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Some Apocalypse

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SOME APOCALYPSE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
David Russell Hehn Jr.
May 2009

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Chair
John Warner
Dr. Jonathan Beecher Field

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is comprised of three pieces of traditional fiction, three pieces of flash fiction, and one work that is neither traditional nor flash but positioned somewhere beneath the wide umbrella of creative writing. As partial fulfillment for the degree Master of Arts in English literature, these selections display a solid understanding of the principles of creative fiction and English literature as well as a desire to experiment with form and push the parameters of creative writing. These selections seek to entertain and to become active in the general discourse of literature.

DEDICATION

This is for Mom and Dad. I love you both a lot, lot.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest and most infinite thanks, props, praises and love-yous to Lauren Rizzuto for getting me here in the first place; to Clint Boswell for having the same ideas as me and not being offended when I put those ideas in my creative thesis; to Emily Scism for reminding me to drink my juice; to David Foltz for never failing to call something important to my attention; to Katherine Webb because she will ultimately have a best-selling collection of somethings inside of which I hope to find an acknowledgement for this acknowledgement; to Adam Million for the hours on the breezeway, rain or shine; to John Barbour for sticking with me through Orals; to Liz Hunter for always being cute and sweet and understanding and patient; to JBF for being JBF; to John Warner for his consistently wonderful conversation, humor and advice; to Keith Morris for pushing me to make stories that are all right into stories that are better than all right. Thank you to those here in Clemson and back home in Moselle and Hattiesburg, who mean more to me than they could ever know.

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INTRODUCTION

A Discussion of Creating Fiction By Way of Discussing Film

I was really pulling for Daniel Day-Lewis to nab the Oscar for his role as Daniel Plainview in There Will Be Blood and, while reading a blurb from movie critic Jim Emerson, I noticed what he saw to be a fault in Day-Lewis' acting that, to me, is a great accomplishment in fiction (I'll tie fiction and film together momentarily). Emerson noted, "In the middle of [There Will Be Blood] stands Daniel Day-Lewis, not quite in but right next to the character of Daniel Plainview." While he bagged the Oscar, I agree with Emerson and see Day-Lewis, not as a man possessed by the spirit of the character, but as a man obsessed with becoming something he is not. Day-Lewis is incapable of literally becoming Daniel Plainview and we, as viewers, are aware of this. The interaction between the actor and his role is similar to the interplay between a reader and a text. When reading a piece of fiction (or even in viewing a film) we, as readers, are aware that we are reading. The mutually-agreed upon objective reality in which we live—while there may be glimpses of it within a piece—remains separate from the world created by the author. The author's aim is to create a world that is independent of our perceived reality, which forces the reader to engage with that world on the author's terms. A piece of fiction should possess its own realities, and the reader should be obsessed with becoming a part of that. An example of this idea is in the highly stylized work of auteur Wes Anderson, whose 2001 film, The Royal Tenenbaums, exaggerates perceived reality and, in doing so, create its own.

In the film (which, according to Anderson himself, is highly influenced by J.D. Salinger's Glass family of Franny and Zooey and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"),

Anderson presents the viewer with a family of child stars turned has-beens (an archetype that reality television has firmly established), but does so in such a hyperbolic way, putting them in such atypical situations, that the story moves from something believable, to something that just outside of reality. No young athlete's breakdown is as debilitating as Richie Tenenbaum's, no precocious playwright's quarter-life crisis as promiscuous as Margot's, and no worrywart father is as woeful as Chas. In his character development, in the unusual New York setting of New York (devoid of the Empire State Building and Times Square), and in the almost-believable plot (the washed up father, Royal, feigns an eminently fatal sickness to bring his family together), Anderson keeps perceived reality and the viewer at arm's length. But Anderson's hyperbole is done in such a seamless way, we almost forget the fiction of the piece and find ourselves being pulled into a world that does not (though it almost could) exist.

Although J.D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey was published forty years before Anderson's film was produced, he creates the world of the Glass Family in a similar way, keeping the reader at a distance while allowing them to engage with the created reality of the novel. With his unbelievably quick, searingly smart dialogue, Zooey jumps between brotherly tenderness and downright smart-assery so quickly that the reader wonders why his mother would stay in that bathroom with him at all; the reader wants to get out as well. Zooey's callousness is not that of the typical pseudo-spiteful twenty-something. His is the angst-ridden honesty of the fictional Zooey Glass. As readers, we do not know Zooey, but we could piece him together by imagining the cruelest, most pitiless people we know and then shoving them behind a bathtub curtain while their world-weary sister (again, a patchwork of people we know) waxes existential on the couch. We do not know Zooey,

though we imagine we could. It could be said, then, that Anderson and Salinger take elements from our perceived reality and heap those elements on top of one another, exaggerating our mutually agreed-upon perceptions, eventually ending up with hyper-reality, which is their fiction.

It is the task of the writer to seamlessly yoke together the elements of perceived reality so the reader becomes familiar with the story, setting and situation. Through this the reader is presented with something that is more than the quotidian, though still able to engage with that. In my story, "Animal Week," I collated several events from my own life to create the story of a second grader, Dirk, who must ameliorate his values and reconsider his expectations. In an attempt to make Dirk's story accessible to all readers I chose to set it in the second grade so as to keep the tone light and, by opting for an adult narrator remembering and commenting on his past, the story remarks on the horribly unsound practice of creating unreal expectations, even in second graders. Elements that are true of my own life (my presumptuous love for a black girl, my fear of worms, Eli and Wesley) are coupled with elements that must be true for someone else (vomiting in the crayon box, the caribou presentation, chocolate milk) to create the hyper-reality of fiction that is similar to that which Anderson and Salinger present.

However, there are times when the reality of a fiction, either to the characters in the stories, to the reader, or to both, is revealed as a ruse. Salman Rushdie's narrator, Saleem Sinai, describes this process in Midnight's Children, when he learns of his telepathic gift:

Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the

screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves—or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality. (164)

The reality of the film (or the fiction) becomes a world of its own, and when the viewer (or reader) gets close enough to the story, the façade is stripped away and the ruse is revealed. Playing on Rushdie's idea of the movie theater, my attempt in "The Curse of Abduamma-Tulu al-Hama the Turk or 'Da Last Dame in 'da Woild'" drives toward a similar idea of removing the layers of hyper-reality created by the artifice of drama.

Inadvertently, I spent October of 2008 doing field research by running the soundboard for a play. It's amazing how much of a toll that kind of setting can take on a person (the late nights, the candy bar dinners, the anxiety dreams before opening night), and by the time the show closed I had pages and pages of pent-up observations waiting to fall from my pen. I witnessed these people become their characters. When Ryan came out on stage to warm up he was not Ryan, but Bobby. Andrew did not have his usual tough-guy swagger, but he became the troubled, downtrodden Detective Moon. Erin was Penny and Nick was Mr. Rictus. They had succumbed to the hyper-reality of the play, seduced by the artifice of the stage, and this is where I got the idea for "The Curse of Abduamma-Tulu al-Hamma."

My story's fictional characters begin to lose themselves in the fiction of the play and the world of noir. As they take on their roles, the world of the play begins to encroach on the reality of the theatre. The characters, to borrow a term from Baudrillard, give in to the "Evil Demon of Images," and become seduced by the archetypes that the fictional play's fictional author created. The tiger that kills Judd, then Little Ed, then June/Daisy is the jolt

of reality that shocks Charley— who has almost completely assumed the identity of Detective Jimmy Bumpo—to the realization that he is actually just a low-life bum who will probably have to go back to work at the Costco. The artifice cannot last.

The End of Artifice: The Theme of Apocalypse

The term “artifice” struck me very hard when I read Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Musing upon the sea and the song of an unnamed woman which acts like something of a movie score, directing the emotions, the poem’s speaker says:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. (37-40)

The woman stops singing and the lights from the houses on shore form lines across the water, partitioning the sea like fences among tracts of land. Stevens’ poem makes a clear distinction between the orders provided by the woman’s song and the “emblazoned zones and fiery poles” created by the lights from shore. The harsh lights of civilization quickly usurp the former—a more naturalistic and aesthetically pleasing image. In either case, as Stevens’ poem suggests, the artifice cannot last. We witness the small apocalypse of the “world in which she sang,” yet if the woman begins her song once more, the lights will cease to impose order on the sea.

The stories in this collection deal with similar endings in which the characters are faced with the ends of artifices, for apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories have great sway

over my imagination. I could mention influences from the Book of Revelation to *Mad Max*, but I will choose only one.

Several years ago I picked up a book by Adam Johnson entitled Parasites Like Us, in which the protagonist, an anthropologist named Hank Hannah, unwittingly unleashes a Paleo-Indian virus upon the world that eventually brings an end to all birds, then to livestock, and eventually to civilization. Hank Hannah accidentally saves himself by eating a bowl of Paleo-Indian popcorn and lives on to record the final days of North America's existence. The life he knew goes up like the smoke from the piles of burning pigs that clutter the South Dakota plains. Johnson's witty-yet-heartbreaking novel was one of the first apocalyptic texts I encountered that was neither wholly bleak nor prophetic, and that influence has infiltrated these fictions, littering them with apocalypses big and small.

Of course, as this collection of stories will show, there are the obvious apocalyptic allusions in "The City of Cars," and "The Inextinguishable Beulah Ratcliffe," but there are more elusive apocalypses that happen on much smaller scales. The perceptions that we as thoughtful creatures create for ourselves can only last until reality strikes with usually heavy, sometimes diminutive blows, rupturing the façade of certainty that we render and grow accustomed to. We love when we want to love and ignore our wiser impulses; we contrive unrealistic expectations and assume that life will go according to plan; we create personas when we are unsatisfied with who we are, and we grow complacent in those artifices, forgetting that we are only pretending. My attempt is to break down the self-imposed ruse of each fiction and allow my characters to restart once reality strikes its blow. Whether or not we can continue on to new beginnings after we peel back the layers of our own artifice and face our own apocalypse depends entirely on ourselves.

Car Crashes: Reality's Significant Blows On the Head

In the eleventh chapter of John Barth's The Floating Opera, he provides a harsh critique of writers who utilize nature's coincidences to make their stories excessively poignant, and warns aspiring writers to avoid the mistakes of those who have come before:

One is constantly being confronted with a sun that bursts from behind the clouds just as the home team takes the ball; ominous rumblings of thunder when one is brooding desultorily at home...[etc.] (110)

In the paragraph prior to this, Barth's narrator, Todd Andrews, discusses the artlessness of embracing those concurrences of nature:

Nature, coincidence, can be a heavy-handed symbolizer. She seems at times fairly to club one over the head with significances...so obvious that it [is] embarrassing. (109)

The symbol of the car accident is, in several of these stories, the vehicle, pardon, by which I have chosen to inject reality into the fiction when reality is needed and, in doing so, break down the artifice. Abrupt, unexpected and jolting, the car crash is the average American's atomic bomb. Aside from the occasional insurance money leftovers, no good comes from the car accident. But, avoiding the life-altering changes that typically come from a car crash (a character dies, a character survives and chooses to lead a better life, a character decides to stop drinking and a car crash was just the thing to get them straightened out), I have handled these crashes and their results in a way that, I hope, does not beat the reader over the head with symbolism.

In “Chupacabra and the Yearling,” I chose to have Maggie drift off to sleep on the lazy drive home in order to create a false sense of security for the character of Rudy as well as the reader. Bathetic, or perhaps oblivious to the notion of mortality, my attempt is to portray Rudy and Maggie as people who are somewhat self-centered and relatively comfortable with their lives. The car accident involving the yearling and its subsequent resurrection, though obviously fantastic, serves to bring Rudy into contact with death, thus causing him to reconsider his values.

Another, more blatant instance of vehicular reality comes in “The City of Cars,” which began as a brief, dull poem. To begin with, John, the narrator, is anxious about his car not starting. Finding that exceedingly uninteresting, I added the “purply whorl” of smoke for intrigue, an irate trucker for conflict and a nagging wife for comic relief, only to find it still agonizingly boring and mostly pointless. Disdainfully, I tucked it away until I happened upon a prose poem by James Tate entitled “How to Become a Member.” In the poem, the narrator takes part in a bizarre ceremony involving a set of very structured rituals that he cannot perform properly. The narrator shows up with an orchid but a woman explains to him that he should have brought a teddy bear. “Right now it is only a teddy bear that counts,” she says. When the narrator returns with a teddy bear he finds that everyone is partnered up for “slapping time.” He does not have a partner and eventually crawls in the grass pretending to be a snake. “I decided I didn’t want to belong to the human race,” says the narrator. This brought me back to revamp my own poem. Tate’s work often seems nonsensical, but in “How to Become a Member,” he expresses the impossibility of ever successfully becoming part of a race with such ludicrous contrivances.

When I resumed my work of “The City of Cars,” I decided to incorporate a similar sense of the whimsy that Tate consistently brings to his work. So, not only does John’s car explode, but traffic comes to a halt for several hours and, almost immediately, the people form a society that John does not completely understand, but attempts to participate in. John gets sucked into this odd community and, for no reason at all, believes that Ezra, the old man who “mumbles bedlam under his breath,” is planning John’s murder. As the city of cars disperses, the artifice ends and this world that John inadvertently created has its apocalypse. He must return to reality wifeless and carless.

Although Tate’s subject matter and his elements of whimsy find their way into these fictions, his prose poetry, or flash fiction style has made its impact as well. It is both intriguing and difficult to attempt to compact such large stories into such small spaces (typically less than 1,000 words) without losing important detail. When done correctly, I admire such conciseness, and I attempted this in “The City of Cars,” “The Inextinguishable Beulah Ratcliffe” and “Penelope’s Ghost.” The latter two of these flash fiction pieces focus on love, or the hope of love, in the face of inevitable endings. In “Beulah Ratcliffe,” it is obvious to the reader that the narrator’s final declaration, “I could love you till the end of time,” is inherently flawed since he is quite obviously on the verge of death, though the narrator holds on to this idea. The speaker in “Penelope’s Ghost” is forced to come to terms with the fact that both the ideal woman (or spirit) and the actual woman he could have potentially loved, had he not killed her, are now out of reach. The style of the flash fiction piece forced me to carefully consider each word, so that none of the elements are lost, and nothing too excessive. This is why “Hypno-Regression Therapy Led to the Cat Piss and Your Father’s Visit” was one of the most difficult and fulfilling pieces to write.

In my aimless wanderings across the Internet I happened upon a story entitled “Your Narrator and the Mermaid” by Darby Larson, published by Pindeldyboz. Larson’s story was shorter than the typical flash-fiction piece (a mere 127 words) and was incredibly disappointing as a “story,” but Larson did something that I had never seen before (although, David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest has been brought to my attention somewhat recently, but I have yet to assay that behemoth), and something that I wholeheartedly set my pen to in “Hypno-Regression Therapy,” a story told almost entirely in footnotes. When I started in on my footnoted, somewhat sentimental, mostly expository tale I had no idea what I was getting into. The process started with the letter, which begins:

Sandy,

Your mother taught that cat of hers to piss on my sheets. We haven’t slept in the same bed together in three years. I should have told you sooner.

But, as soon as I wrote that, I realized that the letter was dull and would lead to nothing, so I let it sit. At some point I remembered Larson’s story that I had seen about a year prior and thought I would give it a shot.

To do this, I had to develop Sandy, her father, her mother, and the cat. I constructed each footnote as if it were a piece of flash fiction, the longest note being 277 words, and most of them are, to greater and lesser degrees, enjoyable as stories unto themselves. The notations are pieces of these people that are, like any other family, broken and scattered about, and I feel that the footnoted format is appropriate to convey the way we learn about people in staccato instances, picking up individual fragments of history until they come clearly into focus. In “Hypno-Regression Therapy,” the endings and undoings are numerous, but appear most prominently in the shattering of Reed Floss’ expectations.

Until his wife was injured in the car accident, he assumed that his happy life would continue to go smoothly. But, because reality intervened with the accident, he was forced to reconsider everything and try to start anew. Such is the case with all of these fictions, though the car crash appears in many forms.

The Inextinguishable Beulah Ratcliffe

Beulah Ratcliffe walked out of the apocalypse unscathed. She was the only speckle of moving-ness against the red glowing monotony of desolation. Not a hair on her head was disheveled and she knew it. Beulah was wearing nothing at all. She'd been taking a shower when the cosmos came roaring down in blasphemous sheets of ruddy magma. As she stood there, silhouetted against the backdrop of the raging brimstone of civilization I could see her tender breasts jutting out in humble defiance of the everything that was now nothing. And I knew, by God: I knew I had to have Beulah Ratcliffe.

But I was scathed Ooooh boy was I ever scathed. She took my hand and pulled me out from under what had once been the South Carolina state credit union. A nickel was fused into my kneecap, but I didn't care. Not a single bit. We walked down the sulfurous remnants of Magnolia Street hand in bloody, mangled hand and did not say a word. Beulah had to slow down for me because the flesh on the balls of my feet was steadily disintegrating. It was like treading a landscape of grisly atomic banana peels. My polyester shirt was melted into my skin, leaving a heart-shaped patch of plaid over my fading and faltering lungs. I wanted Beulah to see it, but my hand crumbled from my arm when I went to point. It was a glorious afternoon.

I looked at Beulah Ratcliffe, stunning in her composure and colder than she'd ever been now that time was burning away in embers around us. I couldn't help but look at her breasts again.

"There's an ash on your bosom," I managed to choke out through singed and frayed vocal cords.

“Oh, is there?” she said, looking down at those bolus of desire as though she didn’t recognize them.

“May I?” I asked.

“Please do,” she said, and with the gnarled and oozing hand I still had, I wiped away that gray corruption from her supple mammaries.

“Thank you,” she said, and my Adam’s Apple fell from my neck like an overripe plum. I nodded and she knew I meant, “You’re welcome.”

It was about that time, my knees inverted and the thing that was my face slapped against what had once been a sidewalk next to what had once been a chinaberry tree. My left arm tore off at the shoulder and Beulah Ratcliffe continued to hold my hand, then she gently and prettily laid it by my side, assuming I’d kicked the bucket. “Sweet dreams,” she said. She whispered it like Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat* and continued on, walking with the confidence of a million Cleopatras. I had no lids left, but my eyes still worked. My eyes still worked, by God, and I saw her pull another mangled soon-to-be corpse from beneath the melted and melting Exxon marquee and walk toward the crimson horizon, nestled in the crook of his arm. What did he have that I didn’t, Beulah? Both ears and most of his hair, still? It would be gone soon enough. And look at his lower intestine, Beulah. See how it spills out like that? A man without entrails could never really satisfy you. And his nose, how small and ugly it is sitting in his fat, blistery paw. You wouldn’t want your children to have small, ugly noses like that, would you? A man with a nose like that could never love you, Beulah. I could love you. I could love you till the end of time.

Animal Week

The day before Cherry Rogers came to school, which was four days before I lied in the face of love for the first time, it was Worm Day. Mrs. Turner arranged a snake wrangler, a worm guy, a pair of amateur ornithologists, a bearded trapper and a weasel farmer to come visit our class for Animal Week. We'd been anticipating this since kindergarten when we heard the big kids talking about it at recess. I, however, had my doubts about Worm Day from the beginning, and as we gathered in a semicircle around the clay pot of roiling dirt and writhing night crawlers, my apprehension peaked. Mr. Dave, the "wormologist," instructed us to "reach on in there and grab you a couple." I expected squeals and objection, especially from Claire and Kim who came to school spotlessly prim and agonizingly proper every single day, but, instead found that I was the only one who didn't dive at the bowl straight away. "Ewww," they said, letting the worms dance through their fingers and plop on their paper towels. Ivan Erikson dangled his worm above his open mouth like an ugly piece of spaghetti. It was appalling.

"Go ahead and get you one, son," said Mr. Dave. He presented the bowl with an open palm, like a jewelry salesman.

"No thank you," I said.

"Go ahead and get you one. Heh-heh. They don't bite."

Heads turned in my direction.

"No, thank you. I don't like worms."

"Well, everybody else has a worm," said Mr. Dave. "Don't you want a worm too?"

"Not really. I'll just watch," I said.

Mrs. Turner was taking notice now. She looked up from her crossword puzzle.

“Is he giving you trouble, Mr. Dave?” as if I’d been a voice of constant dissent. I prided myself on my good conduct, damn it, and now she comes at me with this.

“Well, he says he doesn’t want a worm, Mrs. Turner. He’s just a little scared, I reckon.”

“Get you a worm, Dirk,” said Mrs. Turner, “or you’ll have to sit by the fence at recess.”

“No, thank you. I don’t want a worm.”

“Here,” began Mr. Dave. “Le’me hep you.” Before I knew it, Mr. Dave was behind me, and my hands were sunk deep into the bowl with Mr. Dave’s fat mitts holding them there.

“Go ahead and get you a couple. They ain’t gonna bite.”

Across the semicircle, Ivan and D.P. Rodriguez were pointing and laughing. D.P. had his lips pooched out like he was about to cry, and I realized that I was actually crying. “*Ennw ennw ennw*,” I squeaked.

“Just grab you a worm, son,” he insisted, but, instead, I wrenched my hands free and sprinted out into the hall and, accidentally, ran into the girls bathroom where Miss Missy, the janitor lady, was sneaking a cigarette. I was in hysterics.

“What’s wrong with you?” she said. The cigarette dangled from her lips and she idly leaned against her mop.

I sort of babbled something.

“Well, ain’t no need for all that crying.” She tossed her cigarette in the toilet, flushed it, and spritzed herself with some perfume she pulled from her pocket. “Let’s get you back to class.”

My loud sobs on the short walk back to Mrs. Turner's room brought sudden leering multitudes to the open doors of the classrooms we passed. Every student in grades One through Three watched as my dignity trickled from my eyes and onto the faux-marble tile. It was like that dream everybody has about showing up to school in your underwear, and the incident earned me the short-lived and completely uninventive nickname of Crybaby Jones, which lasted until January. Everybody forgot over Christmas. Mrs. Turner met us at the door just as I was pulling myself together.

“Found your boy, Mrs. Turner,” said Miss Missy. “What’d ya’ll do to him?”

“It’s Worm Day,” said Mrs. Turner. “I don’t think he likes worms.”

Mrs. Turner ushered me back to the semicircle just as Mr. Dave was putting away his knife. Two halves of a worm wriggled on a paper towel in the middle of the table and my classmates were clapping, standing up and moving back to their desks.

“You missed the finale, son,” said Mr. Dave. He seemed really disappointed. I didn’t exactly feel like speaking, especially with my classmates whispering about me like they were. I felt like that worm looked, all wriggly and uncomfortable.

On the way back to my desk, D.P. Rodriguez approached me. I knew that nothing good came of being approached by D.P. Rodriguez, for this was not the first time I had experienced his antagonism. We’d all (those of us who were not friendly with him) crossed paths with him at some point prior to second grade. He was a constant reminder of our shortcomings, real or otherwise, and I always wondered how an Opie Taylor-looking kid with leg braces and a stutter could ascend to the top of our prepubescent food chain. Here’s what I was wearing when D.P. approached me:

<u>THOSE THINGS D.P. DID NOT MENTION</u> (top to bottom)	<u>THOSE THINGS D.P. MOST CERTAINLY DID MENTION</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hair: parted 4 inches from right side of scalp (hairspray applied) 2. One necklace purchased at Six Flags, Atlanta, upon which dangled a small vial containing <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Some transparent liquid b. A grain of rice with the narrators name inscribed in tiny calligraphy 3. Electric-teal t-shirt, upon which was printed one skate-boarder in mid-air performing a grab whilst proclaiming “Skate or Die,” the graphics of which were diverse geometric shapes of varying colors (namely purple) 4. Ninja Turtle undies 5. Purple shorts 6. Pristine white sneakers with Velcro straps 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Purple socks

Continuing.

“Those socks are gay,” said D.P. He rocked back and forth on his afflicted legs, and I wondered what gay meant. It doesn’t seem to make sense that a second-grader would know what “gay” was, and even less likely that he would be able to use it in such a demeaning, masterful way but, it’s important to note, D.P. should have been in fourth grade.

“Men wear white socks,” said D.P. “Girls wear purple socks.”

I really had no retort, and it was now perfectly clear that this was a jab at my masculinity, as if this worm incident hadn’t done enough damage already. His braces squeaked him away without saying anything more, leaving me to reconsider my attire. Fortunately, only three or four kids heard what D.P. said, but those that did got a decent laugh out of it. I’d never been conscious of what color my socks were.

I spent the rest of the day trying to hide my miserable ankles, crossing and uncrossing my legs, realizing again and again that if one sock was covered, the other was exposed and begging for ridicule. I awkwardly contorted my legs, trying to force my feet back and beneath my desk, ultimately realizing that the pelvic joints, even in the nimble body of a nine-year-old, do not bend like that. I finally settled on sliding my backpack in front of my feet and, with clammy hands clasped under the desktop, I prayed for 3:30.

When I got home my mom asked me how my day was and I told her I wanted white socks. I told her that men wear white socks and that I was tired of wearing red and purple and teal socks. Dad wore white socks and I aimed to wear them too. I didn't mention the worms or the fact that Miss Missy smoked in the bathroom. That night, as I was falling asleep, I made up my mind that the next day, Bobcat Day, not only would I wear white socks, but I would wrestle one of Trapper Steve's bobcats into submission and shove my head into the beast's mouth to further prove that I was a man.

When I left for school on Bobcat Day I was wearing a pair of my father's white socks which I had to double under my foot and stuff down into my shoes so that they didn't rise up above my knees. Ignoring the giggles and smirks as I walked down the hall, I strutted into class like the events from the previous day had never happened. Like I hadn't freaked out over some worms.

"Hey Crybaby," said Dusty.

"That's not my name," I said.

"Hey Crybaby," said Kristy.

"That's not my name, Kristy."

I expected Mrs. Turner to say “Crybaby Jones,” when she called roll. She didn’t, but I almost accidentally wrote my new moniker on the top of my multiplication worksheet. D.P. called me Crybaby too, of course, and I thought about throwing a stick in front of him on the way to the lunchroom. I knew he lacked the dexterity to avoid a stick, but I decided to postpone any theatrics.

Just wait, I thought as I sat in the lunchroom, ostracized, gobbling up a second slice of pizza, shoveling down heaping spoonfuls of corn and ketchup-loaded French fries, chasing it with ice cold chocolate milk. It was ravenous cafeteria food cholesterol therapy. *Just wait till I wrestle that bobcat later.*

After a sweltering late summer recess we returned to our stuffy, fan-cooled classroom where a new student waited for our return next to Principal Boone. Her name was Cherry Rogers and she was black. When we walked I saw her—and I do not doubt this even now, after having fallen unrequitedly in love on several miserable occasions—the first and only time my heart skipped a beat. It was confusing. I was well aware of my social standing for, despite my parents’ best efforts, my aunts and uncles had instilled in me the idea that, although I was to be nice to the black children, I was not to associate with them for too long or too deeply. But I knew that I had to marry Cherry Rogers. I knew that I would have to draw her a picture and make her laugh like nobody else could. I knew I would have to woo her and take her to a movie and eventually go to dinner at her black family’s home and shake hands with her black dad and meet her black cousins at the black family reunion. But, I was willing to sacrifice both family and heritage in order to have her hand.

Cherry knew nothing of my past. She hadn't seen me pee my pants two years before, or misspell "walrus" in the Spelling Bee or burst into tears at the end of the Little Mermaid. She hadn't seen me lose it over some worms, nor had she witnessed Miss Missy lead me back to class in my gay purple socks. She didn't know about Crybaby Jones. She was perfect, and my exhibition of bobcat wrestling, scheduled for later that afternoon when Trapper Steve came to visit, would be the first step toward our long life of happiness.

Mrs. Turner introduced Cherry and we all said "Hello, Cherry," and then Mrs. Turner, bless her, sat Cherry in the desk in front of me because Jonathan Cole was absent that day. I couldn't look at her. I could feel myself blushing uncontrollably. The heat moved up my shoulders and I got warmer and warmer. She smelled like pepper and coconuts and the heart-shaped beads at the ends of her ropy braids clacked together like a hundred pearly marbles.

As my little heart reeled over this goddess sitting in front of me, I wasn't conscious of anything. I was in a driveway with Cherry teaching Dirk Jr. to ride a bike without training wheels, teaching him to tie a tie, preparing him to be President. Mrs. Turner asked us to pull out our Family Trees and continue coloring them, but I was too absorbed in the thought of Cherry, trying to figure out what was going on with my heart while attempting to string together the perfect phrase to make her love me back. There had to be some secret password for that. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand.

I didn't look up when Cherry turned around to ask if she could borrow a green crayon. I could hardly hear her from the rush of blood in my ears. "You got a green crayon?" she said. The room instantly got warmer, muggier.

Somehow I managed to squeak out a little “mmm-hmm” as I reached to retrieve my color box from the built-in cubby in the bottom of my desk. I placed it in front of me and dutifully popped open the lid to select for Cherry the best and brightest and longest green crayon I had. Most of the crayons were nubs or broken in half, Crayolas and RoseArts covered in the specks of each other from the bouncy hours spent in my backpack. But this green was whole and pure. It was Kelly green, and I passed it to Cherry. A sickly film of sweat formed on my upper lip.

“Thank you,” she said. She was very polite.

When I finally mustered up the strength to look at Cherry I found that her eyes were purple, like Elizabeth Taylor’s. They were incomparable. I couldn’t articulate it then, but I know now that they were the purple of forgotten royalty, they were amethyst and chalcedony and sapphire, they were the thick, bilious blood of our unwashed enemies. They were a trance and a sickness, a poison and an antidote. I opened my mouth to say you’re welcome or I love you or let’s name him Dirk Junior or I don’t *care* that you’re black, but as I did my stomach jerked and I shut my mouth immediately, like a bear trap. I could feel that extra pizza and the chocolate milk churning in my belly. The room was sweltering. My cheeks filled up like a squirrel about to pop and my brows contorted until one eye was squinched together tight, while the other eye opened and opened almost to infinity. I’m sure I looked like a Picasso, for Cherry’s face was in some cruel pantomime of my own and, careful not to get any on her, I vomited in my color box.

Now, if you’re unfamiliar with the smell of a second grader’s box of crayons, (as I’m sure you know the pungency of vomit), it’s a fragrance the foundation of which is that of cold, stale wax. On top of that are the essences of playground dirt and sweat, kool-aide-

sticky fingerprints and residue of ketchup, wet dog musk and cinnamon pop tarts and the million other remnants of the nuances of the life of a rural southern second grader.

I looked to Cherry for help, but she'd already turned around, so I slammed the lid shut and tossed it back beneath my desk. The smell alone was enough to cause Wesley, sitting one row to the left, to upchuck directly into Kim Fogg's luxurious golden locks. The chaos that swept over the classroom on the crescendo of Kim Fogg's piercing scream and Wesley's swoon into the aisle sent the entire class into an uproar while I sat and sulked, knowing what I'd done. Chaos was all around me, and Trapper Steve walked in on the middle of it, led by a pair of leashed bobcats. The mayhem spooked the cats and they roared and slashed at one another, which sent our screams even higher. He had to grapple them out into the hall and back into his van, which we watched him doing through the window. We screamed and shouted as he cursed and fought the cats that were ripping his shirt to tatters. He bolted out of the parking lot without so much as waving. Mrs. Turner ushered Wesley, Kim and whoever else was caught in the maelstrom out the door and told us to work on our family trees until the bell rang. I had to borrow a blue crayon from Dusty. He was out of green. I threw my color box in the trash on the way to the bus that afternoon.

I got home and told my mother about Trapper Steve, but she said I would wet the bed if I lied, and the same thing would happen if I played with fire. I told her I didn't believe her. She said it's impossible for Moms to tell a lie. I told her that there was a new girl and that I needed some more crayons too, that I had been loaning them to Ivan Erikson all year and that he never returned them. He probably ate them. I didn't tell her that life as I knew it was absolutely over and that she should give up on the prospect of ever having grandbabies because Cherry Rogers would never marry me because I'd puked in front of her

and ruined my crayons in the process. I showed her our family tree instead, and apologized that the leaves were blue, how I knew they were supposed to be green, but I didn't have a green and neither did Dusty. She hung it on the fridge.

"Tell me about the new girl," she said.

"What new girl?"

"You said there was a new girl at school today. What's her name?"

"Cherry, I think. I can't remember."

"Is she cute?"

"I don't know."

"You don't *know*?"

"Nuh-uh. She sat in front of me because Jonathan wasn't there today."

"Did you talk to her?"

"No."

"Why not? You should be nice to the new kids. She was probably scared on her first day."

"I don't care. She's a girl," I said. "Dusty told me and Eli he's gonna kiss her."

"She must be cute then."

"I think she's ugly."

"I thought you said you didn't know."

"I changed my mind."

"You're gonna wet the bed."

The next day at school, Weasel Day, I was relieved to discover that the events from the previous day had overshadowed the worm incident, so the Crybaby jeers were much more tolerable. At recess I found myself digging holes with Wesley (who, today, because of the Kim Fogg incident, was Pukey-boy) and Eli. Our primary spot for excavation was in a large patch of dirt beneath two oak trees where the grass just didn't grow. We dug using our fingers and sticks, working in absolute silence, looking for nothing in particular, completely immersed in the task at hand. There was no need for me to defend my socks or my fear of worms or my masculinity to Eli and Wesley, for Eli and Wesley were pussies. I use the term sparingly, but I say it now because this was the same situation I'd been in several months prior when D.P. and his cronies threatened to whoop me if I didn't give them my snack money. I didn't have any snack money, so they whooped me. Without saying a word Eli and Wesley had skedaddled to hide behind a bush, afraid to tell on D.P. and suffer the consequences. But, this was a new day, Weasel Day, and I was in no position to blame them for their lack of bravery. Besides, we needed each other to lean on.

“Here's a good skippin' rock,” said Eli, holding up a flat, oblong stone.

“Yep,” said Wesley.

“My daddy skipped a rock twenty-five times down on the river.”

“No he didn't,” said Wesley. “You cain't skip a rock on the river.”

“Yeah you can.”

“No you cain't. S'too choppy.”

I looked up to inspect Eli's rock and I noticed Cherry off in the distance on the swing next to Felicia Wolfe. Her beaded braids danced across her forehead every time she swung backward, then she would lean as far back as she could go, bending her body in an

elegant arc of womanhood, her braids grazing the rutted dirt beneath the swing leaving a tenuous halo of dust in her wake. My heart dropped when I thought back on Bobcat Day. There was no possible way that her grace could ever be coupled with my pitiful ineptitude. She was swinging in carefree perfection, while I crammed my fingers into the dirt, hoping to uncover some horrible, centuries-buried monster that would swallow me down into the earth. *She thinks you're gross*, I said to myself. *But, I didn't mean to*, I responded. *Doesn't matter. She told her daddy about it and he thinks you're gross too. Then he called her grandmomma and told her about it and she just laughed and laughed. But I couldn't help it*, I said. *But it happened.* I was right. It had happened. What is there for a lovelorn boy to do that could possibly reverse that kind of embarrassment? Sure, I could have jumped up and reassured her that I wouldn't let the bobcats eat her up on her first day of school, but I'd missed that chance as well. I would have to live with the knowledge that I'd caused Cherry's premier at Mizell Elementary to be the most terrifying day of her life. And, because I didn't know any better, I assumed that I couldn't look her in the eye without throwing up.

“Did your daddy tell you you can't skip a rock on the river?” asked Eli.

“I ain't got a daddy,” said Wesley.

I wondered what Cherry's daddy was like.

Weasel Day and the next couple days were spent avoiding eye contact with Cherry and pretty much everybody aside from Wesley and Eli, knowing that, even though nobody except Cherry had seen me yak in my color box, they knew, somehow, that I'd ruined Bobcat Day. I kept to myself on Weasel Day, determined to keep whatever dignity I had left.

Things weren't much easier on Parrot Day either. I found myself watching from across the room as Bo Walters perched a parrot on Cherry's shoulder. I hated Bo for that. I tried to read Cherry's lips, and I'm certain I saw her say, "That Dirk boy's nasty. I wouldn't never marry him." Bo laughed and said, "Polly want a cracker?" Cherry said it too. All the bird said was, "Hello. Hello." I really wanted it to peck Bo's eyes out.

I imagined thirty-year-old Bo and Cherry at a fancy restaurant dressed like grown-ups, drinking champagne and being disgustingly happy together.

"I'm so glad I married you," says Cherry. "I just love you so much, Bo Walters."

"I love you more, Cherry Rogers," says Bo, and then they go home to their big two-storey house and push their kids in a tire swing. Bo plays first base for the Braves and makes a million dollars. Cherry is a successful brain surgeon who dabbles in glass blowing and reads three books a night. They lie in bed talking about their perfect children and telling stories about their childhoods when, one night, Bo remembers something that happened in second grade, the day before Cherry got to school, when some boy, "I can't remember his name," says Bo, "but we called him Crybaby," got scared of some worms and went into hysterics. "That's so funny," says Cherry, "I'm so glad I didn't marry that boy, whoever he was." They laugh and laugh. There was some comfort in imagining that I'd been forgotten.

On Snake Day our class was visited by a lady who insisted that we call her Yahoo Sherry. "What's my name?" she asked. "*Yaboooo!*" we chorused. Yahoo Sherry was a million years old and wore khaki shorts, a khaki shirt and a pith helmet, something like a withered old Teddy Roosevelt without the moustache, like a plump Jane Goodall. She'd kicked in the classroom door holding two big, square metal cases and she had a ball python

draped over her shoulders. It could have crushed her in a wink. I knew it was a ball python because Blake Smith had one named Billy. He let me feed it a mouse one time, which I hated. Mrs. Turner fell quickly into the background as we crowded around Yahoo Sherry trying to touch the snake she called Slick, “but don’t rub him the wrong way!” she said. I didn’t plan on touching Slick or even getting close, and I didn’t, but I went to the front of the class with everyone else anyway.

One of the Brady Twins, Elmer, I think, picked up Slick and was holding him just behind the jaw, poking it in the faces of Ivan and the other Brady Twin, Elton. They growled and hissed back at it. Elmer turned on the rest of the class, and like some hellacious perfume vendor, he brandished Slick like a bottle of White Diamonds. “Haa! *Haaaah!*” he said, imploring us to fight back. All we could do was squeal. Elmer shoved the snake toward me and I didn’t draw back. I was fed up with all of these people and I was, by God, going to stand my ground. I wanted to rip that snake out of his hands and use it like a whip. Lash him good until he was a dumb, blubbering batter. “*Who’s the crybaby now?*” I would say. I looked Slick right in the eye and I didn’t flinch, and just as I was about to grab that hideous serpent and take back my pride, I felt something roll up under my arm and into my back. It was screeching, and it was Cherry, trying to get away from Slick. She didn’t know it was me that she was covering behind until Yahoo Sherry yanked Slick out of Elmer’s hands. “*Thaaaat’s* enough of Slick,” she said. “Awww,” we replied. Cherry stood up and saw that it was me. “Sorry, boy,” she said, and slid closer to Michelle Kyzar.

“Now,” began Yahoo Sherry, cramming Slick into one of the boxes, “what’s your favorite animal?”

I said, “Caribou!” (leading up to Animal Week I’d presented a paper on the caribou) and everybody else said something different, but I distinctly heard Cherry say, “*Moose!* *Moose!*” and I knew, then more than ever, that Cherry was The One, capital T capital O, however intangible she was. A moose and a caribou. This was, though I did not know the word for it then, synchronicity.

“Good, good, good!” roared Yahoo Sherry. “I want everybody to go to the desk and draw me a picture of your *faaaavorite* animal. While you’re doing that, I’m going to get the *snakes* ready!” She wriggled her fingers. “Do you like *ssssnakes?*” “*Ennnnn,*” we screeched.

Things like shame and pride and unrequited love quickly pass from the mind of a second grader, especially when snakes and doodles are involved, so when I sat down to draw, I had no thought of Cherry or purple socks or incensed bobcats. I only knew that a caribou was coming and I had a relatively new box of Crayolas with an immaculate Brown that would bring it to life. I started with the antlers.

“You got some payper?” I heard Cherry ask Kim. Kim shook her head, fully set on her ladybug. “You got some payper, Wesley?” but Wesley had borrowed from Eli who didn’t have any more. “You got some payper, Dusty?” Again, no. “Hey,” she asked me, half turned around. I didn’t think she’d resort to this. “You got some payper?” I pretended like I didn’t hear her. I was already on the hooves and I didn’t want to risk another debacle like on Bobcat Day. My crayon moved furiously. “*Hey!*” She turned a little more. “I asked if you got some *payper.*” I said nothing. Cherry turned around all the way, putting her dark, silky hands on the back of her desk. Her beads clacked and the coconut smell wafted toward me like a mutiny.

“You gotta lotta paper there,” she said.

I'd expected her temper to be up by this point, but her voice was calm and rolling and slow. She was perceptive as well as beautiful.

I said, "mmmhmm."

She waited, expecting more.

"That's a good moose you're drawing," she said.

Moose?! I said to myself. This isn't a moose. She thinks this is a moose. I knew my artistic abilities were such that I could render a perfectly recognizable caribou. This couldn't be. I couldn't let her go her whole life confusing caribous with mooses. But, no. Certainly she was smart enough to know the difference between a caribou and a moose.

"How come the horns look like that?" she asked.

Horns? These are antlers. I was convinced that it was my art that needed help, not Cherry, because, if she didn't know what a caribou was, then she couldn't be perfect, and if she wasn't perfect then I'd been tying myself in knots over an imbecile through the entirety of Animal Week for no reason at all.

"Those are some bad horns, boy."

My crayon stopped moving. It was that feeling you get when someone calls you selfish when you feel more generous than you've ever felt. It was that not-quite-apprehension Napoleon ignored when his friends told him that Russia might not be the best idea. It was that same impossible doubt that Oppenheimer felt when realized what The Bomb could do (I'm sure he gazed through a window for a brief moment then, shaking his head, returned to his work). Same kind of thing happened years later when I refused to believe the reasons my first wife Judy gave me for having her second affair.

"It's a caribou," I said. That simple. It's a caribou. I went back to coloring.

“A *care*-ibou? What’s a caribou? That ain’t a animal.”

I’d said my piece, goddamnit. That was all the explanation she needed and all she would get. It was a caribou, and if I had to explain the blatant differentiations between the caribou and its lesser cousin then I would have to look her dead in the eye and tell her. That, however, was something I could not do, fearing that it was Cherry, not the excess of lunchroom pizza and the sweltering classroom that had led me to puke in my color box on Bobcat Day.

I could feel those calescent plums of eyeballs bore into my forehead, chipping through the stone-faced stoicism I’d been presenting to her and to everybody else all week. She could see my soul and my faults and transgressions. But, no. If she knew it all, if she really was digging in and knowing me, she would have known this was a caribou. I had nothing to say, not even that this was a caribou.

“You’re stupid,” she said.

I huffed.

“Why don’t you draw a unicorn if you’re gonna draw something that ain’t real? A caribou ain’t even a real animal, boy.”

I was fuming.

“Give me some paper so I can draw my moose. A moose is *real*.”

I gripped the crayon like it was an emergency brake. I throttled it.

“That *looks* like a moose, boy. The horns ain’t right, though.”

She could tell I was slipping. I was shaking. Literally shaking. If Wesley hadn’t been so intent on his giraffe he would have seen me and ducked for cover, anticipating the explosion, waiting for the fallout. But I wanted him to see me. I wanted D.P. and Ivan and

Elmer and Mrs. Turner and Yahoo and everybody to see me blow Cherry Rogers away, but I didn't blow her away. I set down my little brown crayon and took a breath. I was about to look her square in those horrible purple eyes and enlighten her. If this was to grow into a relationship with happy family reunions and babies that we'd shape into Presidents, then I couldn't blow her away. Not yet. I faced her with a quick jerk of my chin, like ripping off a band aide.

"This is a caribou.. He lives in Alaska and Canada and he's *way* better than a moose." I said it like a machine gun, waiting for my cereal to come up.

Cherry stared at me and her eyes were less harsh, but she was still prying, still surveying. "Oh," she said. She didn't believe me, but I could tell she was pretending like she did. "Well," she began, "can I have some payper?"

Cherry held out her hand as if I was giving in. I wondered what this was. If this was some sort of peace offering on her part, or if this was some apology she was expecting from me for Bobcat Day. I could've laughed at her, spit in her face and never talked to her again. I wouldn't learn what "disillusioned" and "jaded" meant for several more years, but I knew I'd been put on. She wasn't perfect at all. I refused to blame myself.

"Mrs. Turner!" I belted. "Cherry won't give me back my green crayon!"

Mrs. Turner, not looking up from her crossword, half-heartedly prompted Cherry to give it back.

Cherry was seething. "You tryin' to get me in trouble?"

"Yes," I said.

"I don't like you."

"Good," I told her. "I don't like you either."

Chupacabra and the Yearling

Earlier that summer, Maggie's mother had discovered a new drink called the *missionary's downfall*—an awful blended thing full of rum and greenery—and, after first delivering the line, “Take you a sip. You’ll see why they call it that,” she fed them to Maggie during the entire visit. Now Maggie was lying down in the backseat. She wasn’t absolutely drunk, she just couldn’t handle the way Rudy, her husband, drove. She did this all the time. Rudy adjusted the rearview mirror so he could see his wife.

“Your mother is blowing our inheritance on rum,” he said. “You realize this.”

“Rudy, if she didn’t have her rum then she would have to call me no less than 40 times a day. Then she would be wasting *my* inheritance on long-distance charges, driving me desperately ape-shit in the process. With rum, she’s tolerable. I’m willing to make sacrifices for Mother’s happiness.”

“I don’t see why she can’t be perfectly happy and perfectly sober in that gigantic house on that horrible little beach. She’s the neighborhood lush, lying in her hammock every day waiting for one of her little blue-haired friends to come visit with a bottle of wine.”

“That’s when she’s happiest, dear,” said Maggie.

“Then she should drink her friends’ wine and lay off the rum. She’s being inconsiderate,” said Rudy.

“What do you suggest, then?” asked Maggie. “She’s already been through her midlife crisis, but maybe we could get her a motorcycle, huh? Oh! or how about a jet ski? I’m sure she’d be just pleased as punch with a jet ski.”

“You’re probably right. Something massive and powerful between her legs would be more than enough to fill the gap.”

“I hate you,” said Maggie. “Slow down.”

Ten minutes later Maggie was snoring. Rudy reached for a granola bar in the passenger seat and casually sped up the car, just a little.

The summer before, on the same trip down to see Maggie’s mother, they got caught in the tedious 4th of July beach traffic that turned a typical three hour cakewalk into an eight and a half hour cage-match when first the air-conditioner died on them and then they ran out of cigarettes. They decided to quit smoking almost immediately. This year, in an attempt to avoid the traffic and, in doing so, keep their marriage together Rudy and Maggie left her mother’s house around 2 a.m. after a last round of drinks and a game of canasta.

Rudy reached to turn on the radio. It was *Coast to Coast* with Art Bell and they had just finished up a segment on the Supervolcano. A group of Supervolcanites had just laid out their doctrine for the next 70,000 years and then they gave their address for anyone who wanted to send donations. This year they were raising money to help the families of firemen lost in 9/11. Next up on *Coast to Coast*, the reemergence of the Chupacabra, the lizard-beast of Colombia, Mexico and Texas, sighted for the first time in two decades just outside of Lubbock; 27 heads of cattle counted amongst the casualties.

Two farmers called in and gave their accounts of bovine mutilation, decapitation, big, three-toed footprints and shots fired. After the break would be Melton Karnes of the Lubbock County Sheriff’s Department. “Scary stuff folks,” said Art Bell. “We’ll be right back on *Coast to Coast*.” Cue some creepy music. Rudy turned down the volume because of the commercials.

Maggie was still snoring and the light from a gas station fell across her long body, all curled up and uncomfortable-looking. Her head was thrown back and her face was wedged

between the corner of the backseat and the passenger door, up against the seatbelt buckle. It would leave a mark. She was drooling a little too. Rudy wouldn't have her any other way. He remembered the first time they—"and we're back!" said Art Bell. Rudy turned up the volume again. He didn't want to wake Maggie, but he really wanted to hear this, so he turned it up a little more.

Melton Karnes had to correct Art Bell. He was a *former* Lubbock County sheriff. Not one at present. He'd retired back about a month ago as a matter of fact. Things just start to get to you after a while.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that Melton," said Art Bell. "I hope it wasn't the Chupacabra that got to you. HA-HA!"

Melton didn't speak for a few seconds, even when Art Bell stopped laughing.

"I'm uh...I'm sorry folks," said Art. "We seem to have lost the connection there. I sure hope Melton calls us ba—"

"I'm still here," broke in Melton. "I just wanted to make sure you had your laugh out."

"Well, Melton. I sincerely apologize for that."

"I'll just go ahead and begin if you don't mind," said Melton. All matter-of-fact.

"By all means," said Art Bell.

"Well," Melton began, "it was 1961 when I first saw the Chupacabra. Me and some boys from school were out on one of the boy's daddy's ranch. We took another boy out snipe hunting."

"Can you--" Art Bell interjected, "can you explain 'snipe hunting' to our listeners, please, Melton?"

“You take a boy out at night with a bag and a stick and tell him to go find a bird that doesn’t exist. Then you leave him by himself for a while and come back later and scare the shit, excuse me, scare the hell out of him.”

“Thank you Melton,” said Art Bell. “Go ahead.”

“Well, we took this one boy out there and left him, then we went back to the truck and drank a couple beers. After a while we figured it’d been long enough so we went to scare the one boy out snipe hunting. We were up on top of a ridge looking down in a hollow and we could see his flashlight moving around so me and the other two boys split up and decided to come up on him from three sides. Then we’d just throw rocks at him or make some noise. Just scare him. Well, I made a wide right and started coming up on him and I got about 50 yards off and was about to start whooping like an Indian or howl at him or something but then I heard that one boy, the one out snipe hunting, I heard him start screaming like he was scared and figured one of the other boys had got there already so I started running to catch up. Well, the screaming got real bad after a while and it just went on and on while I was running. It didn’t sound right. Not like he was scared. Then he finally stopped and I thought everything was ok and the joke was over with.

“Well, when I finally got to him he was laying on the ground and there was this man just sort of squatted over him and I yelled “Hey!” and it stood up. God, it seemed like it took forever to stand up, and it wasn’t a man at all. Its head was flat and its arms were too long and its legs were too big and it just...it just wasn’t right. It looked at me real, real slow and just started breathing hard and heavy standing over that one boy, just standing there just looking at me. I pissed my pants right there and then one of the other boys got down to the hollow too and said hey but then the thing, the Chupacabra ran right at me and I just stood

there. It didn't make any noise at all when it was running and then it just pushed me down real hard into a mesquite tree," and Melton stopped. Rudy was breathing heavily and wishing his wife was awake. Rudy turned on the high beams.

"Mel...Melton," said Art Bell. "I need to ask, what happened to the boy? The one out snipe hunting?"

"Well, Art. He was eaten is what happened," said Melton. All matter-of-fact.

"I, folks, ha," began Art Bell. "I didn't realize there'd been a *human* casualty in the case of the Chupacabra..."

"I hadn't told anybody until now," said Melton Karnes, former Lubbock County sheriff. "We said it was coyotes."

Art Bell didn't say anything for a long time. Rudy leaned closer to the speaker. Just a crackling sound came out of it. Rudy could hear his tires humming on the black highway and Maggie was sort of purring. But then Art Bell finally said, "And Melton," then he cleared his throat. "You saw the Chupacabra more recently, didn't you?"

"Yes. Yes I did."

"Could you tell us about that?"

"Well, it was just a routine road block we had several months ago. Friday night. Kids from Tech driving out to The Strip to pick up booze. We try to catch them on the way back in. It was a slow night. Cold night. Me and a deputy. I looked up and saw the Chupacabra standing off the road, over by some train tracks an—"

"OH MY GOD!" screamed Maggie from the backseat.

Rudy jumped, jerking the steering wheel and almost ramming the car into a guardrail. "What is it?!" he yelled. "What the *fuck* is it?!"

Maggie laughed and laughed. “I love you,” she said.

“I hate you so much,” said Rudy, turning off the radio. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I know,” she said.

Rudy took a moment to catch his breath. “That was pretty good though.”

“I know,” she said.

“Sleep good?”

“Excellent,” she dragged the word out, yawning. She stretched against the doors in the backseat with her feet and her neck. “I dreamed about the Chupacabra.”

“Did you, now?”

“Mmhm,” she replied. “Where are we?”

“Almost home.”

“Wake me up when we’re there.” She rolled over and nuzzled her head in the corner.

The sky was beginning to glow with morning and Rudy pulled off the interstate. Their house was spitting distance now, so Rudy laid on the gas some more until he saw blue lights up ahead. It wasn’t a wreck or anything. Just a roadblock.

“Hey, babe?” said Rudy, tapping Maggie on the thigh, “hop up.”

“We home?” she moaned.

“No, there’s a roadblock. Put your seatbelt on.”

“Ok, *dad*.”

“Just put it on.”

Rudy slowed the car down as he approached the blue lights, digging in the overstuffed glove box for an insurance card that wasn't out of date. He rolled down the window.

"Good morning, officer," he said.

"License and registration. Thank you. You folks have a good weekend?"

"We went and saw the in-laws," said Rudy. "I think that explains itself."

"Hers or yours?" he asked.

"Hers," said Rudy, thumbing at the backseat.

"That explains it," said the sheriff. "Is that why you're in the back, ma'am?"

"We're in a fight," said Maggie, all matter-of-fact.

"That explains it alright," he said. "You folks have a good day now."

"Thank you, officer," and they pulled away.

Rudy turned and started poking Maggie in the belly, or trying to. She giggled. It was her spot.

"So we're in a fight, huh?" said Rudy.

"Oh! You didn't know, darling? Ow! Don't pinch! I've been mad at you since my first Missionary's Downfall!"

They were almost home now, not even a mile, so Rudy unbuckled and turned to fondle his wife with both hands, steering with his knees.

"Watch the road, you horrible man!" she squealed. "You vicious indelicate fiend! You—RUDY, STOP!"

The little yearling fawn flew ahead of the car as Rudy jammed the brakes. It landed in the middle of the road.

“Oh no oh no oh no,” mumbled Maggie.

“Hang on hang on. Maybe it’s ok.”

Rudy got out of the car and Maggie followed closely behind him. They held hands and walked dumbly as if they were approaching a horrible ticking bomb that they’d have to dismantle.

“Is it breathing?” asked Maggie.

“I don’t know,” said Rudy.

“What do we do?” she said.

“I don’t know.”

The fawn wasn’t bleeding, but it wasn’t breathing either. Its slender, spotted legs were splayed out at wrong angles. Nothing moved at all. The misty dawn was quiet.

“I’ll get it off the road,” said Rudy.

“Be careful.”

It took a couple seconds for Rudy to start moving. The only wild animal he’d ever encountered was in a cage and he didn’t even feel safe then. He’d heard stories about the awesome power of injured beasts but really, what could a baby deer do. He couldn’t convince himself that it was harmless.

Rudy squatted when he got to the fawn and slowly, steadily lowered his hands to feel for breathing or a heartbeat or a quiver. The deer’s fleeting warmth moved soft against his shaking hands and he flexed them, not meaning to, jutting them there as if someone was tapping the point of a knife between his fingers. Rudy focused on the yearling’s body through the spade-shaped gap between his hands. Rudy wasn’t sure what he saw there, though it wasn’t the white-flecked flank of a deer, but he thought of his sister. He thought of

her urn. Horribly aware of the silence, he had never felt more alone. Maggie was a million miles away from him and Melton Karnes was a distant galaxy. Gulf Shores didn't exist at all and the Chupacabra was standing over his shoulder waiting to dig into his neck. He would have given anything for the lizard-beast of Lubbock to rip his head from his shoulders and eviscerate him, as long as he didn't have to feel the baby deer's warmth push his hands any more. Something moved in the bushes off the road and Rudy stopped breathing. It was the doe. She saw him as well. Her gaze held Rudy there until he clasped his ears, not knowing why, still crouching over the corpse. There was rustling from the trees on the sides of the road that Rudy couldn't hear.

"Rudy," said Maggie from somewhere far off. He didn't know if he heard her. The doe stood across the dead yearling. Behind her were other deer, regarding him. A buck shifted uncomfortably where he stood and the two young ones, they looked like twins, leaned against each other as if for solace.

The doe lowered her head to her dead child and sniffed along the length of its body. Rudy cried. There was something deep in the doe's slow eyes that made him sit on the asphalt.

"Rudy," said Maggie. He couldn't hear her. She was in Egypt.

The doe stepped forward, just a step, and nuzzled her yearling on the nape of the neck. The deer behind her crouched on their forelegs and raised their calm, glassy eyes to the glowing blue sky, bellowing from deep in their throats. Again, the doe grazed the yearling on the neck and, satisfied, stepped away. Rudy watched as the dead yearling shuddered. It pulled in a great gasp of air and another, never breathing out. The muscles in its neck were twisted and struggling. Rudy hadn't blinked.

“*Rudy!*” said Maggie. She was nowhere to be found.

Rudy heard the broken bones snap and creak as they moved back into place. The yearling tucked its feeble spindly legs up to its body and rolled onto its stomach. It stood shakily on nimble stilts. The yearling was breathing normally now and the other deer began to stand and disperse back into the roadside shadows. The yearling and the doe followed. None of them looked back.

“Rudy?” said Maggie, who was right there, pulling him up by the elbow. He shirked away from her and she watched him walk silently to the car. He looked old. Maggie rode up front this time while he drove home. Not even a mile. They didn’t speak.

When he stopped the car Rudy stared at the steering wheel for too long.

“What was that, Rudy?” Maggie was staring at nothing.

Rudy looked at his hands and considered how weak they seemed, shriveled and gray in the faint blue light. He folded his arms, tucking his fingers tight against his ribs. It was several minutes before he spoke.

“We’re speeding toward death,” he said. “I’m afraid we forget that.”

Maggie shifted in the seat and tucked her legs beneath her. The wrinkles seemed to be spreading at the corners of her husband’s eyes, his hair on the verge of graying.

“You’ve been driving for a long time.” She spoke calmly. “You’re just tired, baby.”

Rudy nodded distantly, closing his eyes and rocking slowly.

“Why don’t we go in and get some sleep,” she said. “It’s been a long day.”

The Curse of Abduamma-Tulu al-Hamma the Turk
or
'Da Last Dame in 'da Woild

Detective Bumpo let the cigarette dangle from his lips as he rolled up his sleeves. He took one last long drag from it—it had burned down almost to the filter—then crammed it into the overflowing ashtray on his desk. Some of the ashes landed on his reports. He just let them burn. Bumpo didn't give a damn.

“You made a mistake, sweetheart. A big mistake.” Bumpo kicked back in his chair and plopped his feet on the desk. The ice in his tumbler tinkled. Stringy smoke circled his fedora.

“But...but Jimmy...” said the woman. She was on the opposite side of the desk, on her knees, looking into Bumpo's eyes. The L.A. sun filtered through the blinds and fell across his face in glowing yellow stripes. She tried to cry but the tears just wouldn't come. The tears never came.

“But Jimmy' nothin’,” he said. “You dumb broads are all the same. That coulda been love that stabbed you in the gut and you'd never know it, kid. You'd never even know it.” He lifted a dented-up cigarette case from his shirt pocket.

The woman pulled a butcher knife from the bloody tear in her yellow flapper gown. Her insides spilled out. Spaghetti. Ketchupy spaghetti. She held it in her hands. “But...but Jimmy,” she said again. She reached up to wipe the sweat from her temple. The ringlets around her face were stained red.

“I ain't Jimmy, sweetheart. Jimmy's my brother. Twins, y'see. Name's Morris. Nice ta meet ya.” Bumpo slid another cigarette between his lips, lit it and snapped the case shut.

“Jimmy always did love ya, baby. Still does. I can see why, too. I never knew a dame to kill herself for a gumshoe. You’re one in a million, doll. One in a million.”

The woman stared at Bumpo. Her porcelain brow furrowed. She shook her head. Softly at first, then violently. She gripped her ears with her slender, blood-smeared fingers and yelled. “Fuck!” she said. “What’s the goddamn line?”

“Come *on*, June!” said one of the people in the chorus. “It’s your last line! Your *last line!*”

Charley, who was playing both Morris and Jimmy, flung his hands in the air, jumped up from behind the desk, threw the fedora into the orchestra pit, and ripped off his moustache. “That’s it!” he said. “I’m going home. I don’t have time for this! June, get—your shit—together by tomorrow night.” He emphasized each phrase of that last sentence by jabbing the cigarette, held between his middle and index fingers, at her face.

“Woooh woah woah!” said Wes, the director. He came from out of the wing waving his hands in the air as he said it, and his yellow scarf got tangled up in the gesture. He almost choked himself. “Charley, Charley, *darling*, just relaaaax, baby. Baby-Chuck. Run it through one more time for me. For ol’ Wessy.” He was massaging Charley’s shoulders while Charley rubbed the bridge of his nose. June was lying spread-eagle on the stage floor, staring into the lights. She was trying to burn her retinas so she could go home for the night.

“Tell Jimmy I’m the last dame in da woild,” she said. “Tell him its nothin’ but brawds from here on out, see? WHY can’t I remember that stupid line?” and then she let out a long *gubbbbb!* sound, loud, from the back of her throat.

Judd the props manager was crouched over June, stuffing her entrails into a gallon zip-lock bag. “You must rremember to brreeeathe,” said Judd. He tended to roll his r’s.

He'd been a director ages ago. Now he just did props. "Brreeeethe. You're not brreathing at all. It starts at the nose and goes down to the toe—"

"JuneBaby! Baby-June," began Wes. "You gotta *know* you're the last dame in the world. Don't just say it, baby. *Know* it. Do you know it, Baby-June?"

"I know it, Wes. Help me up, Charley. This flapper's too tight to move."

They'd been rehearsing the play for two weeks. The actors had, anyway. Tonight was the first night with full sound and lights and the tiger. Wes, a self-proclaimed *circumnavigateur* and *dilettante de le dramatique*, had recently been to Bangladesh with his lover, Richard (call him *Ree-shard*), and had acquired, through some shady dealings, the use of a Bengal tiger for the play. The tiger's only role would be to stalk across the stage between scenes. It was scheduled to arrive that night under the cover of darkness, of course. Authorities had no idea. Wes was very good at that sort of thing.

Wes gripped his clipboard against his hip with his elbow and daintily clapped his hands. "Ok ok ok! Let's take it back to the scene with Katka seducing the mayor. Katka! Where's my Katka?" Wes perched his little round sunglasses on top of his shiny bald head, looking for Nina, who was playing Katka, the eastern-European sexpot.

"Honestly, Wes," said Nina. She came from somewhere backstage, tugging at the hem of a skimpy black skirt and wobbling a little on her six-inch stilettos. They were treacherous. "Why don't we just get rid of the skirt altogether? I'm completely exposed! Look at that!" She turned around, glaring over her shoulder and pointed at her ass. "That's a butt-cheek, Wes. You can see my butt-cheek. Oh, and this..." she jutted her arms straight up in the air, "that's my vagina," keeping her arms up but pointing down at something that floated just above her forehead. Nina twirled around like one of those ballet dancers that

pop out of jewelry boxes. Ed, who was playing Mayor Evans O’Nancy, folded his hands in and around one another as he ogled Nina’s crotch.

“And look at that, Wes,” she indicated Ed. “*This* vagina is going to be in *that* pervert’s face.”

“Ed, stop it,” said Wes. “You could never get it up anyway,” then he turned to face the balcony. “Lorenzo!”

Lorenzo was the lighting designer for the play. He’d been sitting in the tech booth with Ahmed, the sound guy, for over two hours. They’d been pushing buttons and turning knobs, watching the actors bumble through their lines as Wes pranced around like their muse. Thankfully, there were 327 seats and about 4,000 square yards of crushed red velvet between Lorenzo and Ahmed and the stage. The velvet lined the walls of the old theatre; the backdrop for what looked like a million cherubs, busts, masks and gods that The Bristo’s decorators had picked up at antique stores everywhere from Beijing to Athens, then spray-painted gold and arranged along the walls. Lorenzo and Ahmed smoked cigars in the booth and always had a half-finished game of dominoes waiting on the table between them.

“Renzo, darling, can you bring up the house?” yelled Wes. Lorenzo tapped a button with the butt of his cigar and The Bristo’s six golden chandeliers faded up from black to their misty orange glow. “Eet’s your turn,” said Lorenzo. His moustache twitched. He knew Ahmed was way ahead in the game.

Wes folded his arms and held the clipboard to his chest, cocking his head to the side and assessing Nina. “Well, you don’t have a camel-toe or anything, Nina. I really don’t see what you’re so concerned about,” said Wes. He shooed away the greasy, drooling Ed behind

his back. “You *are* the bombshell, after all. And it’s not like I want you to show *carpet* or anything, just a little eye candy.”

Nina crossed her arms and raised one pencil-thin eyebrow so much so that it almost disappeared into her black bob wig. Her lips parted slightly, but not in the way that suggested she was about to speak, just that she was waiting.

“Don’t give me that look, NinaBaby. You’re my vixen! my banshee! my siren! You’re *Octopussy* and *Evelyn Muhray* and *Lolita*! Of *course* we can see your chatch.” Nina just shrugged her shoulders and turned away. She might have smiled, but she would never let Wes see that.

At the front of the stage, Charley was hoisting Eddie, Little Ed, Ed the pervert’s grandson out of the orchestra pit by the arm. Charley had tossed Little Ed into the pit to retrieve his fedora.

“Ok, kid. Good job,” said Charley. “You remember your next line? What was it?”

Little Ed cleared his throat and presented an invisible newspaper up over his head. He couldn’t have been more than eight years old. “Extra, extra. Read all about it—“

“No no no, kid,” said Charley. “Give me some *zest*. Say it with *balls*. Make it *pop*, ya’ know? You gotta shake the fuckin’ rafters out of this goddamn place. Start over.”

Little Ed composed himself. “*EXtree! EXtree!* Read all about it! Gumshoe Jimmy Bumpo gets his heart ripped out again! Not by a movie star, folks! Nope, not this time! Ripped out by a *tiger*! A *tiger*, see? *A tiger?*”

Charley popped his wrist and flipped a cigarette into his mouth, like magic. “Good job, kid,” he said as he turned to head backstage, lighting his smoke as he went. Little Ed let the newspaper drop to his side. “Gee,” he said, all breathy, as the man walked away.

Little Ed would run on stage just as the tiger crept away, lit only by a single, yellowy spotlight. He would announce the news of the previous day, and then the next scene would begin. Little Ed was something of a prodigy. Both his parents were on Broadway, but he'd stayed behind in Richmond to live with his granddad. It was a good place to raise a kid.

The chorus had been shoving their way around backstage, moving away all the *Bumpo: Private Eye* office props and replacing them with Mayor O'Nancy's luxury penthouse.

"Ed, can you keep your hands to yourself?" asked Wes.

"It's not my *hands* you need to worry about," said Ed, indicating his crotch, giggling.

"Keep it in your pants," said Wes as he turned away. "Fucking pervert. 'Renzo! Sweetie, can we take it back to cue 45? The office lights? You're a doll!"

Lorenzo tapped a couple buttons and bright, bluish light fell on the stage just as the chandeliers faded down. Little Ed ran offstage and hopped in June's lap. She liked to play with his hair and he liked to let her.

"Go ahead when you're ready, Ed," said Wes, as he slipped into the shadows in the wing.

"Something has *got* to be done about this, Werthington!" said Mayor O'Nancy, slamming his fat fist on the desk. He was addressing Werthington, his meek, slight-of-build aide. "I just *know* that Turk, that Abduamma-Tulu al-Hamma is behind this. Los Angeles was a paradise...a *paradise*," he slammed his fist again, "before he came here, and now...now we've got chaos on our hands."

Werthington nodded. "I think you're right sir. I think...you're right." It was his only line.

There was a soft tap at the office door—Ahmed’s cue to bring in the sultry *wah-waab-nub-waaaah*, trumpety jazz. “Com...come in?” said Mayor O’Nancy. He knew that knock and looked uncertainly over his shoulder at Werthington who rarely, if ever, made eye contact with him. The heavy oak door swooshed open so that the person walking in couldn’t be seen immediately, except by Werthington and O’Nancy.

“Werthington...” said O’Nancy, and Werthington, without a word, excused himself from the office, moving swiftly through the door past whoever or whatever it was.

“It’s been too long, lover,” said the voice. The accent was thick with Eastern Europe. It was dripping. You couldn’t wipe those vowels up with a mop. They oozed all over the place. Mayor O’Nancy sat up more erect in his huge leather chair and used his hand to brush his comb-over into place. He looked like a six year-old.

“I haven’t heard from you since...since that night,” said O’Nancy. As he said it, a hand slinked its way around the edge of the door. The skin was pale and the nails were like cherries. A slender arm followed the hand, then a pair of pert breasts and a knee and a thigh, then a size six stiletto attached to a milky calf, then the lips. Then the hair. Then the door shut. “I thought you had forgotten me, lover,” she said.

“K-K-K-Katka. I would n-n-never forget y-y-y—“

“Shh sh shhhh,” she hissed. “Don’t stutter, lover. You know I hate it when you stutter. It makes your lips so tired, and you know what we need those lips for.”

O’Nancy was sweating. He whipped a handkerchief from his coat pocket and ran it across his forehead. “Did he send you, Katka? Did *he* send you?” whimpered O’Nancy.

Katka, had she been any other woman, would have pummeled through the space separating her and O’Nancy but, because she knew how to move, it seemed as if she licked

the distance away. She devoured it. She bathed in it. It was like she never even moved. Before O’Nancy knew it, Katka was on top of his desk with a foot perched on each arm of his chair. O’Nancy kept his eyes locked on hers.

“You’ve done bad things, lover,” she said.

“Uh huh...”

“You’ve been very...*veery* bad.”

“Uh huh...”

“My boyfriend, he’s upset, you know. Very upset. And with *you* of all people. Are you sorry, lover?”

“Uh huh...”

“Are you *sure* you’re sorry, lover?”

“Uh...uh huh...”

“Then why won’t you let my boyfriend’s kitty come out to play?”

O’Nancy was melting.

“My boyfriend’s kitty doesn’t like to be left alone. She needs com—pany.” Katka grabbed O’Nancy by the tie and pulled his face into her breasts and started tugging him downward. “She gets very, verry lonely, lover.” She reached with her other hand and pulled his hair, yanking harder on the tie. “Let’s not keep kitty waiting.” Katka winked at O’Nancy and shoved his face into her crotch. She viced his head between her taught, opaline thighs and squeezed harder and harder as O’Nancy thrashed his arms against the desk, her legs, her chest. Finally, he stopped. His lifeless corpulence was cradled in Katka’s crotch. “Now it’s kitty’s turn to play,” she said.

“KatkaBaby, Baby-Katka, you’re *wonderful!*” said Wes. He dashed out onto stage applauding her with one hand and the back of his clipboard. Lorenzo brought the house lights up. “Even *I* wanted to fuck your brains out, darling.”

Katka ripped O’Nancy’s bulbous face from between her thighs. He was breathing heavily. “You and him both,” she said.

“But Ed! Ed! What are you doing? Honestly. *What* are you doin’?”

“Well, I ju—“

“Well you just nothing, Ed.” Wes slammed clipboard on the stage. “I’ll tell you what you ‘just.’ You have *just* been approached by the greatest lay you’re ever likely to have. Her Turk boyfriend has a tiger—a *tiger*—that’s on the loose, killing every Los Angelean it can get its paws on and you *know* this is happening because this woman told you about it! You lost your *wife* because of this woman. You lost your *kids* because of this woman. You’ve lost any *hope* of ever having good *sex* ever again because of *this woman* and here she is, in *your* office, and you look like you can’t *wait* to give her the icky sticky. You should be fucking terrified, EdBaby. You should be throwing yourself out that window you’re so afraid of and in love with this woman, but here you are...waiting for that vajamjam, not even *considering* that this woman, this communist *bitch* is the one who ruined your life. Ruined—your—life.” Wes turned away and picked up his clipboard, rearranging his scarf. “You did a great job NinaBaby. Let’s run it again.”

“I swear to God,” began Lorenzo, “eef you ween again I’m going to beat the piss out of you.”

Ahmed laughed.

“Seeriously, you raghead son-of-a-beetch...I’m geeting seek and tired of losing to you. Beegeeners luck ran out long ago. *Long ago!* Just once, can you let me—“ Ahmed nodded at the stage. Wes was waving at them.

“Cue 45 LorenzoBaby!” yelled Wes.

“Yes, yes. Cue 45 you son-of-a-beetch,” mumbled Lorenzo. “I know what eet eez.”

The actors ran through the scene again. This time Ed was much more terrified, but he was still panting when Nina freed his head from between her thighs. Lorenzo adjusted knobs and shifted sliders and June, the girl from the butcher knife scene, had left Little Ed with one of the chorus members. They were having a thumb war. She approached Charley in his dressing room, backstage.

The Bristo’s backstage area was three times as large as the stage itself. There were four small cubicles just behind the rear curtain that served as dressing rooms for the lead actors. The rest of the space was reserved for storage. Costume racks from decades ago, a forest of two-dimensional wooden palm trees, a giant paper-mâché Teddy Roosevelt head, a stuffed giraffe, a cabinet full of marionettes, several crates of prop guns, a fifteen foot tall rainbow, stacks and stacks of suitcases and hatboxes, a dozen grandfather clocks, something that could have been an elephant costume but was probably a de-stuffed plush hippo, the car from Grease, a stairway made to look like clouds that lead to a dusty golden Buddha, Noah’s ark, a dulcimer, a harp, three grand pianos and, sporadically placed atop all of this, no less than one-hundred and fifty styrofoam heads; some had makeup, all of them had wigs. There were, of course, a great many other things in the vast backstage warehouse but this is what was immediately visible. Everything else was stashed away in plastic tubs or piled up in

indecipherable masses of sequined fabric and tulle. Two of the grandfather clocks stood as sentries at Charley's dressing room door.

"Hey Charley," said June. He was pacing in front of the mirror in his trench coat, tugging away at a cigarette.

"...and *that's* why you'll never make it in Los Angeles, kid!" he roared, wheeling around on June.

"Scene three?" she asked.

"Yep," and he plopped in his makeup chair, unscrewing a bottle of water. "So, what happened out there?" he asked. He cocked his fedora back on his head.

"I don't know," said June. She leaned all her weight into the doorframe and looked down at her hands. "It's just such a ridiculous line. It's almost like my brain won't let me say it. Is that weird?"

Charley thought for a minute. "I know what you mean, kid," he said, "but sometimes there's nothin' to do but say it."

"My *God*," said June, bringing her hands down on her thighs. "Are you *still* in character?"

"Never leave it, baby," said Charley. He turned around to face himself in the mirror. "Never leave it."

June made her way into the dressing room until she was standing behind Charley, trying to catch his eye. "Do you think this play is as much of a piece of shit as I do?"

Charley finally looked at her in the mirror. "Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Why are you even in this play?"

"I don't know," she said. "I thought it'd be fun."

“Ha! Fun.” He paused. “I remember those days. Show your ass up there in the bright lights. Hope somebody likes you. Tell you you did a good job. Toss you some flowers. You got no idea, sweetie. No idea at all. To me, you’re nothin’ but dead weight. You got the dream, but you don’t got the drive. You’ll never make it, kiddo.”

June sized him up.

“How *old* are you, Charley?”

“Thirty-seven,” he said. “What’s it to you?”

“Just curious,” said June. She pretended to fix her hair in the mirror while Charley brushed ashes off of his slacks.

“Street scene!” they heard Wes yell from the stage. “Everybody ready for the street scene!”

Charley perked up. “I guess that’s us,” said June.

“Try not to screw it up,” said Charley.

Detective Bumpo walked out of the deli and onto a busy Rodeo Drive eating a sandwich. He wasn’t the kind of man to sit down for a meal. No time. He was on the job. Bumpo glanced at his watch and realized he was late for a stakeout on the north side of town. He trotted down the crowded sidewalk, trench coat flapping, sandwich out in front of him like a relay baton, trying not to knock anybody down, but he crashed into another body. They both stumbled backward as the sandwich fell between them. It was Daisy Dewdrop, the up-and-coming starlet. He knew who she was, but he would never let her know that. She was beautiful and Bumpo had a history with up-and-coming starlets. He was successful with them too.

“Look what ya’ did,” said Bumpo. “I just got that thing.”

“Sorry mistah,” said Daisy. “What’s a dame supposed ta’ do in this jungle anyway? You can’t go anywhere without somebody else bein’ there already.”

“A dame, huh? I thought there wasn’t nothin’ but broads left in this city.”

Daisy blushed. “What’s ya’ name, mistah?” she asked.

“Bumpo. Jimmy Bumpo. What’s it to you?”

“Maybe I’ll see ya’ ‘round, Mistah Bumpo.”

“Detective.”

Daisy looked him up and down. “Detective, huh?” she smiled. “Well, don’t be a stranger...Detective Bumpo.”

“I’ll see ya’ in the pictures, dollface,” and the two parted ways. The foot traffic filled the gap between them. Daisy stopped and looked over her shoulder at the retreating trench coat. Bumpo stopped too, and turned. He tipped his hat to Daisy then shuffled back in with the crowd. The two would meet again later on, when Daisy feared for her life. She would eventually fall for Detective Bumpo, only to be deceived by his twin brother, Morris. The two continued to walk away from each other but Bumpo stopped, then Daisy stopped, then every bustling body on Rodeo Drive stopped. They’d all heard something, and a chill fell over every one of them. It looked like a photograph. They weren’t sure what they thought they heard, but then they heard it again. Another roar—just like the first one—came from backstage.

“*It’s here!*” squealed Wes. He threw down his clipboard and darted toward the sound. The cast briefly, dumbfoundedly stared at one another, then they scrambled in a pack to see the tiger.

Three men were leaning against the car from Grease as if it was theirs. They looked like they were in high school, except one was wearing a vest made of leopard skin and the other two had substantial beards down to their sternums. Wes was greeting them individually. His body was literally vibrating he was so excited. “Dipali, Amlan, Daggoo! I’m *so* glad you could make it. Did you have any trouble?” Daggoo, their apparent leader, picked at his fingernails with a bone-handled bowie knife and shook his head.

“*Wonderful!*” chimed Wes. “Let’s get on with it, then!”

Dipali pulled a crowbar out from nowhere and began prying away the lid of the deeply purring crate. Wes was letting out a high-pitched and almost inaudible “*eeeeee*” of anticipation, like a teakettle. As soon as Dipali popped the lid off, a huge white and orange paw lashed out from inside the crate. The cast screamed in unison. Daggoo wielded his knife by the blade and whacked the tiger across the knuckles. The paw disappeared and Daggoo, unfazed, continued his manicure.

“*Ooooooh*, this is so *exciting!* *Judd!* Where’s Judd?” chirped Wes.

Judd slowly approached the crate carrying a wooden chair and a whip. “Here’s your new *prop*, JuddBaby!” Judd looked like he wanted to cry. Of course he’d agreed to go through with this (he’d dealt with a tiger years before in *The Jungle Book*) but these were much different circumstances. “I’m not so sure about this, Wes,” he said. “I mean, this tiger...”

“You can handle it JuddBaby, no problem. I believe in you. Dipali, Amlan, Daggoo, could you help Judd get the kitty out of the crate? I want Gary to run through the first scene and then we’ll have the tiger walk through in the transition.”

The three men looked at one another, then looked at Wes, not speaking. Daggoo snapped his fingers. “We must go now,” said Amlan. And they exited through the back door, Dipali, Amlan, then Daggoo, without saying a word.

“Well, that was rude,” said Wes. “Places for the first scene everybody! Places! Judd, get the kitty ready. You’re on in ten.”

The first scene of the play was Abduamma-Tulu al-Hamma’s sinister monologue in which he cursed all the bourgeoisie of Los Angeles and declared revenge against those who would not allow him the opportunity to act. Apparently it was based on a true story—something Wes dug up on his world travels—though he’d embellished it greatly. There was not a tiger in al-Hamma’s real story and, in fact, the man never followed through with his plot of revenge, which was to buy out several motion picture studios and burn them to the ground. Wes, finding this dull, scrapped that part of al-Hamma’s plot and replaced it, instead, with a trained tiger that would be sent into L.A. to maim various movie executives, producers and actors. The opening scene called for a great deal of red lighting, bright strobe-flashes, mild pyrotechnics, and loud claps of thunder. Gary, an olive-skinned man of Italian descent, was playing Abduamma-Tulu al-Hamma, the Turk. Gary was an old pro. He delivered the monologue perfectly. He was so convincing that Little Ed had to shut his eyes and cover his ears to keep from crying. June held him close.

Gary wrapped up the monologue with “...a curse upon all who stand in my way!” and, as the red lights faded to an eerie green and yellow, the cast waited quietly for the tiger to stalk through the L.A. twilight. They heard the beast’s low growl from somewhere

offstage, and they waited. This was Judd's first time working with the animal, so of course it would take him a little longer.

“*Obmygod obmygod obmygod,*” whispered Wes. He was shaking.

“*Obmygod obmygod obmygod,*” whispered Nina. Ed put his hand on her thigh as if to comfort her. She immediately slapped it away without looking. Little Ed was fine now and standing on the tips of his toes, trying to see into the shadows on the other side of the stage. He couldn't see anything. Nobody could see anything. Nobody was breathing. It was taking too long.

“Okay, okay. Stop,” said Wes, finally, tossing his clipboard up in defeat. The cast let out a collective sigh. The lights came up as Wes trudged backstage. When he rounded the corner at the edge of the curtain, his feet flew out from under him and he landed flat on his back in a puddle of something. He screamed when he realized it was blood.

Charley came darting around the corner, stopping just before he stepped in the puddle. “What is it?! Wha...oh...my...God,” breathed Charley. Wes was whimpering. The rest of the cast came around the corner and gasped, then screamed. They followed the smear of blood with their eyes as it went along the worn concrete floor. It trailed off into the forest of wooden palms. “He got him...the tiger got Judd,” said Wes.

“We gotta get outta here!” said Charley.

“No!” yelled Wes, desperately grabbing his leg. “Nobody can know about this! They'll throw me in prison, Charley! Do you know what they do to guys like me in *prison?*!”

“Wes,” said June, “there's a fucking tiger—a *tie-gerrr*—in here. We've got to leave right n—“

“Noooo!” yelled Wes. He jumped up and ran for the back door. The cast chased him, careful not to get too close to the palm forest. Wes locked the door before they could stop him. He turned quickly and braced himself against the door, facing the cast. His eyes were rolling wildly in his head and his scarf fell from around his neck. “Nobody leaves!” he yelled.

“But, Wes!” began Charley. He approached Wes with an outstretched hand. “We’ve got t—“

“*Noooo!*” and Wes shoved his way through the crowd but, again, they weren’t fast enough for him. He pushed a grandfather clock out of his way as he ran and sent it crashing to the ground behind him. The cast had to hurdle it, which gave Wes some time. He slid across the hood of the car from Grease and kept running. He leapt over the orchestra pit, miraculously, and was at the back of the theater, locking the lobby doors before everyone else made it halfway up the aisles.

“Stop!” yelled Wes, and everyone stopped. “Now, you listen to me,” he said, pointing at each of the twenty-three faces. “I’ve given *everything* to you people. You would be *nothing* without me. I made you what you are, Ed! I *made* you! Before I came along you were just a big fat sit-on-your-ass-all-day-and-mope motherfucker. *Now* look at you! You’re a goddamn mayor. *A mayyyor!*” Wes shook his fists in the air. “And *you*, Nina! What have you got, like three kids? *Four?*” Nina held up four fingers. “Before you met me you were lugging around a kid on each tit and had two in the crib. I *made* you a sexpot, Nina. And *you*, Charley!” Wes pointed a shaky finger at the man in the trench coat and fedora. “You delusional *ass*. Where were you working when I found you? A *Costco*? Nobody gave a *damn*

about you. Not even your wife. Sure, she left you, but look at you *now!* Look what I've *given* you! You're a goddamn star! *And that goes for all of you!*"

The cast jerked their heads backward in a collective *who?me?* then looked at one another.

"Yes, *all* of you!" roared Wes. "Now...now I want a favor in return. Nobody leaves this place until we clean up that mess and figure out what to do about that tiger. The show must go on, as they say! So, do Wessy a favor and figure this shit out."

Wes collapsed against the center lobby door, panting and wiping the sweat from his forehead. All was quiet except for Wes' heavy breathing and then, from the orchestra pit, came a long, terrible scream that was quickly drowned out by a deep roar. The scream had come from Little Ed.

"*Eddieee!*" yelled June, as she barreled down the aisle toward the pit. Her flapper gown shimmered in the chandelier light and the tassels beat against her rail-thin body like a fancy tambourine. Just as she was about to reach the pit, the tiger—like a jack-in-the-box—leapt out and threw itself on top of her, taking a chunk out of her neck and shoulder as it did. Three quick gunshots were issued from the balcony above and the tiger fell dead with its fangs in her neck. It was Ahmed who had fired the shots from his Browning High Power DA/HP-DAO, which he carried on his person at all times. Lucky for the cast, Ahmed was a retired Belgian Army Artilleryman and had taken up his first love, lighting design, when his pension ran out.

Charley was the first to get to June. He struggled and, eventually, shoved the beast off of her. She was still alive.

"Ch...Charley, is that you?" she asked. Her voice was faint and gurgled.

“It’s me, June. I’m right here.”

“Call me Daisy,” she said. “It’s the only time I’ve ever been happy.” She was almost gone.

“Stay with me, Daisy! Stay with me, dollface! Don’t cry, kiddo. We’re gonna get you some help, ok? We’ll fix you right up. I promise.”

“No point, Charley. He unmade us. We don’t even exist any more.”

“What are you talking about, June? We’ve still got lives, right? We’re still people, aren’t we? We’ve still got things to do. We can fix you up. Just hang in there.”

“No ya’ won’t, Charley. I’m too broke ta be fixed. I’m the last dame in da’ w-w-world...” She was gone.

Charley held her head in his hands. His trench coat was covered in blood and golden tassels. He couldn’t stop shaking. He thought about his job at the Costco and his ex-wife and the kids they never had, wondering, since he wasn’t Charley any more, if they would take him back. He didn’t even make any noise he was crying so hard. He felt like he was dissolving, and he knew that Daisy was right.

“Hypno-Regression Therapy

Led to that Cat Piss and Your Father’s Visit.”*

At 4:30pm, Sandy had to get out of the house because her father was driving her bonkers. He’d been staying with her for the past three days, sleeping on her futon, bitching about his job, usurping her kitchen. Now he was using her shower. It’s not that she didn’t like him; it’s just that a parent coming to visit their child seems unnatural. An imposition. A hassle. So Sandy went outside to check the mail and get some air. Had she smoked, she would have smoked. Wrapped in a bundle of sales papers addressed to “Occupant,” Sandy found a letter that didn’t have a return address. She thought of anthrax immediately, but opened it anyway:

Sandy₁,

Your mother₂ taught that cat₃ of hers to piss on my sheets₄. We haven’t slept in the same bed₅ together in three years₆. I should have told you sooner₇. I’m moving out before I kill your mom₈. I would hate to do that to you. I’m going to Singapore to find my true love₉, if she’s still alive₁₀. My flight leaves this afternoon₁₁. I wish you the best of luck₁₂. This may be the last time you hear from me₁₃.

(Heart)₁₄,

Dad₁₅

Sandy balled up the note, threw it in the grass, and walked back toward the house.

**The narrator would like to inform the reader of his position:*

Literally, physically, the narrator is parked in his car several hundred yards from the home of Sandy Floss. She has just walked away from her mailbox after sifting through a gaggle of flyers and credit card notices, eventually finding a letter from her father, reading it, balling it up and discarding it onto her lawn. Your narrator has retrieved that letter, of which he will illuminate certain elements.

In his other position, the narrator is a former professor of anthropology upon whom bad luck was heaped several years ago. The narrator then expatriated to Russia and, because one does not plan on becoming a cyanide dealer, he became a cyanide dealer. When the narrator received an order for a single cyanide tablet from Reed Floss, with whom he attended elementary school, the narrator took it as a sign that he should intervene. The chances of Reed Floss ordering cyanide from the narrator who expatriated to Russia seemed unlikely.

Initially, the narrator was concerned for Reed Floss' well-being and wondered why a man, especially a man that he knew across thousands of miles from decades ago, would need cyanide. However, as the narrator got deeper into Reed's story, the narrator felt more and more awkward at the prospect of approaching Reed about his cyanide purchase and even more so at potentially having to explain his actions, his life, and his concern. "Concern," now being "infatuation," and itself now a cause of concern. The narrator is aware of this, and that is what he will say to Sandy when and if he works up the gumption.

¹ Sandy Floss grew up in a loving home in the Midwest and moved to Atlanta straight out of high school because of a boy she'd met when she was doing an internship in D.C. the summer before her senior year. His name was Suffolk Cowling and he was from a well-to-do family in the Northeast. Suffolk went to prep school but always longed for something more. He was an artist, of course, and that's what attracted Sandy to him. He became very popular in the Atlanta art scene and was commissioned to do a series of murals all over the city promoting change, equality and, oddly enough (though he did it tastefully), public transportation. After receiving much acclaim for his work, Suffolk developed a bit of a cocaine habit, a taste for middle-eastern women, a "certain air about him," and he, "that bastard," subsequently dumped Sandy. Sandy broke out in hives and stopped eating. The

doctors insisted that she would literally kill herself if she didn't shape up. She eventually recovered. In Suffolk's defense, he really wasn't a bad guy and Sandy will—as speculation warrants—eventually stop calling him “that bastard,” as soon as she reconnects with her father and learns to understand her mother, if such a thing is possible.

² Doris Reynolds Floss was leaving the grocery store—one of those 24-hour places—at 3am on a Tuesday morning. She was trying to pry open a plastic container of miniature brownies when a car screeched around the corner and hit her going 15 miles per hour. Doris rolled up and over the entire length of the car, which drove away. It was an incredibly slow night and she wasn't found for another two hours, when the daytime manager was coming in to work. She was covered in brownies, iceberg lettuce, strawberry-flavored condoms, and a Buick hood ornament was lodged in her thigh. She had several contusions on her head and a broken wrist. Her husband, Reed, could not understand why his wife had purchased condoms. They hadn't been intimate in over a year.

³ Pebbles the cat belonged to Doris and was, to her mind, a replacement for the family dog, Mountain, who had been murdered by the Floss' German neighbors, the Himmelreichs, twenty years ago. The Flosses had gone on vacation and asked the Himmelreichs, who often complained about Mountain's incessant barking and burrowing, to feed the dog while they were away. When the Flosses returned, they found Mountain dead in their backyard with his chain wrapped around his neck. A note from the Himmelreichs was under the Flosses door:

“We had to make an emergency trip to the motherland. We left the dog some extra food.

-Heinrich”

Doris started a flyer campaign around the neighborhood, stapling “Remember Mountain” posters to every light pole in suburbia. She even went so far as to paint an homage to the dog on the side of their house that faced the Himmelreich’s den window depicting an angelic Mountain happily romping through a meadow. This had been twenty years ago and Pebbles, of course, was no real replacement for Mountain.

⁴ Doris Floss described her husband’s Egyptian cotton sheets as “a goddamn eyesore.” They were, for lack of a better term, baby-puke yellow (as if a kid had eaten pureed bananas and then drunk just a skosh of grape juice), and dappled with orange, red and purple flowers. Not even good flowers either. They were those flowers that were supposed to be tulips but looked like a cracked half of an eggshell. They really were repulsive. But the sheets reminded Reed of the bed he slept in when he stayed at his grandmother’s house as a child. Because Reed was an “impotent, insufferable tool,” according to Doris, she trained Pebbles the cat to take a leak on Reed’s bed, and on Reed’s bed alone. Pebbles didn’t even have a litter box. This sort of activity, this extreme passive-aggression and neurosis, had been going on since the car hit Doris. When Reed approached his wife and said, “That cat of yours pissed on my sheets,” Doris replied, “Do you think that’s an accident?”

⁵ Reed and Doris slept in separate twin beds.

⁶ After Doris was hit by the car she developed what she called “a supreme distaste for the male genitalia,” and for strawberries. Her therapist, Dr. Nelson Piecemeal¹, explained that this, as well as her loss of certain memories, was the result of post-traumatic stress. For a time, when Reed would ask his wife, “So you really have no idea why you bought those strawberry-flavored condoms?” Doris would truthfully, to her knowledge, explain that she really had no idea. This was the source of a great deal of tension in the relationship. That tension, coupled with Doris’ “supreme distaste” prompted the couple to scrap their king-size and purchase two twins. Their friends jokingly referred to them as Ward and June. The love for their easily-shakable only daughter, Sandy, is what kept the beds in the same bedroom. They kept the door closed when she came home to visit.

⁷ Reed had a history of keeping things from his daughter in order to spare her feelings when, really, he just wasn’t strong enough to tell her the truth. When Mountain was murdered (see note 3), Reed kept the news from the 7-year-old Sandy for several weeks by telling her, “Mountain is on vacation, Sweetie.” “Dogs don’t go on vacation, Daddy,” she said. “Yes...yes they do,” he would reply as he trotted off weeping. Eventually, when his wife painted the mural on the side of the house, the jig was up and Sandy was crushed. A similar thing occurred when Sandy’s mother was hit by a car, and now this business about the beds.

¹ *Prior to her accident, Doris had been having a year-long affair with Dr. Piecemeal and her early-morning trip to the grocery store had been for supplies to facilitate the furtherance of that affair. Dr. Piecemeal remained Doris’ therapist after the head trauma had wiped her mind clean of their affair, which he was, even now, attempting to rekindle. Pebbles the cat was a gift from Dr. Piecemeal that he left in a nondescript box outside of Doris’ office with a note attached which read, “From a Secret Admirer.” In his hypno-regression practices, Dr. Piecemeal had been suggesting to Doris’ subconscious that she train the cat to piss on her husband’s sheets.*

⁸ He had seriously considered this and, in fact, had been in the process of ordering cyanide tablets from a Russian-based website while he was at work when his boss walked in and he quickly redirected the webpage to an online travel agency. Reed told his boss that he wouldn't be coming in on Wednesday as he booked his ticket to Singapore. This is what Reed would have called "Plan B," had he actually spoken to anyone about it, although he ordered the cyanide as well.

⁹ When Reed was in college he lived in Singapore for a semester as part of a sociological study for his doctoral thesis. He fell desperately in love with a girl named Shan Deng, the daughter of a rich businessman who was, unfortunately, betrothed to the son of a rich businessman. Shan Deng was very much in love with Reed as well. She swore that, even when she was married, she would never fall out of love with him. Her father had Reed booted from the country, but Reed promised that he would come back to her. He grieved the loss for several years until one day he received an obviously hastily-written letter from Shan Deng in which she claimed she was going to end her life. Reed fell into an inconsolable depression of which he did not come out until he met Doris one rainy afternoon. He'd forgotten his umbrella, so she offered him hers, and under it they expressed to one another their deeply-rooted fears and tedious short-comings. Reed never mentioned Shan Deng, and he still felt that she was alive. Both Reed and Doris found the other to be pitiable and tender.

¹⁰ Shana Teng (formerly "Shan Deng")

2417 Bentota Rd.

Pelena-Weligama 81700

Southern Province

Sri Lanka

¹¹ Delta Flight 8073 from Nebraska-Lincoln Airport to Singapore Changi International Airport. Layovers in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Seoul.

¹² Sandy was in the process of starting a jewelry company using discarded electronics as materials. A little orange transistor for the dangly part of an earring, a necklace with a name spelled out in keyboard letters, etc. This, she thought, was what her father meant for her to have luck in, but he just meant luck in general. He knew that Sandy was too much like him and, therefore, terribly subject to her own heady whims and highly prone to romanticizing the most superficially romanticizable situations. He knew too, but had for a long time ignored the fact that Sandy was lonely, creeping toward thirty, and sad.

¹³ It was not.

¹⁴ Although Reed typed this letter because of his shaky, nervous hands, the parenthetical “heart” was not due to the keyboard’s lack of a heart key, but a family joke from before Sandy’s birth. On their first anniversary, Reed made Doris a conscientiously childish letter from construction paper and macaroni noodles and covered it, or attempted to cover it, with glitter-glue hearts. He was completely inept in doing so (they turned out looking like apples),

but he gave Doris the card anyway. Doris tried and tried to teach Reed to draw a decent looking heart but he could never get it right. Sandy inherited the flaw. The subject of her first free-write in her first poetry class when she got to college was on the irony of her being both an art student and an incredibly loving person who was never able to render that one symbol successfully. The Floss family replaced all hearts with this parenthetical (Heart) stand-in. Valentine's Day was always fun.

¹⁵ Reed Floss is currently staying with his daughter, using her shower. On his layover in Atlanta he got very emotional when he saw a father hand his daughter one of those big soft pretzels with the big salt crystals. The girl dropped the pretzel almost immediately and, before she even knew what happened, the father picked her up and popped his own pretzel into her mouth. The girl had no idea that she was about to start crying. "Look at that," whispered Reed Floss, who missed his connecting flight to Los Angeles.

Penelope's Ghost

I met Penelope's ghost the other night. I can't honestly say that I wasn't elated when the specter swashed through me. Of course, I assumed that Penelope was dead. I imagined that little red car of hers zipping down country roads at a treacherous pace. I constructed in my mind a bizarre accident involving several paintbrushes and an aerosol can. I called Penelope's roommate, Julia, and in somber but hurried tones, avoiding talk of spirits, I asked only if Penelope was around. Julia assured me that Yes, Penelope was sitting right there. They were watching *Twin Peaks*. Penelope's ghost winked at me, so I hung up the phone without expressing the relief I was pretending to have.

Penelope's ghost and I stayed up late that night. Though I wanted to, I never questioned what she was doing at my home or how she'd come to be there. I didn't want to offend. These unasked questions about transcendence and the afterlife made for strained conversation, and so I offered her a beer. Penelope's ghost, being a much more gracious guest than Penelope, kindly declined, but I insisted. She put the bottle to her plump, pooching lips and the beer passed through her wispy body and spilled onto my couch. It seems odd that a ghost should be able to hold a bottle yet have the contents pass swiftly through her, I realize this, but I refused to question it, as the conversation was already awkward and, again, I did not want to offend. We moved from the damp couch to the small loveseat and two things happened with Penelope's ghost that had never happened with Penelope. I fell asleep before her ghost did, and when I was in that just-before-sleep lam, Penelope's ghost kissed me on the forehead and ran her tender fingertips across my eyelashes. She smelled like nothing at all.

Next morning I woke to the smell and sizzle of bacon in a cast-iron skillet. I'd left the blinds open and so the sun dazzled me. I sat for a minute rubbing my eyes against the glare. As I did I heard Penelope's voice, though not so shrill and with a tone of warmth say, Hey, you. When you wake up come help me with breakfast. I can't flip omelets like you can. Penelope's ghost peeked around the corner at me smiling. The sun was so bright I could hardly see her. She was something less than smoke and when I walked into the kitchen it looked as if my apron floated there, hanging on an invisible line. Sleep good? she asked, but I only smiled back. She didn't look at me. She was turning the bacon, but she smiled too.

The conversation over breakfast was much more natural than it had been the night before. Without mentioning it, we understood that any question or attempt at explanation of anything regarding the physical body or the lack thereof would be pointless. I shut all the blinds and placed a tea candles around the house so I could see her. Penelope had her ghost's face but there was nothing here of harshness or vanity. Penelope's ghost did not look for her own reflection in my eyes. When she pretended that she was full I pushed my last half of a biscuit onto her plate and poured honey on it for her. But you were always so selfish... she said. She laughed. Then we did the dishes.

We got down to the last dirty thing. Penelope's ghost was washing the cast-iron skillet she had fried the bacon in. I dropped the rag I was drying with and as I stooped to retrieve it, through some horrible joke of supernatural physics which I've yet to comprehend and which, again, seems odd for a ghost, the skillet passed through her wispy hand. The rag was not retrieved, for the skillet came crashing to the back of my skull, knocking me out indefinitely.

I came to and Penelope's ghost was crouching by my side and had been through the duration of my absence. She'd placed a cool damp rag on my forehead because Penelope would not have thought to do this. Penelope's ghost told me I'd been out for a good 8 hours. The sun was going down already. I was understandably groggy as I picked myself up from the kitchen floor. Penelope's ghost cradled the back of my head, as if she thought the contents would come spilling out. I love you, she said. I was unable to respond. She'd caught me by surprise. Even if we would've made the necessary progressions from acquaintanceship to love, I would not have responded. She knew this. She was Penelope's ghost. She was not Penelope. Go take a shower, she said, we're going on an adventure. Penelope would never have instigated an adventure.

I stepped out of the shower and Penelope's ghost was there waiting with a towel, not giggling, but outright laughing at my erection. She said it looked like a little soldier, and so we sang the French national anthem, marching around the bedroom and waving towels as banners. We sang it through again and I slowed my march and turned to face Penelope's ghost. When we got to *qu'un sang impur*, I wrapped her up in my nakedness and kissed her deeply. It tasted of raspberries, though not nearly as bitter.

I can't stand to be with her any longer, she said.

Then you should leave her, I replied.

We gathered rocks on the way to Penelope's house, collecting them in our pockets. All the lights were out and the aura of serenity surrounding the home lent itself to mischief. I'd never cut brake-lines before, but I sliced with the precision of a surgeon, gawking with pride as the fluid trickled out onto the moonlit driveway. We chucked the rocks through

each darkened window and ran off into the night, collapsing under an azalea bush when we were at a safe distance. We made love until we gave in to exhaustion. I woke up alone.

As I discovered later, Penelope's body was not recovered from the river. Her ghost, free now, was never heard from again.

The City of Cars

The line of cars in the rearview mirror grows steadily, building its way backwards up and over the hill and out of sight. My wife, Betty, nibbles at the tip of her pinky and says something about tablecloths while I tap the steering wheel, *pub-di-da-dap, pub-di-da-dap*, waiting for the light to change. I have the overwhelming feeling that this car will not go when the light turns green, that I should have changed the oil weeks ago, that the tires are out of alignment and need rotating, that the air fresheners need changing, that the timing chain is out of sync, that the fan belt is on the verge of snapping. And I know that when the light turns, this car will not move and I will fail in my responsibility as the driver beneath the traffic light. The progress of these people's lives depends on me. They cannot budge if I do not. *Pub-di-da-dap, pub-di-da-dap*. "Is that smoke coming from my car?" I say to Betty. "Don't be ridiculous," she says, but I can see a thick purple whorl rising up behind us. "It's smoke," I say. "It's smoke and I have to check on it." "Don't be ridiculous." Betty erases a misplaced 6 from her Sudoku and brushes it away with the back of her hand. I bite my bottom lip as the smoke in the mirror coils up and around us, forming the haggard silhouette of a sixty-year-old man holding a rifle by the bayonet, but it passes quickly back to a scattered nimbus. "That's coming from our car," I say. The gauges and arrows on the dash aren't spinning crazily or going all willy-nilly, but the light is still red so I get out to look at it, and I put the car in park. Betty just stays in the car. "You're ridiculous you're ridiculous." I tell her to hang on, I'll be right back, I have to check. "Don't be ridiculous. You're being ridiculous." It bothers me that she's become angry. There aren't any irregular squeaks emanating from the chassis, just the normal ones. No rattles or vibrations or jeopardous leaks, but there is still the purple smoke coming from the tailpipe. "Nothing's on fire!" I

shout from beneath the muffler, and she's saying, "you're ridiculous. Get in the car." The light changes and a man in a big Peterbilt behind me says, "Hey asshole! You got green!" "But it's smoking," I say. Betty shouts, "You're ridiculous, John!" which is usually a term of endearment. "Well, get the hell out of the way!" says the man. An angry chorus of horns blares behind him. "But what if it doesn't go when I try to go? That would be so embarrassing," I say. He unbuckles his seatbelt and yells "Oh! I'll embarrass you!" and I say, "You listen here, buster!" but then I stop because I'd said buster, which was an odd thing for me to say. "Drive," says Buster, so I get back in the car. Betty is livid and says that I'm being ridiculous and I tell her to get the fuck out if she feels that way. Mumbling about a cigarette she doesn't have, she rolls down her window and the horns swell in. A young man with an old aura walks up to our car. He is wearing a tunic with tiny mirrors woven through the fabric and spangled bracelets rattle on his wrists. He leans in through Betty's window. "Is he bothering you?" the young man asks, and I shout, "not as much as she's bothering me. Don't you open that door," I say. "Don't you open that door." Betty calls me a prick over and over. She hops out and walks off with the young man in the tunic. "Do you see what you've done? Do you *see* what you've done?" I can't tell if she's yelling at Buster or me. I chase after her but the young man is so fast, carrying Betty away on a flying carpet. I imagine he's responsible for the purple whorl. Behind me, the car makes a weak coughing sound right before the tires burst like harquebusiers. Flames erupt from the engine, incinerating the hood, and the chorus of horns stops. A gear falls from the sky and lodges itself in Buster's neck. I can feel the car's heat on my back like a brand. Buster collapses to the ground, bleeding like a fountain, though I don't know what to do with him. The horns begin again and we wait for what seems like years and years. The choir of horns

ushers in three babies as they come screaming into the world of cars behind me. Two more are conceived in their wake. A pair of kids falls in love when they realize they have the same bumper sticker. We christen them Ladye and Judah. Neither of their parents is in attendance. A flock of geese fly overhead and a man named Ezra pulls a rifle from behind his seat and shoots them down even though we insist that he stop. "Our supplies are low," says Ezra, collecting the game. "We can't last." For a time, Ezra is shunned, though he takes on the irrefutable air of a cassock. He mumbles bedlam under his breath. I believe he is plotting to murder me. A woman who calls herself Pania comes from deep within the cars followed by people draped in newspapers. "You have brought us here," Pania says. "You will destroy us." Ezra looks on from the hood of a school bus. The children fear to touch him, but they gladly take raw goose from his gory hand, roasting their portions over my burning car on skewers of yellow pencils. "You seek Ezra," I say, mimicking Pania's grave tones. "I can only bring grief," not knowing how to respond. "Buster must return to dust," say Pania's people. "Here, death has no place." We move the children and make a pyre of my smoldering car. "You must eulogize him," they say. "You knew him best." "But I only knew him as a son of a bitch," I respond. Ezra knows that this is the end. The people of the cars lift their voices all at once and chant, "Buster, may he rest in peace, that son of a bitch," and they continue until the city begins to move, when the cars roll along over the ashes that were Buster.

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