. I used to believe I could cook up a prescription, a solution.

Imagine that- a solution, from the source of the problem.
I can still quote Marcuse. We need a "reconstruction of the economy in such a manner that the economic no longer determines the faculties and powers of man, but is rather determined by them." I memorized that phrase. I used to think phrases like that could save us.

I sensed something terrible at work in the world, but I couldn't have been more wrong about the causes of that terror. I sensed that humanity was not built to be wired together by an invisible network- that connections are personal, friendship is earned, lovers are meant to be loved, and latitudes crossed- but I did not understand our poverty. I believed too much in the individual, in the logical mind, in our smarts and guile.

Now, all I believe in is prayer.
Simple, heartfelt prayer.
Devoted to union with Him.

-O-

Eighth week:

I have been called to abandon the ordinary life.
We are all called to be saints, extraordinary.
He did not design one of us, not one, for any other life- we are all called to His grace to rise above this world.
The failure to do so rests on us- this world we have created and allowed to fester.
How many saints have been captured by cheap dope, instant sex, confined to an unreal world of neuronal impulses? How many Mahatma Gandhi's has modern convenience granted us? Joan of Arc's? Will this sick culture of ours prevail? The devil's work? Will all truth be harrowed and discarded? Will we cross the umbral equator and never return?
Us monks, we pray for a different world.
We pray like Abraham outside of Sodom- if there are but a hundred, fifty, ten, one?
Spare us.
There may be a chance.
Hope.

-O-

Ninth week:

I saw a newspaper for the first time in months by the door of the main office this morning.
A headline about the presidential election.
I chuckled, thinking about the world out there, the people in it, the stories and the drama, the struggle- I chuckled thinking about politicians, politics, the left versus the right.
We read the newspapers and watch the shows and believe in the war-red versus blue. We believe the elected officials are fighting for our beliefs. We fail to see that American democracy has been

eviscerated and made defunct- it is no longer an ideological or provisional system that allows for meaningful activity to occur on behalf of the people. It is democratic in name only. The common principles rooted in a democracy- a freedom to live a life of our choosing, a consensus on common dignity and liberty- we've been completely removed from any ability to participate or reflect upon them. And instead of acknowledging this failure, we are distracted by pageants. We fall into trapdoors, hungry for more- hungry for the emotional high of us being right and them being wrong. We are no more rational or modern or informed than any Roman citizen gnawing on bread and cheering mindlessly while gladiators disemboweled slaves two thousand years ago in the Coliseum. Both sides are culpable, both sides are equal to blame and equally ridiculous- but here we are.

Here we are.

I chuckle, then stop.

I am responsible for my part.

I am culpable.

I am eager for hymns, for more prayer.

I am hungry for the eucharist.

I am thirsty for His blood.

-O-

Tenth week:

What did any of it matter?

How much of it had I been in control of, anyways?

How much of it was me?

What had I arranged?

What had I done?

What could I take credit for?

Even if there was any credit, what could I do with the accolades?

I want to give everything to Him.

Everything.

Please, take it all, every bit, and leave me empty.

Empty, yet filled beyond measure.

-O-

Eleventh week:

I have no children to call my own, but I often think of the future, of young people who will grow up one day and inherit this world we are designing. What will they think of us? What will they think of this incessant blipbleep zip-pop, of wild lights careening forthback around? What will they think of this schizoid existence of image, of appearances- the monstrous houses, luxury cars, voluptuous breasts, slick-hair'd pinstripes, European vacations, upper-bracket tax-incentives? Will they look at us like we are peculiar oddities? Will they criticize our hypnagogic fetishes, an entire generation stoned on impulse, nightmares? Will they see through us, driven by blind avarice, driven by lust, by flesh, by

the flow of dopamine? Will they look pitifully at their mothers and fathers, women and men who can't make love without electricity supplementing the endeavor- who lost contact with the power of love and lovemaking, eliminated by handheld screens looping endless reels of rub and fuck and pull. Will their eyes weep when they find even our most human elements denuded of sanctity, microchips processing?

Will they forgive us?

Will they even think to forgive?

What if they admire us? What if they praise our dearth of heart, our dregs of soul? Will the concept of a soul be entirely forgotten? Born in a gulch of darkness- will they emulate us? Contemptuous, unappreciative, sardonic, decadent self-obsessives too self-conscious to experience the beauty of creation? Sophisticated and unfeeling, will they be another generation of stillborn consumers lifeless and programmed and plugged in? Will they continue to rely on the grotesque cleverness of Senate hearings? Non-participants drooling as their televisions report disaster, with eyes transfixed not in an act of sympathy or empathy or understanding but simply for entertainment, for ratings, simply to imbibe death. Will theirs be such a penury of spirit that even a mayfly laughs at the resume of their dreams?

Will our children be the rightful inheritors of our sin?

How then can we expect our children be unoffending, innocent and beautiful? How can we(us) be expected to produce innocence and beauty?

All we want is to be 'okay,' justifying each hit each inhalation each orgasm each high each low, one and then another then another all in the name of deliverance. Instant delivery- lest we be out of service, out of range, out of touch. I weep for our children. How can we be expected to bestow freedom to our children when we are entirely unprepared to be free? When all we want is to escape? To look away, away from this world we have created- away from the truth. The truth of our times- we have sacrificed our lives, our authenticity, our beauty, our heart and our soul all in the name of convenience and self-stimulation. And now we are left with only emptiness. No matter how high the skyscrapers reach, how deep the subway tunnels burrow- our confusion only increases.

How will we ever be able to look our children in the eyes?

In some ways, if I am honest with myself, I came here to escape the emptiness and confusion and anxiety of the world.

Yet in the silence, in the activity of prayer, in meditation- it confronts me more profoundly, it makes me shudder and grieve.

I will keep praying.

-O-

Twelfth week:

Brother Louis encouraged me to keep writing in my journal.

I told him maybe it was sinful, some of my thoughts, some of my ideas, what I might be saying or feeling or observing- it might not be productive to the contemplative life.

He told me everything belongs to God.

I felt the power of his words.

I nearly wept.

So what if I am a strange poet with my pen taking notes, wandering in my head like a lonesome planet with these questions which will never be answered? What good is an answer? If everything belongs to Him, then I am content in my humble pursuit.

Everything belongs to Him.

To be His creation, to serve Him, to exult in Him, to relinquish myself entirely to Him, His care and control- what could be more important?

I spent months, years, anxious, impeded existential, consumed by questions of the afterlife, the eternal, the grand picture: where did I fit into the cosmic order? I was bogged down. I was upset, for the most part. I strived. I pursued. Yet I never found any answers to my liking, I never felt like I had a solid foundation. I didn't know who I was, what I was. I didn't know where I was supposed to be pointed.

Then I found Him.

In order to gain, I had to surrender.

In order to live, the notion of who I was had to die.

In order to be fully present, I had to let go of the past and the future.

In order to take control, I had to implant myself into His care.

Today, it is a simple meal and the Prayer of St. Francis.

Today, I can feel His presence in every moment, penetrating. Every experience reflects the underlying truth of His presence. It is a truth I will never understand, that I will never comprehend, but it is a truth I can feel. He is here, with me. Within me. To live is to be immersed in an ungraspable truth- so I let go, and let God.

Today, the only question is how to serve, and how to love.

Every moment is necessary. Every experience is required- and none of them are owed. All of them are gifts.

AFTERWORD

REST STOP: Dilated cameraphone pupils, neurons oversaturated with confirmation codes, delirious, snapping up bits of phantom- who among us is worthy of salvation? What of this life ought to be preserved? Whose truth ought to be acknowledged? I glance sideways- plastic cups, food wrappers, soiled napkins, engine exhaust- wait, go back and make sure you bought enough.

In the face of our fellows, we are called to compassion. From pulpits. From the lips of saints. From commandments in old books. Feed them. Love them. Be honest with them. But what if the truth is, there could never be enough beauty to outweigh the ugliness? What if the truth crashes down like a typhoon of fury, flipping the money changers' tables and stalls inside the temple?

It's no surprise when you examine our collective subconscious that there is a heavy resonance with the apocalyptic- we're doomsday obsessives, waiting for the end of the world. Burnt flesh. Beating of breasts. Blackened suns. Seas rising. A great wailing. Scores of innocents.

Such an ending might be our only chance for justice.

INCONVENIENT: In this Post-COVID world of ours marked by working remote from our couches, having each and every one of our needs delivered to our doors, we seem to be disconnecting further and further from the physicality of the world. Convenience, modern convenience- its aim is to remove the hardness, the weight, the gravity of the environment around us. Cut down on the time. Make the job easier. Less to haul. Nothing to decide. More hours left to enjoy our favorite shows. We seem to be floating, more or less, in an entirely mental world, mediated and maintained by our digital technologies. Inside our phones. Logged into our accounts. Signing up for another app. People don't make their own food, clean their own homes, watch their own children, drive their own cars- now, with artificial intelligence, they don't even have to formulate their own ideas.

Soon, I fear, we won't even make our own art.

I have reflected on this in my own life, this outsourcing, these culturally acceptable forms of convenience and ease- where might this be leading us? What if we lose contact with the world as object, in the palm of our hand, and exist only in a world of ideas, of representations, of images- in the palm of our avatar's hand? Is that what we were meant for? What if we wander too far, disconnected, in that digital space and we lose touch with the physicality of the world around us? What would happen if the conveniences abandon us- the power shuts down, the circuit boards zap- what then, when we are forced back into a place where we can bleed, where we sweat, where we breathe heavily and vomit and break our hands and twist our ankles- it might be jarring. We might not

be ready for it. We might do something absurd. We might do something awful.

CONTENT: We are a generation of parents who record videos, store pictures, upload posts- we convert the physical, spiritual world into a digital simulacra. We are raising children who are more concerned with generating an image, performing, creating content, than having actual experiences. In essence, the performance has replaced the experience. Yet we relish in the responses from our family and friends, the LIKES, the hearts.

We justify our behavior in the name of 'preserving memories'- to capture moments. It is an act of perfect irony. Because we capture moments that were never fully experienced in the first place- a cell phone mediating the interactions of our eyes and our ears and our hearts, preventing direct contact with the world around us.

No matter how much content we produce, it will never replace the actual experience. It will never replace the person, the moment. No picture, no video, nothing will replace the tender lips of a child pressing on your cheek, or an arm around your neck, squeezing, or a simple "I love you daddy" whispered from under a blanket as the lights shut off.

STRANGER: Nothing beautiful could emerge from middle-class suburban America and its comfortability, its conformity. Capitalism's inner circle- this ring of society is incapable of producing anything great. We are *feelgood* junkies, committed to feeling good. Our trajectory is more comfort, more convenience- at the sake of others, unseen and silenced. None of our children will develop into anything more than replicants of their nervous mothers and idiotic fathers, godless and sexless and unhappily obsessed with fiscal endgames.

Sometimes I still believe this.

But sometimes, I don't.

OVERHEAD: Death is the crux. How we respond to death, to Holy Oblivion, endless darkness- this, for me, is the singular question. Singular in terms of practicality, since all of us regardless of race, creed, background or beliefs will confront death. Singular, too, in terms of our inadequacy to conjure up answers. There is no key or secret to be shared- there is only the unknown.

I have seen people in such a state of grief, robbed of somebody dear to them- the hollow, abandoned look in their eyes- I've left them and wondered how are they going to persevere? How will they keep breathing? I tell myself, if that were me, what else could be done- what could you do but scuttle what was left of your own heart? Yet, I've had the privilege of seeing such people go on, forward. There's a beautiful strength we are capable of. I've

witnessed it. And it's inspired me. Seeing it has helped clarify my own life, put perspective around my own 'problems.'

INDIGNATION: The only way you can begin living is by making a decision about death. You have to put your faith in something, you have to decide what you believe. Now, your beliefs will necessarily be wrong, but that isn't the point. The confrontation with the unknown is crucial. And after you come to some semblance of a conclusion about death, it becomes very easy to justify the decisions which propel the course of your life.

RECOMMENDATION: Truth will never be communicable by word, by explanation- it is entirely dependent on experience.