Lemons and Other Grand Delusions

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Lemons and Other Grand Delusions

Jake Yarnold
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For those who helped me believe again, when I’d forgotten how.
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Pitch

*Lemons and Other Grand Delusions* explores a host of characters as they come face to face with their greatest fears, as they get exactly what they think they want. From magic dimension-bending lemons, to automatons powered by the Philosopher’s Stone, as the powers from beyond become in-hand realities, the characters find their greatest desires are not as simple and powerful in their hands as they first thought. Exploring the limits of greed and desire within ourselves and in the society we live in, the collection asks who are we, if not a collection of our own desires, and the impulses to fight them?
Introduction

*Lemons and Other Grand Delusions* is designed around eight distinct main characters whose physical realities slowly break down around them, mirroring the deconstruction of their subjective reality as it clashes with a larger, more objective truth. As each character is forced to face their own false perceptions about reality, the hope is that the reader might also question their own reality in a satisfying way. This is accomplished through several techniques studied and developed over the course of the program: building thematic tension through elements of the magical and absurd, strong and decisive pacing, clear and complex *actionable* dialogue, and short story structure fundamentals.

I’ve studied the works of George Saunders, Kelly Link, Kate Folk, Italo Calvino—authors whose short story mastery is only complemented by their magical, absurd, and comical styles. How does the magic, fantastic sensibilities work to enhance their work *more* thematically? Lyrically? Comically? They develop secondary worlds, but subvert our own understanding of the primary world using its absurdity to point out the absurdity of our own. Even though the setting might change, these deeper pieces of humanity can be observed *more* directly, not less, by the use of high language, unfamiliar fantasy settings, and comic/absurd language. Unfamiliar secondary worlds in stories displace readers from their own, and this form of escapism allows fantasists and absurdist to suspend belief and isolate human emotions beyond the mundanity of everyday life. Human emotions are human regardless of setting, magical properties, or social situations. The fantasist, the science-fiction writer, they observe hope, love, compassion as it might exist thousands of years from now, or thousands of multiversal iterations from us. As we do when we sit down to read literary fiction from hundreds
of years prior. In their literary footsteps, I like to construct an ‘otherworldly’ energy within each of my stories – archaic literary language, long winding sentences. These stylistic choices are intentional and pulled from the influences of Ted Chiang and Ken Liu, Ursula Le Guin and Ray Bradbury. Hope itself feels otherworldly, as one of the few ethereal things that constantly exist within our reality that never is completely tangible – along with concepts like love. To produce that tangible hope within a story, I’ve found a strong measure of secondary world building can separate a reader enough to make everything feel possible through the impossible.

To develop a story capable of driving a main character toward the realization of a broken and misguided sense of reality, there needs to be enough driving force in the pacing to create the feeling of ample momentum and built-up tension. This is done on both a micro and macro level, within the sentence, paragraph, and setting elements. At the sentence level, in the early stages of each story, characters will often be pulled through long, rolling scene descriptions. These include multi-clausal, descriptive sentences that slow down the pacing of the reading intentionally. These are sentences of setup, early in the experience of the reader, when their patience hasn’t thinned. 

Big sweeping images pull readers into a world not quite their own, relax them with descriptions of backyards, rolling sand dunes, twisting California hills. At the beginning of “Guide in the Sands,” for example: “Usaverat was a place to die, the way its golden sands might bury you beneath mountains of its shifting, shining wealth. It is just so, the wealth of this land so vast it becomes nothing but the world you walk on, sleep on, breathe in the air and taste it within your soul, cold and shining.” Or in “Alchemist’s Delight”: “The bar, a dark wasteland of absent seats and absent souls, a place for the wandering and the lost to find their way in the deep shade past dusk, down stone steps and under neon light, their shuffled movements like the ruffling of feathers to warm themselves, the bar was faded, an old photograph.” And in “The Caretaker”: 
“Cast off to that child of divorce tucked in the winding green-gold stretching hillsides that swallow you with every gentle curve, into the belly of mother California, away from the noise and into the silent rapture of rural woodland he found it.” These are often nature-based and filled with color. The goal here is to create a “low” momentum effect, the idea of creating little to no tension, while maintaining interest in the story through lyrical and interesting language, luring the reader into the world of the short story as expert short story writers mentioned above often do. Later in these stories, the power of the sentence shifts drastically, to short, powerful, punching descriptions of action. These are meant to induce panic and heightened tension in the reader, and the feeling of a “high” sense of momentum as reading a page becomes easier and faster with shorter words, smaller descriptions. You can find these in the movement toward the climax of stories like “Switches”: “Mother didn’t just flip a Wrong Switch. She’d flipped many Wrong Switches. She’s building a new Switch.” In “The Caretaker”: “He tumbled, back, back away from the Caretaker. The flash of green, of brown, leaves. Pain.” And in “Lemons”: “His voice echoed out into the night. He could have sworn she was just right behind him. Just a moment ago. But there was no portal, no Grandma. Just the tree. The tree and Walter.” The juxtaposition between these two sentence types creates a slingshot effect, driving the reader and the main character hurtling toward the inevitable break of reality, the climax. This is also reflected at the paragraph level, where longer, more exposition-heavy paragraphs are front loaded at the beginning, becoming thinner and more peppered with dialogue as the stories continue. This is to mimic the unraveling of the main characters’ minds; they find themselves heavy, slow, almost dazed as they’re stuck in the rut of their current state. Freedom of mind and freedom to escape the subjective reality are found in the chaotic, fast-movement pacing of action.
Dialogue and characterization through dialogue have become my primary technical methods of developing story. Through the beats of dialogue, the beat being “the unit of scene design that contains both an action and a reaction from someone or something somewhere in the setting” (McKee, Dialogue, p. 192), we can show the five steps of behavior (Desire, Sense of Antagonism, Choice of Action, Action, Expression) laid out in front of the reader, and see how an individual reacts to a stressful situation. For example, in “The Caretaker,” Yuri engages in dialogue with The Caretaker in which the beats lead to multiple conclusions for the reader, the Caretaker, and Yuri:

“He nodded. “Yes ma’am.”
“Again with that ma’am cockamamie. You stunk to high heaven, Lord Above could sniff last night’s booze on you.”
“Excuse me?” Who was this woman to comment on the private intake of alcohol in his own home?
“The booze. You a professional drinker, Yuri?”
“A writer. You know what Steinbeck said. Write drunk edit sober.” The Caretaker grunted and cleaved another head of wood. He flinched as the thump rang out.
“It was Hemingway that said that, the useless drunk.”
“I’m pretty sure it was Steinbeck,” he said, sporting a knowing grin, “That said that. You should know that, being in Steinbeck country and all.”
The Caretaker jabbed a finger in the direction of the cottage. “Got a whole shelf to prove you wrong. Drunk as a fish, he was, drowning all those demons. Steinbeck country, we’re a few miles north of all that.”
“You read?” he asked, unsure who ventured to say ‘write drunk edit sober’. Where was Steinbeck country, anyway? Wasn’t it here?
“Huh,” She grunted, strafing me with her cutting eyes, “the good stuff, anyway. None of that contemporary nonsense. What do you write, Yuri?”
“Literary fiction. The good stuff.”
She grunted, went back to chopping. “Contemporary nonsense, you mean.”
“It’s not nonsense,” Yuri’s voice cracked and he cleared it. “It’s high voice, true writing. As good as any Steinbeck. Or it will be, when I finish.”

Through the progression of the dialogue, we see Yuri’s tough exterior begin to deteriorate against the natural strength of The Caretaker’s stoic behavior. He moves through a series of different actions and reactions as he is met with a sense of antagonism: bravado, defensiveness,
doubt, and finally expressive weakness as his authenticity begins to show through his layer of inauthenticity. With dialogue like this, the character can take on new dimensionality, and the external forces of character and events press this character to realize his or her own forthcomings and false sense of self and reality. By challenging the main character’s “assumed” persona through dialogue, the character’s contradictions become more complex and multi-dimensional, allowing for cracks within the psyche to appear, and so the climactic action to lead to revelation.

About midway through the program, I went to a reading featuring Guggenheim Fellow Ann Harleman, who I was fortunate enough to speak with after the reading. When I asked her advice on the writing of a short story, she said something that confused me at the time. She told me to place a character in a terrible situation, and torture them as much as possible. It was a brief exchange, and I went back to that statement numerous times over the course of writing short stories, attempting to understand the central benefit of torturing your own characters. After reading dozens of stories, I realized that the form of the short story permits, even encourages the exploration of human life as a kind of torture. There are some consistencies to short stories that define the medium as its own art, and separates it from that of novels or poetry. Main characters within a short story are often isolated, excluded or outside of a society, at odds with the norm, and so find complex emotions battering at the doors of their psyche. This battering leads to the “revelation”, or the opening of realization for the character to interpret or fail to interpret a larger meaning for life. This revelation is often presented within the last few paragraphs; the people in stories react, grow, realize things about themselves through the crucible of this societal torture. There are also few characters, tightly woven plots, and often endings that leave the reader in want of more answers.
I’ve implemented these baseline concepts of the short story form into my own writing. The isolated character is a centerpiece of each story, and each character battles with some dissonant idea of ‘self’ or ‘society’ that tortures him or her. Hector battles with the idea of the ‘perfect self’ in “Who You Want to Be,” much in the same way Gary in “Alchemist’s Delight” battles with money and entry into higher class as the solution for the isolation he feels. Both attempt to align themselves with the societal norm, causing natural friction and tension, momentum that leads to revelation, in which both realize their original perceptions of reality to be incorrect, or their own ability or craving to conform to be incorrect. Many of the characters have a “block” of some sort that prevents them from integrating toward the “societal norm” presented to them in the form of a secondary character that represents the larger society; in “Lemons,” Rebeca might fit this mold, and in “Nuts, Bolts, and Sticks” the oppressive underground bunker Johnny lives within. These blocks might be the mental limitations of youth, as in “Lemons,” or the denial of “true” self as in “The Caretaker,” even the self-disgust and desire for another life/self as in Hector in “Who You Want To Be”. But the tension created from these secondary characters creates opportunity for reflection – and out of that self-examination a vision of hope beyond the central struggle of each character. This hope doesn’t necessarily mean a reintegration into society, only an opportunity for self-awareness to grow. This brief moment where the character understands themselves to be at odds with a life of contentment is how each is presented with a hopeful moment, and so the door to “contentment” may open, however slight. This is the desired “revelation.”

Mary Robinette Kowal’s MICE conflict structure has helped me to concept stories that are interwoven, close as they opened, develop in a way that is satisfying – answering questions as they are posed, and allowing the pacing of a story to carry the reader through the conflicts
with ease. The MICE conflict structure poses that all good stories, have four different types of conflict woven into them: M-Milieu, a conflict of place, being stuck in a location; I-Inquiry, a conflict of a question needing to be answered; C-Character, a conflict, external or internal that arises within the story that involves two or more characters (the “external self” and the “internal self” are often viewed as two different characters); E-Event, in which an external event occurs that creates conflict. All of these conflicts, in whatever fashion they arise within a story and at what frequency, Kowal argues, are most effectively solved and put to bed at a sequence inverse of which they arise (say, an E-I-C conflict structure, would resolve in a C-I-E sequence). This allows for the stories to be effectively opened and closed for the satisfaction of the reader. The stories in *Lemons and other Delusions* pose different opening conflicts; Switches opens with a Milieu Conflict – how does a young woman escape her childhood home that she has returned to? —followed by a Character Conflict – what is going on with Switch’s mother? Other stories are simpler, but follow an opening of an Event Conflict in quick succession with a Character Conflict. In Guide in the Sands, the opening line provides tension by Event – a rainstorm is coming, and it will kill the character. This chains into a larger, existential conflict – who am I if not human, what is it to be human, what does it mean to die and contemplate mortality? These conflicts close in opposite order from how they’ve been opened, much like the pages of a book – the first conflict is answered in the final words, the last conflict is solved almost immediately to provide forward movement and inevitable momentum that hurls the main character and the reader to the inevitable and satisfying end. With questions answered in the opposite order in which they are asked, the narrative is sure to catch many narrative strings and tuck them away properly. The reader is left with a feeling that the events that have occurred are not unresolved, nor is the pacing at a frequency in which multiple questions are answered before more are posed,
causing confusion to a reader having already invested time in the questions posed at the inception of the story.

I hope in the future the stories in the collection are able to function on a whole as a conversation within themselves, this conversation's own story of greed and hope interwoven, a larger tapestry that reflects my own obsessions, and the processing of how the individual is able to rise above societal greed, exist as their own person, and learn to question the world in which we’ve all been placed.
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Guide in the Sands

The steaming rain felt cold upon my breast; that is how I knew I was dying. Usaverat was a place to die, the way its golden sands slowly bury you beneath mountains of its shifting, shining wealth. It is just so, the wealth of this land so vast it becomes nothing but the world you walk on, sleep on, breathe in the air and taste it within your soul, cold and shining. I have lived here for many years, growing old under the baking sun, and the crisping tides of fancy just beyond. I have the lines to show it, etched in my sides, like the lines of the sand, the lines of the coppertails and the winds. But the rain is a bad omen. The rain washes away the lines and reminds of a time when water would give the foolish hope, when green was a color washed over the land and not just in the eyes of the lonely, and the wandering. Rain had not come for many days, and many nights, and the sands were content in this. I was content in this. Rain was a bad omen, and as the heavy curl of cumulonimbus rolled heavy in the sky, the wanderer strode across the desert. Following the clouds, as one follows hope.

He sat beside me, under my rippling shade, pocked and porous as it was, meager now against the high tides of noontime heat. The clouds brought hot, stifling air to Usaverat. Thick, muted air. The wanderer wore all black. And, uncovering the wraps about his face, his skin was also, so dark and luminous it bore the weight of all umber that came before him. He wore it well. He had traveled many miles to find me. How many times he had crossed the length of Usaverat to do so could be hinted at, in the tatters of his footwraps, and the cracked, dry lips, and a pink tongue that could not quench their thirst.

“I have chased the waters to your grave, so that I might unearth what was hidden from Mankind.”
The man sat in silence then, for thirteen nights.

With his penance paid, I was obligated.

I spoke: “The Trials test Man, not the individual. Will you carry the weight of your forebears?”

The man nodded. “It has been many years, and their weight is still heavy. But I seek to carry it for those of us left to walk.”

Very well.

***

I stood from my centuries long slumber, shook the grains of golden sand from the slats in my flank, revealing the length of my buried form. The rain told me I was dying, but it would not be today. I struck south, and he followed. We walked for days in silence. The man in black trudged beside me, a small thing, but graceful along the dunes, practiced and respectful of her ever-shifting moods. In the storms, he took shelter under my membranes, and in the nights he chewed at dried jerky while staring into the horizons of the red-streaked borealis, at the brief breaks in the stormclouds. Only once did he speak, on the eve of the second week. He told me of his homeland in the East, where the golden sands would never touch, where the lands boiled with poison and fumed with the rage of the Mother Spirit. He told me of a family that scraped the curdle-pits for flatworms and cuttlepods. Of the shining mountains left by the Ancestors, and of a grey, lowered sky, much unlike the vaulted ceilings of my home.

He told me these things, but not so I would know them. He told me these things so he would remember. He recounted the names of places, people. The taste of the foul air. The cruelty
of the animals there.

At the peak of the third week we crested the Great Dune, sidewinding under the shadow of the sheer face. His small, smooth form struggled to grasp the pathless road, but did not once ask for assistance though I had a few limbs to spare a burden, and I respected the balance of the biped. Perhaps it was the difficulty of their frail existence which gave such determination. At the peak of the Great Dune a spike of white marble, a strike of color against a land so beautifully uniform. It pulled at me like the center of the everything. It was the purpose of my existence. The wanderer turned about and gave a great bellow that echoed and shook the sands far below. It smelled of rage, and pride, and desperation. There was something there that moved me, wondered if this wanderer was like the rest.

The storm clouds rumbled a warning of their own. The wanderer eyed me then.

“Fallen One, open the door that I might bury the world once again.”

I snaked about his torso and guided him to the sloped wall of fleshless marble. It opened at the touch of my mandibles, the tube lights within flickering to existence, lighting a stair curling deep into the Great Dune’s belly. He walked, dark to light, to dark, to light again, down and down to face the first of the Tests. I grasped the core of his body with my latches, the channeled links of his spinal core holding aloft his fragile form. We synced and I felt the neural impulses flashing pain and danger through the tips of his fingers, the curl of his still moving toes. I unhinged the fore of my mandibles and closed them about the soft protective shell that held his soul-muscle, and press the opening of my proboscis against him. Should he struggle, the Test of the Mind would end. Many failed the Test of the Mind. Soul-muscle tastes of memories, and pain.

I fire my radula, penetrating deep inside the core of his soul-muscle, and release the
toxins of the Mind. I am…

***

I am a child. Only five! Oh what joy to be so young! The bright colors, the wobbling of my unstable feet. The deep reek of the pond swamps, that chattering screams of distant predators. Grinning, giggling, joyous laughter bubbles to the surface of my tongue. Father, Father? There, just distant, spear in hand and dark hood cowled about his face. He is calling my name, Ptharis, Ptharis! Oh, it is a game, I must run and hide from Father, he will find me, I am laughing, he is not, but he will! I turn and slip deeper into the swamp ponds, my favorite carving, a stone pony, clutched tight in my hands. Oh, to have fingers, only five… I grip the horse tighter, feeling the sensation echo through my thick, chubby, full of newness body. My feet are fast against the edges of the bubbling marsh, I play Don’t Touch the Sludge, our favorite game, faster and faster I skip from rock to rock, stone to pebble to blackened rock, head down, never touch the sludge, never touch the… I look up.

It sniffs me. Ten feet high, it sniffs down at me. Three tentacles slip and slide and curl about my body, the eyeless monstrosity, the way its teeth curl viciously inwards, a spiral of spines meant for ripping and tearing. Bird’s claws clack impatient against the rocks, what does it smell? Does it smell the boy-fat hanging from my flushed cheeks? The strings of thick black curls rich with sweat?

The chulongo – what a strange word, flightless death – screams, triumphant, wrapping its jaws about me, scooping it into its razor-gullet. My horse, in my fist, finds the soft lodging of rotted gums between the scythe-blades of tooth-bone. It is enough to surprise, and it
drops me, to the ground, at the edge of the bubbling pits, the foul stench filling my head. I feel weak, I feel the limitations of my age, the terror paralyzes. I am scooped from the ground again. But a third scream rings out, guttural and blind as the chulongo, and I am falling, falling from death. Father stands over me, Father the Protector, Father the warrior. He stands fast against the demon, his simple spear dripping black and bloody at its tip, teeth bared, he is a monster to monsters. He yaps, and taps, and screams, dancing wild and strange about the chulongo, confusing it, misdirecting it. Oh, the Voice is a Weapon, Father teaches me even in the heat of battle.

The chulongo senses the changing of the tides, as holes appear about its body, its lifeblood sapped by the sting of Father’s spear, and wraps its metallic blue feathers about itself, screams once more and escapes on powerful legs, the clack of talons against rock growing faint into the deathscape. Father lifts me from the ground. I fear retribution, payment for my actions, but he only hands me the spear, blood-licked and heavy.

Ptharis.

A boy must become a man, someday.

***

The man in black stumbles the last step to the bottom of the Great Dune’s well. He is dripping in sweat, the strength it takes to carry the Test of the Mind is not small. But he has passed. I let him rest then, snaking from his back and curling about the inseam of the wall, tasting the green passion of the soul, the strength to protect those closest. I cleaned my radula, waiting to see if he would speak. Pulling a skein from his waist, he drank deeply, but said
nothing. Some would laugh down here, their voices echoed through the winding stair, others would cry. Some would babble about their memories, or scream, accuse me of being a demon, a sick perversion of humanity on its final glide through vanity while the world died about them. A redundancy long deserving of death. How could I disagree? A barcode stamped about the inside of my left wing, a rattle of machinery whirring and coughing about my chest. Monsanto’s scriptures painted inside the workings of my code. Property of a dead civilization.

Rain is a bad omen. It brings hope I might finally die.

“What was that?” His voice was soft. Sturdy.

“A Test. I examine the memories of your greatest fears.”

“For what purpose?”

“To see how you would stand to the greatest fears of tomorrow.”

The man in black stood.

“He died. My father. Three cycles past. A nanobyte storm came across the long waters, so rare now we thought them to be all but gone. They protect you of the dangers of the present, but cannot protect themselves of the monstrosities of the past.”

I whirred. Clicked. The stone arch door beside me swung inward.

“And the future?” I asked.

The man stepped through the door.

“We will create this. A better, stronger path.”

I followed him, skittering up the wall and through the tunnel into the large stone arena; the Test of the Body. Eddies of sand kick up along the stone floor, float from the ceiling like dust through the cracks in the marble dome. Sand, sand everywhere, it seeps through the ancient place. I took my place among the fissures, hanging, spreading my wings wide, stretching
them wide, feeling the slow shower of sand fall across my membranes, imagining myself the pinch at the center of an hourglass. I watch the man from the east stride dutifully through the collected dunes toward the stone in the center. It is still and silent and the height of three men and more. He touched the stone, and for a moment I wondered if my brother had moved the way of silence forever, but a blue shatter of veins spidered across the surface of the sphere, pulsing and throbbing and hissing.

The man took a step back. Wise in caution. My brother, the Test of the Body, cracked open and let forth a great exhale of steam, kicking up the sand at his base, and he expanded, the plates cracking wide and reforming into the great automaton of strength, blue coursing veins inside and armor plating of thousands of individual chinks, moving, shifting as he rose from his rest. He had no mouth, no face to speak of, but a tail of metal stretched out behind him, metallic feet curled under his thunderous body. A single heart of red echoed behind the shifting plates. It was a simple test, but proved the better of many that ventured here.

The Test of the Body echoed a great drone that shook sand from the ceiling cracks, and for a moment I wondered if he thought to collapse the entire dome on us, angered at being awoken from his slumber. The man in black shed his robe and circled the perimeter, watching as the steel automaton twisting about him, tail swishing about along the sand, great thunderous feet slamming their authority against the stone floor. The two moved about like this, minute dripping to minute, and I knew the man clad in black would pass. His patience showed for it. My brother lacked such programming.

The metallic tail shot through the air at the wanderer, cracking the dry air apart where the man had been a moment before. He’d slipped inside the strike of the tail, moving quickly now along the slat-steel edges, sure-stepped and confident towards that red heart. But my brother
had many tricks, and reformed the sheets of metal outward, a shifting hand jabbing out as the tail curled and retracted. The man leapt backwards, narrowly avoiding both skewering and crushing. My gears rumbled with delight. I desired to call encouragement, despite my programming.

The two continued the dance, a strike, a dodge, a step inside a guard, a defensive cut, crack, slam, silence. The man continued to pester The Test of the Body, and I watched in wonder at the curious figure-eight dance that the man dictated, always in control, guiding the automaton closer and closer to the walls with each move. His voice barked loud, just like in the Test of the Mind, his only weapon. In the beginning, when the storms were many, and the death sent droves into the sands of Usaverat, many came to the Tests, and many died. Those who came bearing great weapons upon their chests, their backs, encased in great suits of metallic weaponry, they died fastest. It was always those who feared death least that would understand the Test of the Body not a war of strength, but a dance accepting death as a dear friend.

The man ducked under another whip of the tail, and it slammed against the wall, with such force it buried deep within the marble, splintered shards of rock exploding in a cloud of white. The man in black leapt atop the shifting plates as they attempted to free themselves. There he danced as he ran, shifting tail like water underneath him. A metallic hand shot from the base of the tail, but the man danced atop its fingers, leaping through the air and pulling himself about my brothers’ back. Razor sharp edges of metallic plates cut their way through the air and the man swept through them cut sharp as the wind itself. He dove. Through the shimmering blades and twisting plates the pulsing blue musculatures holding them all together. He stretched out his hand. Into the beating heart.

The Test of the Body was finished. My brother froze, color fading from his body, strength fading from his many limbs, and collapsed in a heaped pile. The man in black lay
centered among the grey and lifeless plates, chest heaving. I let him, taking my time in returning to the sandy floor, shaking my membranes, clearing the blockages of my chest vents with a puff of hot steam. When I approached he rose to his feet and bowed deeply to the plates at his feet, then to me, approaching.

I gestured for him to step aside and he did, and I reset the Body’s core. The metal plates shake and shudder in the sand, begin crawling back to themselves, rebuilding the great boulder of metal. For the next to face the Trials. There was always a next.

The door at the other end of the arena opened at my touch, a metal hum, and the air pressed from the inside erupted past me, cold and fresh and old. It had been many hundreds of years since I’d opened this door. The man in black entered, climbing his way down into the near-blackness. Fearless still. The walls down the carved steps were natural, sandstone and filled with the veins of long forgotten minerals. Ripples through the walls carried us down, deep reds and bright yellows, pressed layers of centuries upon centuries of slow creation. The wanderer, he felt the layered grit, hands splayed against either wall, stepping further and further into unseeing.

I often wondered at the tools the Creators gave me, if it was all random, the membranes and the chest vents, and the lidless eyes, but never this. While the man in black sunk further into blackness, invisible to him the Creators’ directives shine along the spiraled walls as bright to me as the sun itself. They carry the weight of the Purpose, the reason why they could no longer exist but why I must. I traced the lines of their letters with the tips of my claws, recommitting to memory the words they stood on. Did they stand right? After all these dead, did they sing truth? Did the Creators understand what they were doing? How many had come, only to fall, one after the next, generations of generations their bodies consumed and crushed and ballasted. Had they known the Death they would impart, to sustain Life? The Death I would
impart on their behalf? Were they cowards, in the echoes of the deep sky, resting about their Heavens, looking down with smiles affront their wings and golden halos about their bloody crowns? Or a line of sad masks, looking up from the bowels of Hell, hoping only their Trial would one day prove the reclamation of the Earth?

The directives faded. Light echoed up the tunnel, the calm, still blue, the air of freshness and power echoed with it. The man in black stepped into the final cavern. I scuttled after. It was smaller than the last, much smaller, a place where stalagmites and stalactites met in the corners like rippled pillars holding the low, jagged ceiling at bay. Light came from the center, a blue pool of the clearest waters, a moat about the small island at the center. On it, a dais, wrapped in a simple belt of shining metal, the insignia of the Creators stamped to its front. Atop the dais, a closed box, detailed and forged of ivory and gold and silver and abalone carvings of stories of Creation of every culture.

The Test of the Soul.

“The Test is simple. Enter the pool, retrieve what you have come for. Leave gently.”

“Such a simple test after the Golem before it?” He asked, crouching at the edge of the basin. His reflection stared back at him unflinching.

“Many do not pass the Test of the Body.” I say.

“All of the Tests are the same.” I stop at this. None have said this before. The same? They are not the same, the tests are Three, Three are the Tests. All different. Mind, Body, Soul. I told him so. He shook his head. “There is a legend passed down through my family. We have carried it for many years. May I share it with you?” He disrobed as I clicked assent. As he took his first step into the pool, the water bubbled under his touch. “There was once a man, some deemed evil. He was a thief, and took many things that were not his. But many saw him as a
source for good, as his thieving was for the betterment of humanity, often saving the world from
greater, unspeakable evils. He did not kill for killing sake, and wore a magical hat that gave him
the strength of many men.” The man slipped into the waters, and the dirt and sweat and grime
peeled from his body. “On one journey, through snakes and rats and fire and falling skies, the
man protected his family. It was his first task, his first Test. In the next test the man fought a
being of great metal with nothing but his wit, and walked from it unscathed, saving his family
from certain death.”

“Then he came to his final task. A simple choice. Choose the correct cup, and be
granted eternal life to drink from it. Choose wrong, and die from its waters.” The man in black
stepped up onto the island and stared at the box on the dais. I waited for him to pick up the box,
open it. For him to die. But he did not. He bent down to the dais and looked at the insignia of the
Creators closely.

“There were many cups, jeweled and bright and shining cups. Cups of gold, and
silver, and ivory and abalone. There were large cups and chalices fit for kings, and bowls that
held water enough for a village.” The man pulled the insignia from the dais, and it popped off, a
clear ringing echoed through the chamber. My gears whirred faster. He returned through the
water, wading at chest height, silver metal button held high above his head. When he faced me,
there was no smug victory on his face, though he knew he won. Only the great weight of the task
ahead of him. “The man chose the ugliest, and the smallest. The most simple cup of all. The cup
of Life was not built with vanity in mind. He drank from it, not to vanquish the evil around him,
or for the glory of eternal life. But to save his dying father.” He pressed the insignia to my
forehead, and the latches of my chest groaned. They had never been used, and they faltered,
one, twice, then groaned as they opened on rusted hinges. Green light poured from me, and I
stared down into the center of my chest cavity. At the little sprouts of green in rows upon rows lining the segments of my insides. It had been so long I had forgotten what they looked like. The last plants on Earth. They were beautiful.

***

I signaled the room, and two doors slid open. One held a carrying case, small enough for the man to sling on his back. It was sleek, and black, and looked to be the same material as my carapace. Once the man in black had dressed, he retrieved it and collected a dozen different sprouts from my chest, resting them inside the holders lining the edges. I identified them one by one as he took them; *zea mays*, *solanum tuberosum*, *phaseolus vulgaris*, *glycine max*, *arachis hypogaea*. He pressed a button, and green light flickered on, bathing his sprouts in the very same life I had been giving them for eons. It was… strange to see them go. I did not want them to leave, though it was my Purpose. I would produce more to replace them, I reasoned.

When he had finished, I closed my chest cavity, whirring with satisfaction. He closed the doors to his portable incubator, and slung it onto his back. We took the second door, spiraling back up through the Great Dune.

“I do not understand still how the tests are all the same, or how you knew to pass the Test of the Soul.”

He glanced back as we emerged from the staircase and back into the expansive heat of Usaverat. The golden sands shifted below blue skies. There were storm clouds on the horizon still.

“They are the Test of Man. There is only one. The Ancestors knew this. They failed
this test, and Nature consumed them for their greed.” The man in black retreated down the Great Dune and back into the belly of Usaverat, curved shell across his back. He stopped, and turned back to me. Raised a hand. “More will come after me. My sons, my daughters. I will teach them, and they will come.”

I wondered if that was wise. But I did not say anything, only sat upon the sand and gathered the membranes about my body as I watched him go, as more storm clouds gathered on the horizon. The sand shifted about me as I lay dying. But I would not die today. Perhaps tomorrow.

Maybe rain was not so bad an omen, after all.
Who You Want to Be

Hector stared up at the sign. “Be Who You Want to Be. Be Who YOU Really Are.” Grins like Cheshire cat stains lit up the faces of silky skinned perfection. The clear shining glass reflected Hector’s mopping hair and cardboard frown like a coffee stain faded into the enamel of those grins. He was a specter in the glass, a faded picture, almost gone. Almost gone, and born anew. He could feel the weight of the crisp check in his pocket, the weight of a decade of savings.

Hector entered through the shining glass doors and stepped onto buffed marble flooring. Cold air iced the sweat along his receding hairline. The lobby was immaculate, pristine and sharp and perfect-edged everywhere he looked. Sharp granite chairs and coffee tables, Piet Mondrian abstracts like towering obelisks covered the wall in sharp squared perfection. The receptionist sat with a square-jawed smile from behind the marble-topped reception desk. A screen filled the wall behind her, another smiling face. Next to it, in big block letters: “Your new life begins now”. Hector swallowed and approached, his grease-stained shoes squeaking along the tile.

The woman behind the desk gave a smile that echoed with multi-generational joy. Perez squinted hard, looking for pores but couldn’t find any.

“Hector, welcome. Welcome back to NuLyfe,” She said, as if to a family member. Mister Perez opened his mouth to talk but she continued, “Doctor Perez is absolutely thrilled to be performing your surgery today. He’s been prepping all morning. Why don’t you go ahead and have a seat and we’ll have Preeti down in just a moment to escort you to your suite. Please,” she motioned to the granite chairs. He closed his mouth and squeaked over to the chair. It was hard
on his ass. He felt pudgy, formless in it. But this was his day. He would begin again.

***

He was reading his favorite section, the Sunday sillies, seven years ago when NuLyfe came into his life. The Sunday sillies, because politics were old hat and sports were all numbers and nonsense to him. The Sunday sillies were a place of respite, where not everything needed to mean so much, and when it did, it was only for a smile. He would sit in the faded shine of his favorite pleather loveseat, rustling the pages so Simone would know he hadn’t folded into the creases and become one with the couch, like they so often predicted might happen one day. Simone was salting Brussel sprouts on a pan, still in her scrubs, when she leaned out of the kitchen.

“How have you heard about this crazy procedure? All the girls at work are talking about it.” His head conjured up images of the nose jobs where they removed the nose entirely to lose weight. It was all the rage these days, losing weight. Less weight, less calories to maintain. Less calories, less food to buy.

“What is it this time, chopping a leg off to save space in bed?” He peeked over the zine, eyebrows waggling. She hee-d and hawed.

“Even worse, full-body replacement. Can you imagine? Who are you without your own body?” Mister Perez looked down at his folded form, the curling rotundness that peeked from the bottom of his shit shirt. He pulled the shirt down. Scooted his ass into the back of the seat.

“A marathoner? Hercules? A sex god? A better husband?” Simone rolled her eyes
and disappeared back into the kitchen. A rattle of metal, an open and a close of an oven. She reappeared and crossed the beige sea of flattened carpet, and landed on the green island, rested her chin on his shoulder. He looked sidelong at her. Her browns were puppy-dog large.

“Are you really fishing this time of year? Don’t you know all the lakes are froze up?”

“Ice fishing. A hobby, a sport, a lifestyle.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “You’re exactly what I need. Exactly what I want. You know why I love you?” He couldn’t imagine. His prime taste in furniture, perhaps. “Your heart. I chose you for your heart, you big baby.” She pressed a thumb into his chest. He could feel the give of his body. He thought of the It’s It’s in the freezer. “There, you done fished up a big ole goldfish.”

“Time to get out of the cold, then,” he replied, turning into her lips, feeling the length of her smile as it spread. He nibbled her lip, thinking what it might be like for her to love him for his body, too.

***

Preeti closed the door to the pre-op, her smile reflecting the loud fluorescents overhead. It was cold, freezer cold as he undressed. He folded the stretched Vikings shirt, the faded jeans, briefs, neatly onto the chair in the corner. He wondered if he would ever need them again. Mister Perez fumbled with the strings at the back of the gown, but couldn’t tie them properly. Instead, he sat on the crinkled paper stretched across the top of the patient table, feeling a faint breeze tickle at the base of his back.

“Lay back now, I’m just going to run some brief examinations of your host shell,
make sure it’s properly ready for the transfer. We’re going to set you up with an IV as well,”

Preeti whirled about the room, pulling plastic tubing from different drawers, tossed a black bag over her shoulder. She took his arm in a vice grip, still smiling, and slipped the needle into his hand without hesitation, without any sort of ask to take a deep breath. His scalp itched. She took his other arm and wrapped the bag about it, sliding a stethoscope under it, then pumped the bag full of air, listened to the sluggish echo of his pulse, clicking her tongue and marking some notes onto a glass tablet. “You’re going to love your new form, I just know it,” she said almost absentmindedly, tapping away, “everyone does. Everyone. Best day of my life, you know.

Before this I was a FedOh driver, did you know that? I bet not. Hated my life, hated the world. Now look at me, a real evolution.” She grinned her white shining grin, rosy cheeked wonder. She finished her tapping and sighed, handing him the tablet. “I’ll just need you to sign some last paperwork, nothing special, just the contractual agreements laid out by NuLyfe and yourself back in October. Here and, ah, here, just initial, then, there, your full John Doe.” Hector stared down at the fine print. He didn’t understand what ‘Herein thereby forthwith’ meant. Should he have brought in a lawyer?

“I… could I just speak to the Doctor first?”

“Well, I suppose,” Preeti clucked her purple cloud lips together, “Doctor Yertz will be in in just a bit. Do you need anything else?” He shook his head, and she was out of the door, closing it behind her, leaving the tablet with him.

He was alone. He was here. The lights blared at him, sharp and pounded at the back of his eyes like a hangover. The walls were so flat, so white, so sterile. He stared down at the contract. What did it all mean? What was he about to sign? But what did it matter? Seven years, seven years to now. What would Simone say? Seven years married to Nulyfe. But was this all a
mistake? Was it some fancy, some dream? Simone loves him, she tells him so. His heart, his heart, his heart, but what is in his heart? Bravery to step into this in the first place. Brave to hold such a big check in his pocket. Dreams to dream, big and real and achievable. Cowardice, cowardice to step away from his body, cowardice to choose a body created, not a body crafted. A body sweated for, bled for. Crafted. But he had crafted, seven years crafted, with the doctors, the countless consultants, choice-books to look through. The body would be his, the dreams, the desires, all hand-picked with Doctor Yertz. But… if he left now, it would not be too late, he could go home, to Simone, to his bed, to the warmth of his Sunday Sillies. To Hailie, what would Hailie think? What would she look at, crossing the stage at step-up? Whose arms would she walk into? What was he doing?

Hector stood up in a cold sweat. He gathered his clothes, fumbled and dropped them. The breeze at his backside whistled. The door opened. Hector snapped up.

“Mister Perez, I can’t begin to tell you how excited we all are for you,” Muscular warmth, doctor’s scrubs, blue on blue eyes, crinkled crow’s feet like painted kindness. A handshake offered. Hector took it.

“It’s a big day,” Hector muttered, allowed himself to be guided back to the examination table. He glanced back at the clothes laying on the ground.

“One of the biggest,” Yertz nodded enthusiastically, scrubbing down vigorously at the sink, before grabbing the tablet and looking it down. “How are you feeling today? Any issues with the diet?”

“N-no no issues with the diet,” Hector thought to the nine bile-colored pouches of gruel that hinted of salmon and rust. He shivered.

“Good, good, and the family?”
“The…, yes. They’re good. Happy.”

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“You’re joking.” Hector grimaced. He knew this would be her reaction. She just hadn’t seen the research yet. It wasn’t Sunday, so he was reading the day-olds. They just didn’t seem as funny after a ten-hour shift behind the counter. People never seemed to understand their financial problems were not directly his problem. He was just the teller. Tells people the bad news. He finished Pearls before Swine and folded the paper.

“I’m just saying it has more merit than you first let on. It could be something to consider.”

Simone threw up her hands. “More merit? This quack grows humans. He scoops out your brain and plops it in a different body. He has no idea what he’s doing. He’s killing people!”

“You can’t make that assumption, Simmie,” Hector lectured, “you can’t make assumptions like that. You hardly know the science.”

“Oh, and you do?” Simone laughed and ran the comb through Hailie’s wet hair again, tugging through a particularly tough knot. Her little hams for hands gripped her doctor Barbie tight, bouncing the feet against the white bathroom tile. “You think you know enough about full-body replacement to speak on the subject? By all means, enlighten the nurse.”

“Don’t you want me in a sexy body? Confident? Happy?”

“You’re not happy?”

“No, I mean, it could be… it might be nice if… I lost a few pounds. A few more strands of hair.” He ran his hand through the wisps Simone called his cirrus halo. Always a cloud
above his head. Always an angel.

“Make use of the weights gathering dust under the bed. Go for a run. Take your Propecia.”

“It’s not that simple, Sim.”

“It is,” Simone said, and kissed Hailie on the head, “Have you even thought about your daughter’s future? The kind of money some silly procedure would cost?”

“over ninety percent of mindplants report earning more than three times what they did before the procedure.”

“I’m sure they do. Good for them.”

“I’m just saying,” Hector sighed, “I’m just saying it could be a good investment.”


“For fucks sake I don’t want an enhanced brain, I want your goddamn brain!”

“Mammy?”

“Sorry, baby, sorry. It’s alright, everything’s alright, your daddy is just saying some funny things. Very very funny things,” she grabbed Hailie’s shoulders and rocked her back and forth until Hailie was a giggling mess. “Come on, sugarplum fairy dust, time for bed.” Simone pulled herself up from the bathroom floor, then lifted Hailie into her arms. She met Hector at the doorway. Looked him in the eyes. He kissed her brow.

“I just want you to be happy,” Hector whispered into her forehead.

Simone clucked her tongue and pushed past him, and carried their daughter to bed.
“Well I—” Hector’s voice hitched at the base of his throat. He started again. “I’ve been having second thoughts.”

Yertz scratched at his forehead. Looked down at the tablet for answers. “Well, Mister Perez, it’s been a very long journey to get here. I understand this must be hard, for you. You have every right to have some cold feet. But I’m here to steady the ship, and tell you everything will be fine. Better than fine. Here, I want to show you something,” Yertz moved to the door and gestured for Hector to follow.

They walked through the carpeted hallway in silence, the doors they passed all closed. The IV line dangled off his hand like a third limb, twisting, slapping flaccid against his gowned leg. Hector watched the upright stride of Doctor Yertz, the wide shoulders, the thick swirl of his cowlick. Sharp movements, calculated and proper. He felt the free bounce of his own unbound form, swaying and jiggling under his untied gown.

They came to a door unlike the others. This one was white, steel. A keypad blinked on the wall next to it.

“Usually I don’t do this, Hector, but I can feel your hesitation,” Yertz punched in a series of numbers, “And it’s okay to feel nervous. We were all nervous, but if your consciousness isn’t aligned, then the grafting process might not be as seamless as we’re hoping for.” The door hissed open, and Yertz smiled, placing a hand on Hector’s shoulder. “Nothing to worry about, we just want you off to a fresh, fast start. Complications can lead to weeks of confusion before stability. Drugs help, but, we know from experience the process can be disorienting.”
The doctor entered the room, and Hector followed. “Like Martin Humphry?” he asked. Martin Humphry’s old vlogs were always around the message boards, almost like an urban legend, a topic of hot debate. Martin filmed the entire process of body transfer, before and after. One day screaming at the camera saying he was trapped inside a body that wasn’t his, at war with a mind that wasn’t his. The next day he was happy and ecstatic, ranting how he would change the world, save all of humanity. In his new body he had grown obsessed with guns of all kinds. Three weeks after the procedure police found him in his home, having murdered his wife, before ending his own. Litigators used the vlogs as evidence against NuLyfe, but the evidence was eventually deemed inconclusive. People seeking to destroy NuLyfe used his vlogs as their marching stick.

Yertz sighed through his nose. “Martin Humphry had a history of bipolar disorder that he failed to report to NuLyfe. His actions were his and his alone, and we take his story with us as a cautionary tale, that for NuLyfe success, you must be as honest with us as possible,” Yertz shrugged and smiled, “We’ve been over this several times, Hector, Martin was a minor blip on an otherwise stellar record.”

Hector and the doctor stepped through the doorway. Inside, the walls were placid blue, cool and undulating through bright to dim. Metal walkways passed above a pool, large enough to fill nearly the entire room. The air was thick with a mildly sweet odor that swayed just out of reach of identification. Chlorine, maybe, or pus. The pool was segmented into fourteen smaller sections, dark objects floating just under the surface. Men and women in white coveralls drifted through the pathways above the water, carrying tablets of their own. Hector’s feet slapped cold, clammy on the metal.

“This is where we grow our future. In these holding tanks are ninety-three different
futures, right now, being built from the ground up.” Yertz gestured at the pools, looking across the room like a proud farmer, a proud father. “And I want to show you your future, Hector.”

“M-mine?” The doctor nodded and walked down the right corner of the room, Hector stumbling after. He stared down at the pools, and he saw the half-formed shapes of body organs; strings of intestines, quivering hearts, healthy, bright red lungs. “They aren’t grown… together?” Hector asked after the doctor.

“No, for our bodies to contain the highest rate of accuracy, based on what you choose to be, we need every piece of the body to be created. Designed individually, but using the same genetic structures to ensure when the pieces are assembled, there will be no rejection, only symbiosis. It’s a very tricky business, but this is what we do, for you, for the future of our family. See, Hector, we’re a family, and what a family we are. Philosophers, mathematicians, doctors,” The doctor flourished his hands above his head without looking back. They slowed at the back-right pool. This one had fully formed figures, smooth and hairless bodies suspended in the waters, nude, curled like babes in filmy, thin sacs. Hector looked at each one, but couldn’t figure which was his. They all looked the same.

“The NuLyfe family knows how long of a journey this has been. We can’t wait to fulfill your dreams. Everything you’ve ever wanted. Don’t you remember? Everything you want to be is on the other side of today. And this, is your future.” Yertz bent down and pointed into the pool.

***

The convention was on the outskirts of town, in an airport Hilton built in the 80s,
when salesmen were regional and flying for a job was a privilege, an honor, and an excuse. It was not so much a convention as an informational talk, a podium, rows of chairs that were only half-filled. The media had had its field day with NuLyfe, Martin Humphry was still marching the screens on national television, his words haunting the halls of chatrooms. Hector was the only person in the front two rows, everyone else shy, or unwilling to be called on or placed into the limelight. They were a nervous bunch, picking at their nails and scratching at dandruff in their twice washed hair, still wet. Mostly men, but a few scattered women as well.

Yertz himself was at the podium, a product of his own creation, a look so serious he could have been speaking about alcoholism, or Communism.

“We have been given choices through our lives. So many choices it’s impossible to comprehend the number of choices we pass by in the street every single day. My choice to say these words, your choice,” he gestured at Hector with a smile, “to wear that shirt, to come to this convention. But you made that choice to be here. That choice is the very thing that will change your very life. See, most of the time, my friends,” Yertz grabbed the microphone and stepped off the podium, walked down the center aisle, “these choices are insignificant. So insignificant we make them without even realizing. Eating breakfast. Studying that extra hour on your math test. Eating that bag of chips. Calling in sick for work.” He stopped in the center of the room. Raised his hands. “And now you are here. Here. Looking for answers. How did that extra bag of chips lead to being eighty pounds overweight? One-hundred? How did calling in sick for work lead to being laid off? How does it seem like everyone else has it all together, but you are just. Scraping. By?” Yertz pounded his finger down at the ground with each of the last words. Hector shivered, felt pressure behind his eyes. He loved that part. “NuLyfe knows exactly how you got there. Genetics. Programming. Upbringing. Societal influence. And NuLyfe, has reengineered that very
same process from the ground up. We have figured out what choices lead to what life. We have programmed bodies that have made those choices already, whose choices are built into every cell, every vein and artery. And we have created the first, and only, method for putting you, your consciousness, your wants and desires and all of what makes you you into that very body. You, but feeling every day, as if your next choice is the right one. Because it was. Unstoppable. Forever.”

After the show, Hector approached Yertz, who was finishing shaking one of the conventioners’ hands.

“Mister Perez! Nulyfe’s number one fan,” Doctor Yertz opened his arms as if to welcome Hector into a hug. Hector smiled instead, grasping at his own elbows. “How did you find the presentation?”

“Always inspiring Doctor.” Hector swallowed at the lump in his throat. “Look, Doctor… I know we’ve talked before…”

“Mister Perez, our business runs on the financial support of our constituents. Without money, there would be no NuLyfe! There would be no changing of lives. I’m sorry, I truly am.”

“But if there was a way, maybe payment plans, or, or, if I leveraged my home, or—”

“Please, please,” Yertz waved his hands, “we’ve been over this. If there was any way, I know it would have been the right path for you. But you just can’t afford the procedure, my friend. Besides, leveraging your house? It would take years before we would be ready to operate, where would you live? Your family?”

“I could work for NuLyfe. In the meantime.”

“We are a NuLyfe family only. We employ what we sell. It would send the wrong message if we weren’t to provide you with a procedure but a job. Surely you understand. You
and I have spoken at length, at every convention on the western seaboard, and I’ve told you the same thing in a hundred different ways.” Yertz smiled, his painted-crow crinkles apologizing kindly. “I’ll let you in on a little family secret. NuLyfe, believe it or not, is not a quick fix. It takes years of hard work and failure for the process to work. Everyone with me today has given up their body to free their mind. But NuLyfe is not the only solution. People have changed their lives countless times before us, we’re just the next step in the revolution of success. The tried and true methods are out there, and cost much less, maybe try starting with them. I have other interested parties to speak to, if you’ll excuse me.”

Doctor Yertz began walking away, toward a group of gathered constituents around a table covered in stale cookies and discarded water cups. Hector ground his teeth. How could he… how? “My organs!” He cried, and Yertz stopped in his tracks. Hector chased after him and blocked his path. “Most NuLyfe members are granted their old body as their property. For burial, or transplant organs if a loved one gets sick. But if I sold you my old body. Heart, kidneys, stem cells, all of it. An entire body is worth millions. With a payment plan, and I’ll speak for you across the country. I’ll sell NuLyfe like no one has ever sold it. I will be the posterchild for your product. Millions will flock to you. Please, just please, I’m begging you.” Yertz sighed, checked his watch, looked over Hector’s shoulder. Tapped his foot. Sighed again, shook his head. Finally he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a stiff white card and a fountain pen. He scribbled something on the back of the card then held it out to Hector, who took it.

“Call this number, set an appointment with Marie for next week. Thursday, perhaps, once I’m back from the circuit. We’ll work something out, talk details and see if it’s possible. Good?” Hector stared at the card bug-eyed and nodded. On it, ten crisply written digits. Ten digits that would change his life. When he looked up to thank Doctor Yertz, he was gone.
“H-he’s beautiful.” The chiseled lines running the chin, the smooth, muscled lines running the length of the chest. Tall, like he was created to exact authority. And the smile. Even drowned beneath the radioactive blue, deep in sleep, he was smiling.

“No, Mister Perez, you are beautiful. That’s you in there. After today, that will be you.” I am smiling, Hector thought. Like he was dreaming about waking up, that being awake was a gift. He wondered what it would be like, to sleep with a smile on his face. “Look, look here,” Doctor Yertz pressed the glass tablet into his vision. “You are my greatest creation yet. The physical numbers, of course, are running nominally, you’re the peak of any form of humanity, you could compete with the best of the best in the Olympics, should you wish. But the beauty is in the choice-frame paradigm. Natural confidence running through your veins. Desires and interests in public speaking, technological advances, a deep baritone for wooing crowds. At eight you were suspended from school for running a coup against the teachers because they wouldn’t let you speak freely about the politics of only ten minutes on the jungle gym. At ten you won your first debate trophy. Twelve you were recognized in the media for the Little Genius Award. Fifteen you experienced deep hardships, the death of your parents, but speaking at their funeral led to the ignition of passion within your soul. You promised your little sister you would be the rock of your family, and rose to the occasion. You graduated summa cum laude from Berkeley with a triple major in journalism, biology, and computer science. A phoenix from the ashes.” Doctor Yertz was breathing hot in his ear now, jabbing at the tablet, the scripted narrative on the screen.
I did? All of this, for me? The body shifted under the water. Ripples echoed outward
on the surface, like choices.

“It’s a good life,” Hector whispered.

“The best,” Doctor Yertz exclaimed, “The absolute best. What do you say, are you on
board?” Hector nodded. Yertz swiped at the screen and pointed. “Sign, and we’ll get you started
in your new life.”

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“Mister Perez?” Hector peeked out from over the Business & Finance section of the
paper. He had always loved the way the paper rustled, crinkled. The DOW was up, despite rising
inflation and a stagnant job report. It made him sick, these unemployed marching through the
streets begging for higher minimum pay. As if that would change anything. He knew better. If
they wanted to change their lives, they had to want it. Go after it. “They’re ready for you.”

“Just a moment, Barb, thanks.” He stood from the plastic chair, placed the paper on
it. Stretched. Three months. Three months since he had started this job, something about a
contractual agreement he had signed prior to activation. They had shown him the signature. It
was his, after all, if a bit shaky. Not that it mattered. He was a phoenix, risen from the ashes. He
would do this for his family, his sister, the memory of his parents.

“You’re going to do great, baby,” calm, liquid ice poured into his ear. He shivered.
Preeti nibbled his ear, the base of his neck. She had taken the day off, just for him. That was the
family of NuLyfe, so supportive. The largest group he would ever speak to, fourteen-thousand.
NuLyfe was booming, and he was to share that success across the globe. He turned and pulled
purple clouded lips into his own. Felt the length of her smile as it grew. He flinched. Pain flashed through the fore of his brain. Three months. Growing pains, they called it.

   Just growing pains.
The Mask Shop

I

Henrique Wilcroft had never known there to be a mask shop down Rinoue Lane. A haberdashery, sure. The Peaked Tip, it was called, with its eccentric beanies and boaters and floral bonnets, its owner Nimbus Rice always mumbling and yelping at silence. There was Mr. Ponnet down on the corner, the horologist, surrounded by grandfathers and cuckoos, always seated in a slight desk by the corner, buried beneath various bits of metal, slowly becoming a watch himself. All in a row there was Walter Slims the jeweler, and Harvey Potts the cobbler, and Mary Dims the tailor, fierce with a needle she was. Across the cobbled streets Immil Leichkevitz owned the deli with the best cuts in a ten-square mile, and the best jokes too.

But the mask shop, marked 118 Rinoue Lane, Henrique could not recall. Perhaps it was how it lay tucked deep in shadow between brick and brick, or the way the trade sign hung crooked and fade, its Thalia and Melpomene worn nearly colorless. There were no windows, save one, lit from the inside yellow like a single watching eye, and the sagging roof was in dire need of rethatching. Henrique took Rinoue Lane each way since starting as a clerk at World Bank, near on a year now. He had visions of owning a shop of his very own on Rinoue Lane, but he was young, and money was tight. It was exciting, a new shop to peruse, a new shop owner to meet. None of the other shop owners ever mentioned a mask shop, though they mostly kept to themselves.

The street was nearly empty, the heavy night curling in on the streetlamps lit and flickering. A horse carriage clopped by, down Tinnick Road at the cross. He waved at Nimbus Rice, who was fiddling with his shop door, and after a glance Henrique’s way, and an eccentric
shot of a hand, scattered away down the street all hunched and flail. Strange fellow. Strange shop, this mask shop.

The gate echoed rusty at his tug and pull, less swinging more coughing its way open. Henrique slipped beyond it, and up the crumbling brick steps, strips of luminescent green crack-growers threatening the foundation. A door, ornate, heavy oak, carved and stained in a tradition altogether peculiar to Henrique, stood watch, sentinel on the stoop. Looping and interconnected orgy of bodies, their silent cries on countless faces mouthed open in despair or rapture. He touched at them, and the wood felt porous and giving like flesh and he leapt back. A trick only, he thought, of the mind, and reached for the plain iron knocker and rapped solidly. There was no door knob.

The door opened and bells tinkled. An old man, slight and bent and wispy like the last hairs on his head, stared out at Henrique with eyes that read like the toothy grin under it, eager. Come in, come in, he said, opening the door wide, come in from out of the cold, the wet. Henrique ducked under the doorway, a habit, and pulled a thick-brimmed bowler from his head, shook the moisture from it. It was warm inside, warm as a library on fire, and he stripped from his body the scarf, the coat, the coat underneath. The old man collected each without a word, then limped to the coat rack in the corner, beside the lamp under the window. The shop was much bigger than it seemed from without, stretching back and back and high above his head. What wonder! A fireplace roared at the end of three towering shelves, the source of heat, and its shadowed flickering light whipped and caressed rows and rows of masks before it. Porcelain white screams, and fae yellow grins, black satin frowns, and leather-cut stoicism. Colors, many, shapes also, and materials it seemed no end.

So many, breathed Wilcroft.
Yes, yes, purred the shop owner, now behind the counter to the left, up on a stool and watching intently, there are many masks for many occasions. As if to prove his point, he flourished a gnarled hand up and behind his head, gesturing toward the wall of cubbyholes ten high, each filled with masks of all shapes and sizes. There must have been dozens. Hundreds.

“I have not seen your shop before,” Henrique mentioned. “I pass by often. Perhaps you should brighten the outside, the sign could use a touch up, don’t you say?”

“I find my customers have no trouble finding the shop,” replied the mask shop owner, resting himself up on a tall stool.

“Not me,” replied Henrique, and entered the shelves, breathing the scent of cinnamon and spiced rum, thick and heady in the air. “Are they all yours?” He asked. “The make, the design, all so unique.”

“A few, but not many. The masks of many others rest here. Do you have a preference?”

“Just looking,” he replied, running his hand over a slim rabbit mask, with fur like first snow.

“No one comes to the mask shop seeking nothing. A party, a girl perhaps,” and Henrique glanced through the gaps between the masks at that. It was true, there was a winter masquerade for the World Bank. A tradition at the first week’s end of December, a Yuletide’s masquerade. All employees were requested to attend, and so he would be there. As would Ginny Fainsbridge.

She sat three desks from his left, and though they had not spoken, Henrique was sure they would get along quite fine. She had cheeks like rosebushes and the slightest hitch in her eyebrows when she worked, and her hair bounded and sprang like tulips as she walked. She was
allegedly the estranged daughter of a high-ranking steel family, and came from Boston to build her own empire. The men laughed as she passed chin high, her own empire! But Henrique did not laugh at all, he thought it was beautiful. They had smiled once in passing, though his teeth had felt wooden in his mouth.

“Aye,” he replied then, “a party, a girl, something cheap, but fun, something that says I enjoy a good time. Something that will give me confidence,” and the man nodded.

“All masks give confidence, in one way or about, but I think you will find that one there to be of satisfaction.” The man pointed a riddled finger, and Henrique plucked it from the shelf.

It was bright blue and oblong, heavy and thick and lacquered, it felt like wood or bone in his hand. With hair stretched wild in every direction, and teeth that grinned more than half the length, and eyes like spun webs under the faint glow of the fire. “How will I see?” He asked, and the shop keeper laughed.

“Bring it here,” and Henrique obeyed. He set it at the counter. It grinned up at the shop keeper like an old friend. “This one is quite cheap. Its contents are crude,” he told Henrique. “It will bring you joy and good wit, but wear it too long and it will break, and you will pay, a day of sleep no less no more.” The keeper placed it into a plain box, then slid it to him across the counter.

“But how much will it cost?” Henrique asked, pulling forth his wallet, confused. A day of sleep? He thought, this man was strange, strange as his shop. What had his name been?

“It’s yours, your mask,” the mask shop owner nodded, “take it, take it now, come back another time.”

There was a moment, a tension which Henrique did not quite understand, and averted
his gaze of the sharpness in the owner’s eyes, eager they were, the flames mighty in their reflection. He took the box in his hands and like a breath of relief, the mask shop became a mask shop, and the owner was merely a mask shop owner once more.

The man’s gaze even seemed sweet, then, like a toothy, elderly, in seeking companionship, lonely, and tired.

They exchanged pleasantries, the owner fussing to assist with the coat and the gloves and scarf, and Henrique exited, boxed mask underarm, back into the frigid night, and strode home, dreaming of dances and more with Ginny and her rosebush cheeks and tulip hair.

II

The World Bank rose like a bastion jewel amongst the grey and purple and red stone monoliths. It was all shining glass and sharp angles and wealth. With each swing of the double doors’ entrance, the bumping and bursting of sax and snare, laughter and warmth and noise poured from the entrances, just enough to let the parties of ones and twos in their black and brown overcoats to slip inside, and be consumed. Just outside, Henrique stared down at the curious blue mask with its curious half-face grin, puffing great clouds of steam into the winter’s air.

There would be Ginny inside, for sure, wearing a dress, the thought which sent his stomach into a frittle of falling pancakes, but also his boss Irving Pence, who Henrique had spotted vying for Ginny himself, leaning over her desk, pinching her ass in the halls, and waggling his bush-brow caterpillars at her, and that sent Henrique’s stomach back into his throat like a hot knife. Not to mention the consortium of bosses above Irving: Tim in Taxes Management, Tony in Tax Avoidance Management, Terry in Management and Tank in
Management Management. He could never get their names right, or their wives, Tammy Tina Taylor and Tara.

Maybe this was all a terrible idea. The itching rented suit and painful shining dress shoes to match. And the mask, it was sure to appear foolish on his face. Besides, Ginny wasn’t interested in a newly minted Associate, especially one who didn’t have the word Management in his title. He’d seen how she smiled at Irving after all that ass-pinching and desk-leanimg. Foolish. Foolish. Another couple pressed by him on the damp sidewalk, and he apologized under his breath, stepping to the edge of the walk to let them pass. Then he took another step, backward, and another, and turned to leave. Best to say he had caught a cold, a fever, a stomach thing, as his steps came feverish now, clapping down the street like applause. For the best, turning the mask about in his black-gloved fingers. The mask was goofy; how the mask shop owner had convinced him otherwise…

He slipped the mask about his face, just for kicks. And a feeling came over him. A magnetic attraction as the mask rested warm on his cheeks, a warmth that sent a laugh dancing a jig across Henrique’s tongue.

Such worries, such fear, such banal and gross underpinnings mattered not, and the grin on the mask became the grin beneath it. Such soft and warmth, thought Wilcroft! The mask like a soft blanket about his face, warmth and happiness abound, and the frosty winter’s night faded from his peripherals. To leave? To leave and not say hello? To ask Tammy about her tennis and Terry about his little Tyler? They were the best of the T’s, though it would be prudent to Tim and Tony about their golf. Besides, listen to the music, he could hear it all the way down the street! He would ask Ginny to dance, then ask her to dance. To miss such an opportunity.

World Bank had spared no expense for their Yuletide celebration; the lobby was
covered in white glittering snow that puffed and swirled as masked men and women strode and danced through, an eight-man band strummed away at their strings, between the twisting marble bound double stairs, jazz trumpets and snare drums and a piano man with hands like lightning. Diamond glittering chandeliers, and fir pines big as three lumberjacks around stood adorned and proud in each corner, laden with hand painted ornaments and lit stars. Snowmen and elves danced through the snow and wreaths and tables covered in eggnog and hams and lit candelabras carrying glittering trays of champagne. It had been a good year for World Bank.

Henrique, Henrique my good friend! A bobbing gazelle approached, crooked tie and tweed jacket to match. Henrique’s fellow Associate, James Bynes. A good man from Baltimore, with fastidious work ethics and a sweet family whom invited him to a pasta dinner one evening at their flat in South Brunswick. A pair of teachers, his parents, and James was practically a walking jitter, nervous tics and wide-swinging cracked voice. Henrique often thought the man had come from the womb in that tattered tweed jacket. The two had grown close within their first year at World Bank, often eating in silent camaraderie at Don’s Deli during their lunch hour.

They exchanged elbows. What decadence, James bobbed, it was everything I had expected from World Bank and more, and Henrique nodded. Henrique was feeling strange, strange like he did not wish to stand in the corner of the ball in silence with his good friend James as the party at World Bank went on. No, he wished to find Ginny, and told James so. Ginny, Ginny Fainsbridge, James exclaimed, checking his watch and tapping his shoes twice, you didn’t told me bout’ you and Ginny Fainsbridge. We don’t speak much of anything, Henrique replied, and there is no me and Ginny Fainsbridge, though I wish to make it so, so I think I’ll go ask her to dance.

To dance, jittered James, to dance? I didn’t know you knew how to dance, he said,
but what he was really thinking was ‘I didn’t know you knew how to talk to any girl as beautiful as Ginny Fainsbridge to which James, in his queer mood, said I don’t, and left James to watch his blue-masked friend pluck a champagne flute from the tray of a Snowman and disappear into the crowd.

Henrique strode from table to table, shaking hands with Tony and Tank and Terry and their wives, inquiring about their favorite sports and their favorite children, and their least favorite children, to which they laughed like a big joke; everyone has one! To each he gently inquired about the whereabouts of a girl with rose bushes for cheeks and tulips for hair might be. She would probably be in a dress, he said, but they shrugged, and he shrugged and they all laughed like old friends again.

He found Ginny under the shadow of the stairs. He knew it was Ginny because she wore a simple domino mask that would not cover the sweet rosebushes of her cheeks. And she was wearing a dress, a purple satin one that looked soft and pillowy, armless, and powder white gloves ran the length from her slim shoulders, to the trembling clench of her fists. She was pinned between a giant fir dressed like Santa Claus, a shining wall made from reclaimed Ancient Grecian marble, and a lion-masked man in a black suit so crisp it might turn to ash. The fine print of the “Do not touch” sign next to the marble wall said it dated back more than two-thousand years. The sign was between them, and the lion was trying to lean over it, like a desk, and Ginny was leaned back with a tight-lipped smile like a no.

Irving, greeted Henrique to the lion, Ginny, enjoying the party? The two separated, Irving reeling back to see who had disturbed his hunt. He said something like Henrique, boy, Merry Christmas, I hope you enjoy the party, though it sounded more like go on now, you’ve no right to be here disturbing me on my prowl.
In most cases, Henrique would have turned, and run from the lion. In most cases, he would be wearing a mask of an antelope, or a gazelle like James. But he was wearing a wide-grinning blue mask with eyes like typhoons, and he was feeling strange, very unlike himself. There was no bubbling fear that made his eyes want to melt from his face or his ears to twist about, or his nose to smell burnt hair and cardamom. He was… calm. In control.

Are you alright, there, Ginny? He asked, and Irving leaned up from his prospective meal. She’s fine, he said. What he meant was this is still a workplace, and I am still your boss. *There is a hierarchy to maintain, little lamb.*

Ginny, Henrique said to her, your reports make my heart sing with not a missed number and each stroke of your pen articulate and smooth, and our boss, the corpulent pig that he is, may he rise every day knowing each time he strikes you with his disturbing gestures and false words and inappropriate grabs I feel a deep burning pit of hatred in the deepest core of my soul, but it pales in the comparison of such passion that I crave to see your smile but once more and smile in the way that makes roses bloom and tulips bounce from the spring ground.

Henrique should have been horrified at the words that erupted from his mouth, for had they been his words at all, but the garish blue mask that spoke for him. But the words were spoken so clear and with such earnest they rang not hollow and shallow or tawdry at all, but true enough to make her blush for all the world to see. It was a miracle, it was a horror.

Uh, said Ginny.

You’re done, seethed Irving, done, you hear me?

Would you care to dance? asked Henrique, extending a hand. Ginny took it and sashayed around the fir tree, the sign, and Irving.

So, um, what’s your name again? she asked as they left Irving to boil and rage.
They danced the entire night. He twirled her and tossed her in tangos and waltzes. Ballroom and tap and something called samba, and not once did he wonder where he had learned to dance. He cracked jokes until he coaxed glass laughter from her lips and joyous tears from her eyes, and not once did he wonder where he had grown a sense of humor. Drank, until the lights turned on and they were ushered out the doors, and not once did he wonder where he gained the capacity to hold his liquor.

***

It was morning when Henrique woke to darkness. His heart thudded sluggish. Mouth dry, eyes dry, teeth like wood once again. He tried to move but a paralyzing headache struck him back down, his vision went black and his ears rang until he was sure they gushed blood. Was it the alcohol? No, this was no hangover he had ever experienced. He managed to roll over, and found Ginny standing at the pulled curtains of the lone window in his flat, it was dark outside save for a singular lamp. She was massaging an earring into place.

*Did I?* Thought Henrique, the ruminations boiling into him, *How did...? Where did? When?*

You’re quiet, she muttered, I must go.

Sure, he croaked, his throat like it had been raked over a bed of coals, his voice like a tin can. But morning? He asked. Surely you don’t work Saturdays.

Saturday? She turned, there were tears in her eyes, much unlike the ones from the party. It’s Sunday. I’m sorry, I had a good time, it was nice, real nice, to meet you Henrique.

She rushed to the door.
Wait, he sat up and the world spun wide, then narrow, the edges of his vision greying. She stopped at the door, waiting.

Will I… see you at work? he asked lamely.

Sure, she said, and left.

Henrique’s stomach rolled at the empty clang of the door rattling shut, and he tumbled from the bed to the floor, desperate for the bathroom. In front of his face, a pale blue mask, snapped in half.

III

It was late when Henrique finally managed to stumble from his flat and to Rinoue Lane. No carriages clopped the lane, no patrons walked the streets. It was dark, and silent, save for Henrique’s own feet against the walk. Bleary eyed, he jumped at every owl’s hoot and creaking hinge, and he walked faster, head tucked into his overcoat, hands gripped tight around the two halves of the broken mask. The mask shop was in its place, between brick and brick, sagging roof and crumbling steps, the singular yellow eye flickering from its lone window. The only change was the shop’s sign, which looked to have been fixed, masks Thalia and Melpomene glowing bright with layers of new paint.

Henrique bulled up the steps, two at a time, and pressed through the front door of flailing limbs and twisted bodies. It was his intention to confront the little old man who had sold him the mask, the mask that had done terrible things. He had insulted his boss and charmed an innocent young woman into giving up her innocence. He would be out of a job and donned a reputation of man-whore, zealot, disturber of peace!

The mask shop owner was at the fire, bent at the knees and stoking a new piece of
wood into acquiescence with a cast metal poker. At the tinkling of the bell he stood, and brought the poker with him, the pointed end red-hot and hissing. The man smiled his crooked and toothy smile. He looked quite lively, as though he’d had a good night’s rest.

“You’ve come back,” he said.

“You sold me this thing! This monstrous thing,” Henrique exclaimed, shaking the mask pieces above his head.

The shop owner clucked his tongue, “Oh dear, you’ve gone and worn it too long, my boy.” He walked behind the counter poker still in hand, and gestured to the mask with it. Henrique gave the pieces over, and the shop owner turned them about, looking at where it had snapped in two. Grazed the fissure with the tips of a gnarled finger.

“This thing, this thing did… things!” Henrique stuttered. “It forced me to insult my boss and seduce a fair mistress, and now I will lose both job and future! What sort of cruel magic is this?”

“ Forced you?” asked the shop owner, fiery glitter in his eye. “Magic? Did it not do what you asked of it? Did you not have fun, were you not confident? Was it not cheap, and did you not carry it from my shop and place it on your face of your own accord?”

“A refund,” Henrique demanded, leaning against a wall of masks. He was sweating, and the room was beginning to spin, like at his flat.

“There are no refunds,” the mask shop owner said pointing to a sign on the counter which said so. “Besides, you have paid no sum of money. But I will replace the mask, free of charge, another one, any you like, any that speak to you.”

Another mask? Yes, to fix this mess. If this man sold magic masks, then there would be one that could fix the damage that had been done. Fix Irving’s fury and Ginny’s indignity.
Henrique gazed at the masks on the shelves, the walls. They all grinned at him, waiting. Silent.

“I want a mask that will grant me the power to fix things.”

“An interesting request,” replied the shop owner, rummaging under the counter now, his voice echoing up, “interesting indeed, very niche, very specific, though I think this one might serve you quite well. Where is it, where is it, ah, here,” and brought up a mask. It clanged metal on the countertop. Henrique approached the counter.

“Gold?” he asked. It was a single piece – no hair or frills or large grin. There were three flat slits, one for each eye, the third for the mouth, simple and indiscriminate. Its sheen reflected the fire, polished so that the depth of the mirrored gold seemed endless and vast. Henrique averted his gaze.

“Bronze,” replied the shop owner, patting it with curled and wrinkled fingers. “It hasn’t been used in quite some time. The last owner, was a boy by the name of Alexander. Funny little man, full of timidities. Talked quite a ways about his father’s expectations. Wanted to fix things in his image. Borrowed it from me when my collection was still rather small, not like today. Took quite some time to repair the thing, came back in pieces.”

“Good,” nodded Henrique, feeling as though his stomach might upend itself right there and then, he swiped the mask from the counter and slipped it under his arm. “Consider this payment for your shoddy work on the last one.”

“Of course,” the owner replied, bowing his head so the white tufts of his hair fell into the lines of his eyes. “Please do be careful with this one. It’s quite strong, quite intoxicating.”

But Henrique was already out of the door, the bells jingling shut.

***
Henrique Wilcroft walked down Rinoue Lane the next morning with the bronze mask wrapped tight about his face. The seams ran the length of his face and the slits had grown to the shape of his eyes, and mouth. It was a perfect fit. It was a perfect day for opportunity. From his flat, he’d found a twenty-dollar bill, and a broken watch on the side of the road. He paid a visit to Nimbus Rice, the hatter, and bought a new bowler with the twenty. The hatter gave him change, a one-hundred-dollar bill. He visited Mary Dims the tailor next, and just in time. He saved her from choking, having inhaled a rogue grape. She thanked him endlessly, then replaced his ratty suit for one brand new, a three-piece thing so crisp it might turn to ash.

He bought new shoes from cobbler Potts, and a sandwich from Immil, and stopped at the end of the road, at Ponnet’s, and gave the clock man the broken watch he had found. Ernest Ponnet burst into tears, right then and there. This was his grandfather’s watch, the very man who had taught him to love watches. He had lost it months ago. Henrique left the shop, wrist adorned with a brand-new Baume et Mercier, free of charge.

Henrique Wilcroft walked through the glass doors of World Bank. He was early. He was not sweating. He didn’t like ties but was wearing one. The lobby was cleared of any evidence of the Friday night masquerade, and its marble floors squeaked run run run with each step in his new shoes. He climbed the curled staircase after greeting the doorman, the receptionist, and a passing associate, and a customer, nodding at each. They all thought him an executive, and greeted him as such.

Irving Pence met him at the top of the stairs, fat rolls jiggling with stored anger. The man was sweating. He had forgotten a tie. His favorite watch was gone, too, an ancient thing that dripped with classical prowess. But he was a locomotive with a full head of steam. My office, he
growled. Funny, Henrique thought, *Irving isn’t wearing a lion’s mask any longer.* As they walked to the corner glass office, his stomach grumbled. He unwrapped the sandwich and began to eat.

In the office, Irving placed himself behind a massive oak desk. A massive stack of files leaned against a massive bronze statue of Hercules wrestling the Nemean Lion. In the corner, a massive grandfather clock ticked away. Ponnet’s work? Henrique asked from behind a mouthful of sandwich. He flopped into a chair opposite. Put up his feet.

Shut up, you little twit, fumed Irving, his beady eyes watering. You know the kind of trouble you’re in? Do you know who I am? I’ve got pull, *pull,* kid. You’ll never work a bank job again. You’ll be mopping floors, pulling shit out of toilets, you’ll be eating those fancy leather shoes of yours before lo—

The T’s walked in, all four. Terry, Tony, Tim, and Tank. They were wearing matching bowlers. And ties. Terry! exclaimed Henrique, swallowing sandwich, how was Tammy’s golf lesson this weekend?

About as well as one could expect a woman to perform, they all laughed at that, save a sweating Irving, though you should have seen my boy Tyler, a real mensch, has quite the talent for the club.

Say, nodded a grinning Tank, nice bowler. Say, Irving, would you mind, stepping out for a moment?

Of… my office? Irving face turned redder.

Say, it would be a real favor to us, replied Tank.

We just want a little chat with our man Henrique here, shrugged Tony.
Irving stepped outside. When the door closed behind him, the four T’s sighed. Irving Pence, sighed Tank. Irving Pence, sighed Tony, and Terry. Tony simply nodded deeply, as if it explained all. They all took placed behind the big oak desk. All pulled out sandwiches.

Immil’s? Henrique asked, lifting his own sandwich.

The best sandwiches in ten square miles! laughed Tony.

And the best jokes, too, replied Henrique. They all nodded deeply, as if it explained all.

We’ve been talking, Henrique, Terry said, leaning forward, we’ve been talking quite a bit. We see serious potential in you. You’ve got the optics we need for someone of… executive quality. You’re quite the impressive dancer, we saw you with that piece of ass on your arm at the party, and you sound like quite the golfer.

Never been, replied Henrique, taking another bite. They all laughed.

We’d like you to come aboard the executive branch, continued Tony. As Director of Success. You’ll be directing success. We’d like to place the success of World Bank in the hands of a winner. You’re that winner. We’ll just need you to do a small favor and change that troublesome name of yours.

Of course, Henrique said, how’s Tim? They all laughed. Henrique-now-Tim stood to go, business was concluded. Business went quick with the T’s, just being in their presence explained it all. They shook hands. The T’s patted him on the back. We’ll take care of Irving, chimed in Tank, after they shook hands, he just couldn’t cut it here at World Bank.

I understand, nodded Tim, headed for the door.

Terry continued, oh Tim, my boy, one more thing. I’ve already taken the liberty of firing that sweet piece of sugar, what was her name again, Ginny that’s right, because we can’t
have a pair of tits soon to be a wife distracting our new Director of Success in the office, ain’t that right?

Henrique thought for a moment, chewing the last of his sandwich. Finally, he nodded. Good riddance, he said, a donkey of a lay anyhow (the T’s hee-d and haw-ed). And you know that Associate in Accounting? James, the one with the tweed suit. Take care of him as well. Too quiet to make it here at World Bank.

IV

There was a fire. A fire in the world, a fire in his mind, the world was red, all red, he was scorched earth and volcanic ash. His mouth was the worst. It tasted like ash soap and burnt rubble. His ears were the worst, they rang like a fire brigade. No, his eyes were the worst, when he opened them, for they itched and burned in confusion. He lay in a four-poster bed, under sheets of fine silk. The infinite thread count scraped murder across his bare form. There was a chandelier above the bed, glittering and shining, catching the first rays of sun in its many diamonds. The east wall was all glass windows. It looked out on a half-moon stone balcony, with turrets. Below, a vast estate of gardens, laid in a French style, all symmetry and sprawl.

Next to him lay a mask shattered in four. It was bronze, with slits for eyes and a slit for a mouth. He gathered it in his arms, like a sickly child.

Henrique Wilcroft, slipped from the bed and groaned, his feet touched cold marble floors like ice. It burned. He limped around the room, slowly. Cabinets for many pairs of shoes, varying by single shades of color, from black, to the lightest brown. Cabinets filled with watches, filled with hats, ties, suits.

“Sir?”
The voice split his head in two, and Henrique shrieked. Brimstone bled from his ears.

“What?” Henrique turned, to a tall man in a full tuxedo suit, holding a tray. On the tray, a single egg, a glass of orange juice, and a paper. “Who are you? Where am I?”

The man set down the tray on a dark wood armoire, next to the door. He bowed.

“Your loyal butler, to the last, Mr. Wilcroft. Though I’m afraid not for much longer. I’ve been informed the authorities are on their way to the house now to collect you. I thought you might enjoy a meal before they arrived.” He gestured to the tray.

“Authorities?”

The butler plucked the paper from the tray, and crossed the gargantuan space. His shined shoes clicked run run run against the shined floors. Embers sparked and flashed in Henrique’s vision, burned the color back to grey. He handed it to Henrique. The front page featured a large image of Henrique. The title read: “Captain of World Bank Sinks Ship: Tim Wilcroft to be brought on Charges of Embezzlement, Fraud, Bribery.”

Under it, a short blurb: “As World Bank files for bankruptcy, all eyes point toward little known Tim Wilcroft, whose short six year tenure at the Company has brought it from rising giant to smoking wreck. Everyone, including the authorities, are asking: Where is the Money?”

He read the phrase ‘smoking wreck’ four times. They set me up, he thought, I would never do this. Would I? Then he vomited bloody bile.

“How long?” croaked Wilcroft to the butler, who walked back to the tray and returned with the orange juice. The calm expression on his face unnerved Henrique. He took the juice, swished some in his mouth. Spat it to the ground. Drank some more.

“Within the hour, sir.”

“Get me dressed. I need to be somewhere.”
“Where, sir?”

“Rinoue Lane.”

The authorities did appear within the hour, as Henrique had just pulled on pants, and an undershirt over his sizable stomach that did not seem like his. The wheezing, gulping coughs of police sirens echoed through the cloudless morning sky. They sounded like phoenixes dying.

Barefoot, Henrique ran. Out of the glass doors, and down the rose tipped trellis, the thorn-budded tips slicing at his thin skin like meteors. Through the morning dew of the trimmed grass, leaked from the curled trunks of trumpeting topiary. The dew cooled him as he ran from the echoing firestorm of a life that wasn’t his. Was it his?

There was only one place to go to find out.

The estate was in familiar territory, a private community, gated and reserved for the extremely wealthy, only twenty minutes from his old flat. He jumped the palisade, and stuck close to the overgrowth in the drainage ditches. Twice he dove in, as the clopping of horses rattled through the roads.

When he reached the entrance to Rinoue Lane, his shirt was ripped, his pants covered in mud, and he gasped for breath. It had rained the night before. But Rinoue Lane was not as he remembered it. The cobbler was gone, as was the jeweler, and the horologist Ernest Ponnet. The buildings run down, the windows shuttered. Trash littered the street. Only one building remained standing. It was a mask shop.

The gate shone iron around a manicured garden, and the roof was freshly thatched. It did not lay between brick and brick, as the buildings on either side had been torn down. The sun caught it in such a way some might have said it glowed. The brick stairs were freshly lain and sharp, a new railing curled black up either side of the steps. The door was the same ornate, heavy
oak, covered in limbs and screaming faces. Someone had given it a fresh coat of red paint.

Henrique burst through the door. The bells tinkled their greeting.

The shop owner was standing atop a step stool among the first row of shelves, dusting the top row of masks with a rag.

“Mr. Wilcroft you’ve returned,” the man said without turning. “I thought you might, eventually. It’s a rather… potent mask.”

“They’re crying me a fraud, an embezzler! They’re saying I’m to blame for financial collapse! It says six years!” cried Henrique, shaking the paper still in hand. He threw the pieces of the mask to the ground. “Six! It was this mask, not me!”

“I assure you,” the mask owner stepped down from his stool and approached the distraught customer, “the mask does exactly what the wearer wants. It would not do, what you were not capable of doing.” The owner bent and collected the pieces of bronze, and his thick black hair lay oiled back against his skull, reflecting the fire that still roared under the mantle.

The wail of police sirens echoed through Rinoue Lane. *They must have questioned the butler, they must know where I am, my moments are limited.*

“I will be put away for many years, and I can’t have that,” Henrique said to the shop owner, “I will not go away for crimes that are not mine.”

Henrique grabbed the shop owner by the throat. I want a mask that will make all of this go away, I want to forget all about this mess, and I just want to be left alone.

The fire crackled. The sirens shrieked.

The shop owner reached around and pulled a mask that was tucked into his waistband. He held it up to Henrique, expecting, anticipatory. “This is the one you want, then,” he said, and offered it higher. It was iron, and dull. No mouth hole, only two punched holes for
eyes. The only adornment was an etching of a clock face, carved into the curving slope of the forehead.

Henrique Wilcroft took it, and dropped the shop owner to a heap. As bells tinkled behind him, and the shouting of police echoed through the shop, he slipped it about his face.

The world went dark.

V

Henrique Wilcroft woke to silence. He was in a bare, windowless room, with tilted sides, and a single bulb swaying softly from the ceiling. The mattress had no silk covers, or four posters, rather, it was stained yellow and on the floor. A cockroach scuttled by. Henrique crawled out of bed and to his feet. Cold rattled to the core of his aching bones. His skin was papery and mottled with purple blotches. He felt old.

Henrique crossed the room, aching step by aching step, to the door. Pulled it open and stepped through, down a steep set of stairs. An iron mask lay unbroken, and forgotten, atop the mattress behind him.

At the bottom, a front room. There was a crackling fire under the mantle. Rows and rows of shelves, covered in masks, filled the space. A small wooden counter.

Just as he sat atop the stool behind the counter, the door opened. The bells tinkled hello. He grinned, an eager and toothy grin.

Hello, come in, come in, welcome to my mask shop.

END
Nuts, and Bolts, and Sticks

Humanity began with a scratch of a stick in the dirt, and ended in a maintenance closet, deep in the earth. It ended with janitor Johnny Weishvetz, and his trusty mop.

Johnny’s favorite possession was this mop, and was a gift from his mother. His mother called it a family heirloom but to Johnny it looked like a mop. Jewish mothers, he thought when she handed it to him, always struggling to let things go. His mother told him it had been in Johnny’s family for generations and it was his birthright, and should be treasured. And that was true, it was in Johnny’s family for generations and it was worth treasuring, though Johnny’s mother, Margaret, a sweet name for a sweet woman with a heart like warm porridge in winter and a head like kneecaps and marathons, undersold the mop, though unknowingly. The truth was much more than that, it was a human heirloom, and should have been under lock and key and bulletproof glass, with laser sensors and security guards, but instead it was in Johnny’s hands as he mopped the floors of 7389B. The mop was once a stick, a staff, a branch, a bough, a hammer, a cast, the pull of a printing press, the left foreleg of a president’s desk, the right-side of Mary of Nazareth’s marital bedframe, an outrigger that swam with the first Polynesians, Astronaut Laika’s favorite chew toy. It was the stick first used to break ground in the hands of the first curious man. It was a sacred, holy thing.

Johnny looked most like no one in his family, with long teardrop nose and pulled forward ears, like God had thought he might have been hard of hearing. He was not, he could hear just fine. Johnny’s only affliction was that he was in love, rightfully so, with the tenant of apartment 17 of 7389B-19. He mopped the front of her door twice at rise-time, and twice at
sleep-time, once for his job, and once to see her exit her door and enter it once again. She was the kindest, and once he had seen her pick up a stuffed mole, and hand it back to the young child who had dropped it. The child stopped crying immediately when he saw her smile, she had that kind of smile. In a place mostly silent, she struck up conversations with her neighbors in the halls, where the flickering lights made people rush to the elevators, or to the safety of their home. She brightened the space. It needed more light, Johnny often thought, pulling his cap down below his brow to block the flickering from entering the recesses of his mind. Mop, mop, pull, mop.

Maybe that was why he loved apartment 17, because she was kind, and being kind was messy. That sort of thing stuck out in a white-washed, florescent, sterile place like UnderAngeles. He thought once that he’d like to clean her with his mop, then cried the entire night, wondering what his mother would think. He couldn’t bring himself to talk to her the next day, but he couldn’t bring himself not to the day after. That was love, he whispered to the mop, when his appetite returned with her smile. Maybe it was because she remembered he had an antique bolt collection, and promised to bring him one she found on the surface.

The bolt collection wasn’t Johnny’s first choice of hobby, there was a reason for it. The reason was the missing bolt in the floor panel beside his cot in the storage closet, through which loud, terrible sounds came through at night. He didn’t think there were any floors below 7389B, nor did he know of any sub-level maintenance floors, because he took care of the heat regulators for 7389B himself, even if he didn’t get paid for it. The collection of bolts was just a discarded bucket of tried and failed finds from the floors he worked, every shape and size, color, rust. None of them fit, and he sat there late at night, screwing and screwing all of the new finds into the floor panel under his cot. He took screws from different floors, different rooms, he
unscrewed bolts from fans, and from light fixtures, and from the seven-hundred and six 30m3/h industrial evaporative coolers in the hive’s center, but he didn’t take from them that often. None of them worked. And so the sounds continued. But Lavender, that was apartment 17’s name, promised to bring bolts from the surface, whenever she made it up there. He couldn’t go to the surface, nor did he make it back to his apartment-cell three hives over all that often. He slept most nights on the bunk behind the racks of bleach, and sponges. Sometimes he slept with the mop, and imagined it was her, and that the curly ropes of fabric were Lavender’s not-so-lavender curls. He would whisper in her moppy hair that she didn’t think she was skinny at all. That she was the last woman UnderEarth that needed another juice cleanse.

Johnny loved that mop almost as much as he did Lavender, though it would have been absurd to compare the two side by side. He was comparing them side by side, absently completing the second pass of his mop in front of her door, when she came stumbling down the hall from the elevator, balancing a tower of groceries. He offered to help, rushing to her aid, leaving the mop by the doorside.

“You’re so sweet,” she said as he unloaded the bags from her arms. He smiled, of course she would say something like that. He said it was no problem. “You’re always mopping, I’ve never seen floors so clean,” she continued, wiping sweat from her brow and glancing up at the flickering LEDs in their reptile plexicases, “do you have replacements for those things? I hate that flickering.” Johnny stared up at the lights, chewing a nervous lip at the missing bolt in the right corner of one. The case drooped like melted glass. He told her he’d look in maintenance when he had a chance. She fumbled with her keys and unbolted the door, lifting it up on its hinge and scraping it open then disappearing inside. Johnny heard the clatter of keys hit granite. He started to set her bags inside the door jam, when she called from inside, “Oh, would you mind
bringing those in for me? I’m just an absolute mess.”

He swallowed. Looked down the hall. Maintenance staff wasn’t supposed to enter premises of Hive residents. There was no one there. And it was Lavender. The mop stared at him, and he it. What would you do, Lavender? He walked in.

She was sweeping about the place frantically, pulling bottled juices and waters and calories from plastic bottles. A giant in her heels, much too tall for life down in 7389B. Her purse lay on a grey-stitch love seat, her keys on the granite-top-grey island. His stomach swam. She had a love seat. So Lavender. Johnny had never been in a Hive cell that wasn’t his before; it was against Company policy. He dropped the bags near the cut-in kitchen and took a tour. His still-wet boots squeaked on tile, silented on carpet. He stared at the full-length video walls behind the loveseat. Those must have been expensive. He didn’t have those. They were set to windows looking out on a white-capped Swiss alp. They were in Switzerland, maybe on anniversary, she was always the exotic one, Lavender, pushing him to do things he would never do. He liked the safety of the Hives. Most people did. His father liked the Rises, and his second wife, and see what happened to them. Served them right. Lavender liked skiing, and Bernese Mountain Dogs with casks of whiskey about their slobbering necks. Maybe that was why he loved her. He stared down the hall toward the bedroom, did she have grey sheets too? Cotton? Polyester? No, no, she was a silk girl. Silk and Skiing.

“I see you all the time, but we hardly talk,” Lavender said as he turned around. She was in the kitchen, filling two glasses from the tap. The water was milky, orange. She dropped two tabs in, handed a glass to Johnny. He watched the fizz eat away at the color. Chomp Chomp.

“Bad day,” Johnny said.

“Oh, you heard?” Lavender rounded the kitchen and mopped by him. Her hair
smelled like lemongrass. “Terrible, isn’t it?”

“I’m in maintenance, all I hear is the water issues.” And the lights. And the heat.

“No, no, I mean the UnderFrisco Hive,” Lavender tapped the walls, and the Swiss Alps faded. Faces filled the room. FOX-CNN News. Yellow banners like caution tape wrapped the walls. The words swam, but they said something about an earthquake. Collapsed Hive. Dead. “It’s just horrible, the entire Hive caved in. They’re trying to send rescue crews in, but there’s just so many…” She placed a palm to her neck. Yes, it was hot in here.

“San Andreas.” He took a sip of the water. The bubbles had chomped all the color away.

“Hm?” She glanced back at him, tears swimming in her slipstream eyes. Sympathetic, humanitarian, maybe she worked for a daycare. Something with children, or a homeless shelter. No, Red Cross. Yes, Red Cross. She was brave like that.

“The fault. They built UnderFrisco on the San Andreas faultline. People knew the risk. That’s why the rent’s so cheap there.”

“Those are people.” She turned and took a step back toward the love seat. Maybe that was a sign? She looked at his water glass. He took another sip. Apologize, Johnny, his mother echoed in his head.

“I—sorry. My family was up in one of the Rises, when the ‘canes started goin’ so I… it sucks. Yeah, sucks.” If you call a cheating bastard father and his bimbo wife Vanessa family.

“Oh my God, are they okay?”

“No. No they’re not. Hey, uh, did you turn up any of those bolts from the surface?”

“Bolts?” She cocked her head, glanced past him toward the door. He looked back but there was nothing there. Just a door. He rummaged in his overalls and pulled out a bolt. This one
came off a hanging shelf in the elevator lobby. There were two more to hold up the shelf just like it. He held it up for her, and her eyes went wide, then soft. “Oh, those, hey no I didn’t but I’ll be sure to keep looking out for them, alright?”

“Sure. Yeah, thanks. It’s important.”

“Of course, Johnny. Say, I should really clean up and get dinner going. Thanks again for your help.” Lavender scooted by Johnny, so close the hairs on his arms rose. He sniffed. Lemongrass. She started clinking around in the kitchen. The clicking of a stovetop. The beep of a timer.

“Yeah, what are you making?”

The banging stopped. “Casserole, a family specialty. Look Johnny, I’m busy, I don’t mean to be a bad host, but I’ve got a friend coming by. Thanks for bringing in the bags.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Johnny understood. He set down the glass. A friend. He wondered if she was going to fuck him. Whore. He grimaced. Dirty thoughts, bad thoughts, push them down, push them away. That’s Lavender you’re talking about. He walked by the kitchen entry, stopped. She was holding a naked chicken, and a knife. Carrots on a cutting board. Real food. She must have a real job then. Corporate. Tech. Owned her soul. “No problem. Hey, if you find any of these things, could you——” he held up the bolt, up with his voice, up with his hope.

She smiled. The tension flowed out of him. God, she was beautiful. “Of course, Johnny. If I find any I’ll give them right to you.”

He left. Picked up the mop on the way, and went right to the maintenance closet, and sat on the cot, breathing hard, stroking the still wet, ropy hair of her. He asked her what her favorite mountain was in Switzerland. What the kids were like at her orphanage. If she dyed her hair. Why lemongrass. What she thought about him. Johnny fell asleep next to the cot, bucket of
bolts on one side, Lavender on the other. Bolts rolled back and forth on the ground. None fit, but that was alright. The terrible noises below the floors were absent. Johnny dreamed of saving Lavender from earthquakes.

***

The mop came to Johnny through a distant ancestor, a Water Wars Veteran who got the mop in the form of a flag from his second cousin’s alcoholic step-father, a man who built birdhouses in his back shed and flew the flag out of the back of his Toyota Tacoma, with another flag that had a yellow and black snake curled and hissing on it. He was the one who stole it from a senator’s office during some riots his construction buddies told him about. It had been there since Nixon’s inauguration, not Reagan’s. It came over the Atlantic on a slave-ship as a walking stick of caretaker to tribal king and child orphan. The caretaker would not survive, but the child would, and though he would never come to know his royal blood, he would know it instinctually, searching, striving for freedom. The walking stick remained in possession of a cotton plantation owner for decades as a bloody and terrible tool. Johnny would have been sick to know this.

Johnny wandered the halls of 7389B, thinking about his date with Lavender. If you walked the halls long enough, you would begin to realize the gentle slope of its curve, then understand just how large the Hive UnderAngeles really was, like flying in the window seat on a blue sky day and understanding the earth for the first time. Not that many people flew anymore. It took nearly twenty minutes before he found the rubber-blue stairs leading to Central. He climbed them, and used his rubber-blue key to open a thick steel door with a shocking yellow triangle stamped across its belly. He stepped through, let it swing shut behind him.
Hive Central always made Johnny feel small. It was like he was walking the inside of an egg laid from Capitalism, a breathing, whirring, pulsing maze of pipes and heat and little scurrying men in blue hats on catwalks 10, 100, 1000 stories up. Industrial waste and water units lined the edges of the Hive in long, pumping columns, like the egg had ribs, or veins. Looking at them made Johnny dizzy. Instead he slipped between the pipes, and walked the halls created by evaporative cooler after evaporative cooler. He liked it here, down near the Hive floor because the evaporative coolers were like the heart of the Hive. The heart of Capitalism, the heart of many lives. He wandered through them, distracted, unscrewing bolts as he went. He always unscrewed more when he was distracted. Lavender was distracting.

He wanted to build something with her, something like the Hive, something big. A life. A home. A family. A place where people would congregate, thrive. He knew everything about her and loved the things she did, the things she would say. Why couldn’t she see that? The more he thought about the exchange the day before, the more he grew ugly with realization. A friend. A *friend*. Not him, a friend. Was he a friend? No, he was more, she was cheating on him. Johnny ground his teeth, unscrewed another bolt, dropped it in his pocket. He wanted his mop back, why didn’t he bring her along? She would have calmed him, cooed at him, he would have stroked her ropy hair until she climbed and rode him. His mop made him happy. His mop wouldn’t cheat.

Johnny sat down between evaporator 317 and 318, and pulled out a packet of nutrients. Tore it open. Sucked. He wondered what his mother would say when he brought Lavender home. She would approve. Then she would forgive him for that mishap with the realtor. It’s what it was, after all, just a mishap. Mishaps happen. He just had to make up for them. Maybe that was why he loved Lavender.
“Ay, cabron, long time,” Matín crashed to the floor next to him, grabbing his shoulder, shaking a greeting, “man, where you been man? Place fuckin’ sucks dude, fuckin’ sucks you know?” Matín pulled a nutrient packet of his own from his grease-stained coveralls. Matín was an engineer, fixed things, like missing bolts from evaporative coolers. Johnny would never tell Matín about the bolts in his pockets, or in the bucket filled with them back in storage. Then Johnny and Matín wouldn’t be friends anymore.

“Yeah, long time. Family problems, workin’ long, workin’ late, you know,” Johnny said, nodding in agreement. This place did suck.

“Ay, yo, why you workin’ so hard? Shit runs itself. I just collect the bag and run, ta, ay dude, check it, 7327 had a stuck sump, right? Had to go up there, clean that shit out, but damned if I didn’t see the biggest fuckin’ titties on this throat? Ta, shit was basically bustin out her clothes, mate. She was givin’ me eyes, dawg, she woulda pounced this snake no problem, but ay, I got a job you know? Company policy an’ all.”

“Yeah, company policy. Sucks.”

They sat, slurping nutrients, listening the deaf-rattle of conditioning. Matín slammed the floor, “Ah, man how’s whatshername. Rosemary or some shit?”

Johnny smiled. “Lavender.”

“Ah, yeah man, how is she?”

“Good, man, good. She’s working hard, you know? Got a big job up Top so she doesn’t come down much, so we’ve had to hire a sitter for the kids. I sure as hell ain’t takin’ care of em’. ” Matin got a hoot out of that.

“Shit, kids.”

“Kids.”
“Say,” Matín threw away an empty nutrient packet and ripped another open, “would you describe her again?” Johnny did. Long, red hair. Long, flowing legs. Ass like she takes the stairs. “And her tits? She got big tits, right?” Tits for days, Matín. Matín whistled. “Shit, how’d you lock a bitch like that down man? Shit, if only…” Matín trailed off. Slurped at his nutrients. One of the evaporators heaved and coughed, like an old smoker.

Johnny wasn’t going to say anything, but then he thought about his mop, the nights they had.

“You gotta dig.”

“Dig?”

“Yeah, you gotta dig. Tits, that’s just scratching the surface. You gotta dig and dig deep. Figure out what she likes, what her life was like before. It’s like, you’re digging to build foundation. Excavating. Like the Hive. Go deeper. Dig.” Then he thought of Lavender’s friend. “Sometimes you dig and find shit. I’m thinking of ending things anyway.”

“Dig,” Matín repeated, then busted up. “Man you’re fuckin’ nuts, you know that?”

“And bolts,” Johnny replied, and they both cracked. Cracked like an egg.

That night Johnny danced with Lavender, the mop, and when she asked him how work was, he just said nuts and bolts, baby, nuts and bolts. The horrible noises from the panel were louder, but he didn’t mind too much. He was getting used to them. Johnny even stopped trying to screw bolts into the missing hole. He unscrewed the other three, and lifted the panel from its place and set it against the wall. There was dirt under the panel. That was better. The noises came through better now. He danced, samba, foxtrot. He danced in maintenance to that music. And when he was exhausted, he threw himself down on the cot, and scratched at the surface of the exposed dirt with the end of his mop. Digging, digging.
Before it, (the mop, the flag, the stick) was in Africa, it was in Italy, in the hands of a once-wealthy Roman architect whose mind-shaped the walls of the Pantheon. The stick was a staff back then, broad and thick about enough hardly a hand could go about it, topped by a golden bust of Hestia and Hephaestus crafting a home, and children. It was given to the Architect by Marcus Vispanius Agrippa, who stole the thing from Augustus when he was but a young child playing in the vineyards behind their ancestral home in Velletri. He found it leaning, forgotten, against a brick foundation half-built, that was meant to house other sticks, like trowels and rakes and shovels, and took it into the rows of half-grown grapes to play Emperor. He dreamed of Rome as a place of great architecture, for all of Rome was to be his family and family was raised in homes big and small, and Rome was to be the greatest home of all. And Augustus before him had this stick and staff for many generations in his family, shaped from a warspear taken in prize of conquest Macedon after Alexander had fallen. Augustus would not have known it then, but the stick was the most valued object stolen from great empire to great empire, worth more than all the lands of Apallonia and Thrace and Hellesponia placed atop each other like piles of gold at the base of a dragon’s foot. It took many forms over centuries as it was passed hand to hand, lineage to lineage, most namely the great serpent staff of Moses endowed with powers by God himself. These powers were farce, but the staff was not. Nor were the plagues.

Before it rested in Moses’ hands it was the bough to the home of Hammurabi’s third wife, whose bastard son would go to build many homes though never receive recognition. Her
son went out each morning and leaned on the bough, smoothing it with his hands, feeling its origins in the depth of its rings. Before this, its history can be hard to track, for the history of mankind is also, and the stick was with man, it’s finest and quietest companion, though it did more than support the leaning strides of a home, or the leaning strides of an elder. It was spotted as a hammer at the construction of the first Canaanite gate, and as casting mold in Yangshao at the first pour of copper, though that is merely rumored. It struck the golden spike in Omaha in the rise of America. Broke the windows of Congress in its fall.

Destructions sometimes precede new Creation.

Because that’s what it was, this object that took many shapes but always seemed to fall into the hands of the revolutionaries, the leaders, the dispassionate, the wicked, the holy. The ones who stepped into the light, and worked from the shadows. Hammering, pointing, digging, building, always with the stick. And it fell into Johnny’s hands.

Johnny awoke from a dream to sirens. His first thought was they sounded like the noises under the maintenance closet. The second was to lament his fleeing dream. In it he was digging a hole to plant lavender that smelled of lemongrass. They were outside, on the slopes of Switzerland, and it was warm, hot even. Their kids were throwing snowballs at each other. Lavender loved him. Told him he had saved her. Her kisses felt like mop hair.

The sirens were blaring, but that was alright. Johnny wasn’t afraid. Johnny had a plan. He grabbed his mop from the floor, where it rested over a sizable hill of loose dirt, and left maintenance storage. The lights had shorted, but emergency power strips lit both ends of the floors that he kept clean for so long, throwing up shadows, shadows everywhere, like he was in a disco. The different lights didn’t make it better, he still thought the space needed brightening. Dozens of people filled the halls, more than he had ever seen at one time, they were rushing,
pushing, yelling. A little girl dropped her favorite toy, a mole, her parents didn’t see, they were too busy fighting for space to the elevator. Someone screamed. And it was hot. Sweltering.

Johnny had never felt heat like this. The earth was incredible. He wondered how long it would take to mop up the floors, all these people were surely making a mess. He shoved past the oncoming residents, a short blonde, a tall bodybuilder, a mother of three. They were all headed the wrong direction, but Johnny couldn’t tell all of them that. He had more important things to do. He passed 7389B-12, 7389B-15, 7389B-16, then stopped. He knocked on 73890B-17.

Nobody answered. Johnny hoped he hadn’t missed her.

He knocked again. Nothing. He checked the handle.

The door was unlocked. Maintenance staff wasn’t supposed to enter resident premises. Company policy. But that’s alright. These were extenuating circumstances. Johnny entered. The apartment was dark, barely a glow from the emergency floor strips. The video walls were flickering. The love seat was empty. Johnny wondered if they would have time for a quickie in it. He hit his head. Dirty, dirty thoughts. There was murmuring coming from the hall, probably out of the bedroom, she was most likely still packing.

He rounded the corner and walked down the hall, mop dragging behind him. There was light coming from the bedroom. There was a tremor, like the Hive was yawning, waking up. Cracking.

Johnny pushed open the bedroom door.

“—shoes. We need to leave, now.” Lavender’s long figure was bent under the bed, her arms splayed back, holding shoes in both. Next to her, a man, wearing crescent moon pajamas, and one sock.

“Lavender?”
“Who the hell are you?” The man stepped forward. He was taller than Johnny.

“Lavender, we need to leave. The Hive is in distress.”

Lavender came up from the bed and caught sight of Johnny.

The man spoke again. “Who is Lavender?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. Johnny, Johnny what are you doing here?”

“Lavender who is that?”

“Why does he keep calling you Lavender, baby?”

“This is my husband, Johnny. Kevin, this is Johnny, he works for the Hive. Cleans this floor. I don’t know what he wants. Johnny, why are you in our apartment?” Her voice was small. Johnny was so confused, the sirens were louder than ever. He was wincing, why were they so loud?

“I don’t understand, Lavender, who is Kevin? Husband? Is this your friend? The one you were talking about?”

“Listen, mate, I don’t know what you’re on about, but you better back the fuck up. Jenny? Jenny get behind me, this man is unstable.”

Jenny? Jenny? Unstable? The husband, no, the friend, Kevin, took a step forward. His fists were clenched. Johnny whipped the mop forward and crushed his nose. The man collapsed, grunting, holding his face. Lavender screamed. And screamed and screamed. She fell backwards on the bed. Even in the lowlight, Johnny could see the material of the bedsheets was cheap, some kind of microfiber. Cheap bitch, he knew she never could have afforded silk.

“—I was going to save you, we were going to Switzerland together, with our kids, and snow, the Hive is a bad place, you hate it, you said, you said you hate it—”

Screams, screams. Screams.
“I was going to save you,” Johnny said. The man writhed on the floor.

Screams, screams.

“Lavender?” He asked.

Screams.

He ran.

***

Humanity began with the scratch of a stick in the dirt. It happened in the earliest days, when men were hardly men, and could remember breathing from their necks and crawling at the sand. There was a boy, not very old, but with hair on his chest and a chin big enough to be chief someday, a boy that did not have a name but if there were names then he might have been called gutturally Di’Gun, which meant something like “Strange One”. He crouched under an old oak tree, staring at wriggling, sliming worms after a summer rain, when the oak tree let out a groan, and released a branch from its canopy. When it landed in front of Di’Gun, the cleft in the soft mud was deep, and ragged, and the boy stared at it. And stared at it. Then he took up the branch in his hand, and began to dig.

And humanity dug. They dug trenches and mines and latrines, and built houses and ziggurats and monuments with the dirt, and swords and guns and rockets with the metals. They burned the oil they unearthed until the world wheezed cancer, and the towers were screaming tall in the sky. They dug great Hives when those towers fell to tornadoes, and hurricanes and tsunamis. They dug deeper and deeper until there was nearly no earth left to dig. Only a little more. Just a little.
Johnny raced back to the maintenance closet, mop in tow, shoving people out of his way. The Hive shook violently now. It was blistering. His flesh was beginning to boil. God he was angry at Lavender. Went and got married right under his nose. He just needed to cool off, just cool off a little, then he would go back and tell her how he felt, that he would save her. That was always his plan, to lead her to safety.

He shut the door behind him, and screamed. He knocked over shelves and swung his mop at the wall, over and over and over and over, until it snapped. His eyes went wide. Johnny fell to his knees, and he grabbed at the pieces of the mop. Lavender. He held her in his hands, between the bottles of bleach, under the blaring sirens, the blistering heat. How much they had been through, so many years. Johnny would never be able to bring her home to his mother.

He looked at the pieces of his broken wife, his broken relationship, his broken mop. Saw the long, flat edges of the break. The metal panel against the wall. The scattered dirt among the fallen chemicals.

The hole.

He dug. Just a little more, just a little more, wondering, what lay under the surface?
Switches

There are three hundred and forty-seven switches in my childhood home, and my mother has turned on one of the Wrong Ones. I know this because my father sent me a text three days ago with the code words: Need Help With Mom. Capital letters emphasizing each word, just like that. That’s the only reason why I’m home, standing in the yawning Victorian dusted foyer, battered suitcase in hand, waiting for someone to greet me. She, Mom, is having the walls repainted, the floors are plastic and I can hear a painter in the kitchen humming, discovering the switches himself, clack clack clacking away. Some turn on lights, others let the disposal rumble. I hope he doesn’t find the switch under the sink to the memory disposal. The last plumber that got to it was a mess, couldn’t remember how to fix a leak for shit. Or remember who his wife was. Most of the switches are harmless, but that switch is not. It’s not one of the Wrong Ones, though. Most of those are in the attic.

My mother keeps an immaculately pristine house, except when she touches one of the Wrong Ones. Then I’m needed. I’m the only one left that knows the house like Mother likes it. Not even Mother. Especially Mother. Each switch is labeled with a faded sticky note, under Scotch-tape; green means go, yellow means mustard, red means it’s probably part of the ignition sequence to the dark matter-engines below the house. Grey means anything to do with color, or the sun. Black means you better not, and white means it’s probably fine but it hasn’t been touched in a while so you better not. There are fourteen unlabeled switches in a cabinet left of the refrigerator. They all smell of gin, Mother’s favorite. I am a switch. I am Switch. There is a faded black sticky note under Scotch-tape attached to my forehead. There is a switch underneath the layers of tape and faded wood mulch.
I live in Seattle, being strange, goofy Switch for others. Answering questions about the black piece of paper stuck to my forehead, showing them the switch underneath. I was at my local haunt, the Golden Torch, waiting for something to happen, when I got the text from my father. Someone touched a switch they weren’t supposed to. By someone he meant Mother. It was an accident (it was always an accident). I wasn’t good at much, but I knew more about the switches than anyone, mostly because I was one, and I knew how they all worked. I make trips back home, I fix things. It’s the least I can do, after everything.

So the text wasn’t everything, I’d be the first one to admit I ran, ran from a boy, ran for the airplane doors when the tape began to fray, when the joy of his eyes reminded me of green ribbons and rolling heads. When his whispers of children made my skin crawl, I began to suspect maybe he wasn’t the One. I couldn’t grant his wish. Surely he didn’t understand the relationship between the Typhranis household and the generations of Typhranis women tied to a house on the hills of South San Francisco. He didn’t understand what we had to deal with. What I dealt with. What surely would happen to me, and happen to my daughter. So. Best to run. Run back home, where the switches were both safety and danger. Home. Comfort. The comfort of discomfort.

And now, in the entryway to the mausoleum that was my childhood, everything seemed quiet, everything seemed fine, which is usually a bad sign. I knew which switches to press when there are tentacles slipping from Kodachrome walls or swirling portals to Grecian Hell in the middle of the dining room. When things are quiet, it usually means an attic switch. Attic switches are all labeled with black. Attic switches are Mother’s favorite.

***
I know there are three-hundred and forty-seven switches because I have counted them, many many times, which my therapist would say is a compulsion, but I would say it’s just curiosity, comfort. I walked around the house when I was younger, counting them, on their forty-three separate panels, each unique in their own right. Some are classic, a flat seesaw of plastic. Others have the jutting prominence of a phallic nature, I never liked those much. There are knobs and wheels, sliders and metal chains of tiny copper spheres dangling tantalizingly down the wall. It is a family tradition, those of the Typhranis feminine persuasion, anyway, to collect them. The house is a memory, an echo of matriarchy, a cascading chain of switches built into the walls. I added to the collection on my thirteenth birthday, a little button in the guest bathroom that fills anyone with the sense they are deep in the Argentinian rainforests. It was one of the greatest days of my life, watching a switch perform a bit of magic I’d designed. It stirred obsession in me that was buried deep within a genetic structure passed down through generations of women Typhranis’s. A joyful, manic obsession. That was a long time ago.

“Switch!” My father boomed, coming around the corner with his ogre’s-smile and giant’s-hairy-hands and white man’s-golf shirt holding in around three-hundred too many beers of excess stomach. My parents always thought it was funny they named me Switch, like I was a joke to a premonition I never could have objected to. Never mind the sexual connotations I’ve dealt with my entire life. I let him embrace me, but I could feel from the tension it was difficult for him to admit me back home, that he couldn’t solve the problem on his own. He always tried to learn the switches, but that isn’t how his brain works. It never would. I don’t blame him for that. He loves Mother, despite everything, and there’s a beautiful bit of humanity in that. He doesn’t seem to blame me for how I am, either. It’s a mutual respect of understanding that we’ve
built a bridge of tenuous love. I’m sure he felt the tension of my own discomfort being home, and that shared discomfort is where we sit in our sweet spot.

When he releases me I make a show of looking about the house. “Where’s Mom?” I ask, and by that I mean where are the re-animated teapots dancing in the living room, or the misplaced jungle cats sleeping under coffee-tables. He pats the black-paper on my forehead affectionately.

“Attic. She’s been up there a few days.”

“Food?”

“She’s eating.”

“She touch anything?”

“Who’s to say. Feels like it.”

“Dinner?”

“I’ll order burritos. High-Tec.”

There was an awkward silence, him holding my shoulders, goofy grin (I inherited from him) threatening to drop from his face. He never knew how to bridge the emotional gap. Talk about the tough stuff.

“Are you okay?”

The question catches him off guard. He deflects.

“Shot a 78 today,” He says with a grin, and ambles off towards the office. That was Dad for you. Always the golfer. Always striking out ahead.

To the attic, then.

***
The stairs bare their mossy green teeth. I carry my suitcase up stair by stair, careful not to drag the wheels through the pristine, thick growth. Mother would know if the rhizoid structures had been damaged, they are her pride and joy. The stairs have mostly star, and sphagnum, but there are bits of fern and juniper too, hanging along the edges of the rising half-cork stairwell. A memory triggers as I pass the halfway mark, morning sunbeams through skylights before school, sinking into the wet cushion carpets of their soft leaves. Head leaned on Paul’s chest while he touted a range of horticultural knowledge, tickling my nose with a leaf. Not all memories of this place are so bad, but I push it down anyway. There are other, darker memories. Memories with black taped to their edges. I rub my forehead, ensuring the scotch tape is in place. I deposit my suitcase and duffel at the top of the stairs. Take a listen. Hear muffled thumping through the ceiling.

The attic ladder is down, lights are flickering from the gaping mouth above me.

“Mom?”

No answer.

“Mom, I’m home.”

I hear a grunt. A good enough of an invitation as anything.

I poke my head through the opening. The smell of fertilizer nearly smacks me back down the ladder. There are frozen toads melting down the attic walls. Our sun-bellied gecko Otis floats in the center of the room, looking content. Mother sits underneath, between mounds of soil and four ceramic pots large enough they could be sarcophagi arranged in an Egyptian tomb. A daffodil yellow bikini hangs from her thin frame. Sunglasses like two black holes cover the majority of her face. She’s holding a sun reflector in gardening-gloved hands. The rays of the
gecko bounce from reflector to walls, striking everything in between, including my eyes. Half-
melted toads crawl aimlessly in circles, dragging their frozen hind in wet, sluggish trails through
the dusty maze of boxes. Psychedelic disco.

“Mother.”

“Huh?” She shouts like there’s music blasting. A toad croaks. “Oh, hi sweetheart, you’re
home. I’m just getting a tan in, care to join me?”

“It’s October. Otis should be in his cage.”

“Not in heeeeeeere,” she belts out a falsetto.

“Mom, you’ve been messing with the switches again.”

She looks at me, and takes off the sunglasses. I can’t tell if she wants to hurt me, or feels
hurt by me. That’s the way her eyes always are.

“I know my house. I know my switches.”

“Like last time?”

She blinks. Then turns back to sunbathing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What are you doing up here?”

“Just a little project.”

“You know how your projects go.”

“This one is different. I’m growing something.”

“I don’t want to clean up your mess.”

She looks up from the sunbeams. Eyes narrow.

“There’s no mess. Do you see a mess?”


“Dad seems to think there might be.”
“What does he know, anyway? And like you’re supposed to clean up anything. We both know what you can do.”

There it is. In no time at all. Accusations. That was all I needed, she clearly wanted to be alone.

I oblige, ducking back through the attic floor. Her last Switch is home.

***

Our room remains as if I’d never left. Or grew beyond the age of sixteen. Peeling posters curled down chartreuse walls, drooping Dali faces of boybands I used to crush on, floppy golden hair of past wet dreams. Deflated tigerstripe bean bag chairs in the corner. Paul’s white electric guitar laid to rest. A tangle of Gamecube wires poke out from under his twin bed. An orange lava lamp sits between the two beds, on a shared nightstand, next to a Minnie Mouse clock that no longer ticks. So many past dreams, they press about me. I am sitting on the edge of my bed, reading a Pulitzer Prize winning novel about a man sitting at the edge of his bed reading a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, trying to keep the memories at bay, but I can smell his presence, the faint odor of teenage brother. I wonder where he would be right now. If he was climbing mountains in Nepal. Fighting monsters in labyrinthine underground labs. A mayor of a small town handing him the key to the city, crowds cheering his name. Paul, Paul, Paul, where have you gone?

We were in this room when I asked him how come he had a way with the switches, when it was only meant to be the women of the family. See, I was jealous. He was the perfect son. Prodigal. It’s only natural. It was dark, the only light coming from the lava lamp. We couldn’t
see each other because of that orange glow, so his voice always echoed out into the room, a deep reverberation. There was something about the space, that room, that lamp, that made everything feel so large, infinitely so, an entire world we shared, a place we could hide when Mom and Dad were busy arguing, or fucking, or both. I could almost feel his shrug when he said he wasn’t sure how to feel about it all. How sometimes he thought about running away, from the expectations, from the pressure. Taking a switch to a far away universe. He said it was so much, to carry Mom, to tie down Dad, to keep watch of me. He only wished… sometimes he could be someone else.

That was the only time he ever mentioned anything about running away. It was hard to imagine, Paul, with problems. He always seemed like a walking solution. Fixed malfunctioning time-regulator switches in the basement. A girlfriend whose smile lit up a room, Sadie, they held hands, and kissed in the hallways of high school. He had that right, being a two-sport recruit. The shadows of orange floated across the ceiling; funny, the things we both could see but not each other, each other we were in the dark. In pain. I thought I heard it then, the pain, slipping across the wavelengths of his voice surfing through the dark, cutting, sharp, but then I was young, it was difficult to see anything other than myself. It was difficult to see.

My mom pops her head in, breaking the image floating along the ceiling. A couple of gophers we are. Her auburn-dyed hair pulls like a curtain about her face, her eyes still hidden behind sunglasses. I wiped at the moisture collecting at the corners of my eyes. Set down the novel.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she says. I don’t know if she notices my tears. I cough strength into my voice.

“You hungry? There was only moldy baba ganoush in the refrigerator. Dad said he’d pick up burritos.”
“Didn’t your dad pick up something already?”

“Just a good score on the course.”

She laughs, the tension fades just a touch.

“How about Chinese? If I pick it up?” she asks. Sucker punch.

“Red Town Dragon?”

“Spicy Chicken Lo Mein,” She agrees, with a smile. She comes in and gives me a hug, a kiss on the forehead, right on the edge of my scotch-tape forehead. “It’s good to have you home,” she whispers, then gazelles from the room, but stops in the frame. “By the way, make sure to turn out the lights when you leave the room. The second kitchen switch was left on, the orchids started melting.”

Then she’s gone. I close my eyes. It’s good to be home, Mom.

Once I find the wrong switch, everything will be alright.

Once I find out what’s wrong, I’ll be gone again.

***

There are three hundred and forty-eight switches in this house. One hundred and twenty-three of them turn on lights, that leaves two-hundred and twenty-five. I clear out the fourteen in the cabinets while Mother is out getting Chinese, and toss them in the trash out back. She won’t notice. Two-hundred and eleven to go. I know the Wrong One is in the attic, but it can’t hurt to be safe, so I start in the living room. There is only one black switch in the living room, so I start there. Twenty-three switches. One changes the new paint color from fuchsia back to beige. Another sounds off all of the iPhone alarms, in alphabetical order. One sends out emails to
elderly widows in their seventies claiming to be a Saudi oil prince in need of investments.

Nothing too serious. I don’t touch the black switch in here, it breaks off another piece of the polar ice cap. Found that out when I was six, a tantrum-prone little bastard. The world is still suffering from one particularly bad tantrum. One-hundred and eighty-eight to go. The smells of Red Town Dragon fill the house.

“The witch has arrived on her broomstick, carrying gifts,” Mother cries, and sets the brown bag down on the dinner table with a flourish and a bow. She is bright, airy, dancing and humming around the kitchen, collecting plates, bowls, cups, napkins. Maybe she was embarrassed about earlier. The whole melting frog situation. Dad appears from the den, toting his eReader, glazed expression on his face, quite possibly stoned out of his mind. The three of us sit down for dinner. Silence prevails for a time. It’s quiet around the table, more quiet than it used to be. The clinking of forks, knives. I watch the gentle dripping of a half melted orchid onto the granitetop of the kitchen island. A toad scuttles by across the darkwood floors, escaped convict, one leg still encased in crying cold, headed for the den. I make a joke like what’s a frog with no legs, unhopy.

“They’re toads, sweetheart,” Mother chides. Tough crowd.

Dad interjects and asks me about my life. I start talking. Tell them about the writing, the shit-kicking usher gigs. I skim across the choppy surface of the broken relationship, but Mother grabs my arm tight. For all that scarecrow energy she’s still got a vice grip, and her razorblade nails begin to cut skin.

“Sheart, sheart, baby girl,” she nods and her whole body shakes with emotion, “sometimes you’ve gotta kiss a few frogs before you find your prince, that’s all.” I choke on a lo-mein noodle. Try not to laugh. She wouldn’t understand the irony, only get offended and ask me
to explain. And when she still didn’t understand I would have to unravel myself from the trip minefield of defensiveness. She would start throwing switches. I would have to counteract with anti-switches. World War Infinity.

This is what I’ve trained for. I try a different tact.

“Would you feel comfortable talking about the house?” Therapist Inez would be proud.

Mother leans back. Folds her arms, glances at Dad.

“Did you put her up to this?”

“No no no, Fran, don’t even go there,” his voice raises through octaves of deep tenor, looking up from his eReader for the first time. It says, don’t go there. Don’t pull me into this. I brought Switch back for you. There’s something wrong, but I don’t want to be involved with the paranormal stuff. Settle this between the two of you.

Dad could always say so much in so few words.

“It’s fine, Dad,” I say, trying to emulate him, trying to say more with less. But all that’s behind my words is it’s clearly not fine, please help, stop reading your damn book, I don’t know what I’m doing. “Mom, Dad just asked me to come back because he thinks there’s something wrong with the house and thinks I can help, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Mom’s voice tightens higher, “There’s nothing wrong with the house, why can’t we just enjoy dinner?” She shovels a forkful of lo-mein through her thin, chapped lips.

“I never said there was anything wrong with you.”

“Welf yu migh as well say it anyway,” swallowing the noodles, “Always attacking me, always attacking my opinions. I do so damn much for this house, for this family, and all I get is damn critics. It’s fine, I just won’t open my mouth anymore, won’t do anything unless you two
tell me,” Mom scrapes back her chair and storms from the room. The stairs crack and settle. Phantom steps stomp above Dad and me, we sit there listening until they stop. She’s made for the attic.

“She’s acting stranger than usual.” My eyes roam to Dad, pinning him there. He looks guilty.

“I told you.”

“She snapped at almost nothing. Are you sure it’s not about you two?”

His bushy eyebrows raise. “Me and your mom? We’re solid.” Solid. I wish I had Dad’s dictionary sometimes.

“You’re oblivious sometimes, but not that oblivious.”

“Now you sound like your mom.”

“No, I sound like Paul.”

That stops everything. Eventually Dad lets out a choked grunt.

“Yeah. You’re right. I miss him. So does your mom.”

“Me too. Is it getting to her?”

Dad sighs. “I don’t know. I really don’t. Sometimes it’s like… and then…” He just shakes his head. Turns back to his eReader. That’s all I’ll get from him.

I excuse myself and take the pile of noodles with me around the house, slurping unladylike while flipping switches on and off. Lights flicker red, blue, golden sunset. Johnny Cash mentions a train. Confetti and birthday balloons fall from the ceiling. The downstairs switches were always party pleasers. I run my fingers along the switches, naming their purpose under my breath. Counting them as I go.

My finger strikes something unfamiliar.
I run my finger across smooth wall. Lean in close, sniff. New paint. A switch is missing. Curious. I rack my brain, think it’s something to do with temporal shifts. Mom used to flip it for dinner parties when Dad was starting to lose steam, never the social butterfly.

Question is, why is this one missing?

***

There are three-hundred and forty-eight switches in this house, and three are missing. I wondered what it meant as I climbed the stairs, absently picking at the edges of the tape on my forehead. A piece came loose and I flicked it away.

Paul was everybody’s hero, built like the Rock with Chris Rock humor and among his favorite phrases was “stuck between a rock and a hard place” and “rock on.” He was my family’s rock, and he was my brother. He smiled at pain and cried during cheesy romantic comedies, and took me through long walks through interdimensional portals when Mom went into one of her moods. He was Dad’s best friend and knew the switches to flip to help Mother smile again. Maybe I shouldn’t have resented him for his perfection, but you couldn’t help resent Paul being under his shadow for so long. It was Paul.

All I wanted was to be the hero for once, to be something other than a footnote to the family. I wanted to be helpful. To be seen. Isn’t that what anyone really wants? And so, a long time after he had gone to sleep, long after his rumbling had ceased vibrating the little orange globs bouncing around the room, I slid the switch on my forehead. See, my switch is more like a dial. But it only goes one way, and that click as it turns to a new side, it cracks through reality. Changes things. Things that can’t be undone.
After that, he’d had his wish granted. He was a different person. His smiles were plastic, his eyes were sad and distant, he didn’t understand humor any longer. Paul was no longer anyone’s hero. Angry, sullen. His grades crashed through the floor and his relationship shattered to pieces, a mirror against the sidewalk. He came home smelling of weed, then the sour stink of beer cloaked the side of his room. At night, I could hear his labored inhales take in the heavy clouds of licorice smoke through his vape. In the mornings, it was common for an argument, about food, about classes, about the car, between Mom and Paul. I sat spooning my cereal, always silent, watching in horror at what I had done. It was me, wasn’t it?

And one morning, after an argument with Mother, he walked through the door and never came back. But an argument in this house, one with Mother anyway, wasn’t an argument at all but war. That storm, that tempest… it had nearly torn the house to shreds, ripped us up from reality like a dandelion in a field of immaculate grass. Seeds sent billowing into the skies and we remained a bare stem, a memory of beauty. She’d flipped one too many Bad Switches that day. It was all I could do to flip them back.

The hole in our lives. It broke all of us. It broke the family. It broke me. But mostly it broke Mother. The guilt, it took a while to seep through my bones, crack me at the seams. When I told Mother the truth, that I was the reason, her Switch was the reason her Paul left, she made me leave too. Walk out that door, same as Paul had. Only she said to never come back, not unless I brought her favorite child back.

And now, I was back, empty-handed. I never found him, Paul. He never wanted to be found. Every time I returned home, that look in Mom’s eyes, they seem to wonder, had I finally succeeded? Have I finally become useful?
For a time, in Seattle, I was terrified of my own shadow. The only places I was comfortable frequenting was a bar from my dingy studio apartment, and the closest Staples. I collected post-its, littered the walls with them, replaced the Scotch tape every day, every day a new post-it. Until, one night, a man, beside me in bed, shook me awake. I don’t remember his name, I don’t regret that. I only remember the way he held the post-it in his hand, a small bird fallen from the nest, the way he stared at the delicate thing, at the switch protruding from my forehead. I know what it looked like. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the queer unlight of the morning hours, but I asked him what he wanted, more than anything else. He told me and I almost laughed, what an inconsequential ask, I could have accomplished it without a switch on my forehead, but I flipped it anyway. I remember the way he lay back, sweating, exclaiming over and over how amazing it was, the best sex of his life.

Then I told him to leave.

I became emboldened, after the first time. Careless, probably the more apt term. I granted wishes, minor, inconsequential wishes that people asked of me when I asked. Often it was sex, more frequent was a round of drinks. Every so often, a surprise. A call from an estranged father. A tattered copy of Walden left in the woodlands of Voyageurs National Park. The strength to go to therapy. Small changes, small switches for others. A regular genie I was. I thought, if I could only master it, it would never get out of hand again. If I mastered it, I would never become my mother, and her pristine house, and her pristine switches, sanitized of the uncontrollable, the filth.

I wore the switch bare on my forehead, left the tape, the post-its, in unused piles at the corners of my apartment. The bar became a frequency. A compulsion. I couldn’t go a night, an afternoon, an hour without granting a wish. Without the sound of that click firing at reality,
adjusting it, shifting it to others’ will at my expense. I cleaned others’ lives. Cleaned debts. Relationships. Addictions. I was the only one in a four-block radius with an addiction.

Then I understood.

***

I ran for the front door and ripped it open.

Billions of fractal nothingness shattered against each other, trees folding into cats folding into the mailman delivering today’s garbage. A bird took a shit on its own head flying upside down through a car window made of blue skies and my own horror.

I slammed the door shut before my stomach delivered Red Town Dragon.

Mother hadn’t flipped a Wrong Switch.

She flipped many Wrong Switches.

She’s building a new Switch.

The attic ladder is still down, and I climb it and push through the scuttle hole. There she is, the Witch, whistling a jolly tune, hanging frozen toads from a clotheslines arcing the center of the room, the pots are lined below. Pinned to the walls are all Paul. Pictures of Paul, accolades of his graduation from high school, his first place equestrian trophy sits on a box, shining blue and gold plastic. His graduation cap. His favorite crossbow. Interspersed are the ripped out switches and panels, jerry-rigged with wires that ran down the walls and across the length to the floor to a breaker. The entire room crackled with interdimensional energy. Quark-tides rippled through the space like heat in the desert.

“M-mom,” I stuttered, “you can’t seriously be thinking of growing a new Paul.”
She doesn’t turn, but continues stringing toads. “Don’t be ridiculous, sweetie, I’m growing multiple Pauls. And you’re just in time, I need your heeeelp,” she trills the last bit.

“I won’t help you.”

“If you would just come and sit right here,” Mother pulls a chair across the creaking floorboards and pats the dusty cushion, sending a cloud of dust airborne.

“No.”

“Sweetie,” Mother turned to me and gave me those hurt-me-hurt-by-me eyes, “you’ve been off in Seattle, galavanting with God knows who, leaving your only mother to figure this out by herself. The least you could do is just sit in the damn chair, and be useful for once in your damned life.” Her voice turned sour.

I chewed my lip.

“It’s not like he’s dead.”

“He might as well be dead to me.”

“What did you say to each other?”

“It’s not important.”

“Not important? You’re breaking the house apart to grow replacements. It couldn’t be so bad.”

“It was that bad,” she whined.

Mother was always the child. Fragile, an ego like paper, with a house for a toy that could collapse the space-time continuum. You couldn’t argue. You couldn’t get her to see any way but the way it was meant to be in her eyes. Maybe Paul had had enough. Maybe he retaliated. You can’t retaliate with Mother. There was only one way to calm her down.

“Okay.”
Mother paused, then lit up, and patted the chair again. “Good girl, my sweet little Switch, I knew you would understand.”

Oh, I understood.

I sat in the chair and Mother hummed over me as she slowly peeled the tape from my forehead and revealed the hideous thing etched into my skull. I hated that switch. It was a source of great and awful power, and I hated what it meant, I hated carrying it around like a weight on my existence. But most of all, I hated that still, even now, out of all three-hundred and forty-eight switches in her house, she still didn’t understand mine.

Mother bounced over to the breaker and flipped it. The air in the attic grew stale, then thin, then ice cold. Otis popped into existence, and began melting the toads. The toads dripped into the pots, whose soil began steaming, and Mother fought her way through the shifting air back to where I remained seated, watching as arms, teeth, noses began to sprout. The world quickened, everything became high and tinny, like the world after a loud rock concert, or getting socked in the nose. Deformed heads lifted from the soil, dripping amniotic fluid from an ear on the forehead, a mouth on a knee, they groaned, Mama, Mama, Mama. Mother grabbed my head and tilted it back, wrapping her clawed fingers about the switch on my forehead. There was a shift inside me, a sickness of disgust and calm as she broke every boundary I had spent years building.

And the floodgates opened.

By the end Mother got what she wanted. Four, perfectly formed Pauls, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the attic. Toads hopped into their laps, their hair. Otis floated over to me and I collected him onto my shoulder and scratched his head while Mother inspected the Pauls.

“Did it work?” she asked.
“Did it work?” all four repeated at once.

“I don’t get it, it should have worked,” she frowned, poking at one.

“I don’t get it, it should have worked,” the Pauls said.

“You can’t replace Paul.”

“You can’t replace Paul.”

“I wasn’t trying to replace him, I just want him back,” she groaned and fell to the floor, hugging at one of the Pauls. It reached into air and tried to hug her back but missed. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I just want my Paul back.”

I pulled out my phone and walked over to her. Bent down.

There was no Switch for what she wanted. Not even me. A wish I couldn’t grant. A mess I couldn’t clean. Just like my Mother. And it killed me.

END
Now

Walter leaned against the chain-link fence at Oakwood Memorial Park, tossing a lemon in a high looping arc, waiting for his grandmother’s funeral to begin. Catch, throw. Catch, throw. It was a perfect Meyer, the kind that smelled of summer shade and Grandma. Catch, throw. It slipped through the air against the peeling paint sky. There was magic in that lemon, Walter knew the weight of its form, the dimple of its skin. He’d carried it a long way.

Grandma’s favorite color, Meyer Yellow. He wondered if there was a Crayon with that name. Immortalized in wax, children’s fingers. Crude drawings of suns in the corner of stock paper. He wondered if Grandma would’ve wanted to be immortalized with a meaningless headstone over an empty pine box. If Grandma would be gone forever. Forever was a long time.

Down below, among the crabgrass and headstones, his family gathered, all in black. They used fancy words, like estate, and presumption of death. What they meant was give up, move on, forget. Walter wouldn’t move on. Walter would never forget.

Next to him, between the crisping blades of grass, a stone. Forever. Stones were good at that, enduring forever. He was supposed to place that stone atop a grave today. A grave he didn’t believe in. A grave he didn’t agree with.

They asked him to write a eulogy. He’d written a confession instead. Words sprawled like tinker toys down the crumple of paper in his lap, smudged drifting lines down the page. They were good words. His family said it was going to be a good day. That this was celebration of life. The words were a confession. Ingrained. Memorized
He pressed the lemon to his lips, wanting to bite it, let the juice ripple through his teeth, his throat, his memory. The memories were sour, sweet. The memories were on the smudged page. All he had to do was read. It was going to be a good day.

“I first found magic in the lemon tree behind Grandma’s house.”

Then

The Yinkels didn’t often visit Grandma’s, but it was Hanukkah, and that was special. Walter sunk into the quilted bedspread of the guest room, huffing that Grandma smell, listening to the wild yapping of Grandma’s terrier Lassie as she announced their arrival. Walter’d never admit it to his friends at school, but Grandma’s place was cool. It was the elongated portraits of thin unsmiling people, and the towering amethyst geodes, and the clocks, the hundreds of clocks that seemed to tick at the very fabric of reality with their swinging pendulums behind glass cases. It was like a different world. It was like a landed UFO with all types of alien artifacts hidden inside. It was like home.

He loved Grandma’s house for all the stuff stuffed inside it, for the goofy dog, the clocks, the geodes, the springy mattress he hated. But he loved her house for one reason above all others. Grandma’s magic lemon tree.

It rose gallant over a pool more swampy Florida stew than crisp L.A. diamond. The lemon tree was big. Bigger than big, this Meyer giant curled its toes through split concrete and dirt alike, bending its gnarled knees to stand, to life the weight of the infinite sky with verdant palms stretched wide. And when you stepped under its branches and the concrete gave way to fresh black soil, everything smelled of lemons and earth and newness. It felt Walter belonged,
belonged under the wild, twisting branches laden with yellow fruit, sheltering him from the glaring Los Angeles sun.

The last time he’d gone down to Grandma’s house, Grandma’d appointed him Apprentice Lemon Wizard. Walter thought Grandma was crazy when she first told him there was magic in the lemon tree. He never would have believed Grandma’s nonsense-talk (he was old enough to know better now) if it wasn’t for the dimension-bending demonstration. Stepping through space and time like it was nothing but a trip to the bathroom. Grandma was crazy alright. Crazy cool.

She said the lemons at the edges, the ones that hung like a Joker’s cap’n’bells, weren’t ripe. She said Walt, the ripe ones were deep inside the heart of the tree, the ones that rested like jewels on the Queen’s earrings. And when Walter told Grandma there wasn’t a Queen in America, she just pinched his cheek and smiled. But Grandma was right, she was always right. There Walter was again, dutiful Apprentice, reaching up under the canopy so thick it rested like nighttime against the skin, not a Stephen King night, but a full moon nighttime, all flickering glowbugs and thimble-poke constellations. Reaching for a lemon that just might’ve been the moon in disguise. His fingers scraped its dimpled bottom and it swung just out of reach, goading him, so he stuck out his tongue and reached higher and harder and with all his might snatched for it.

It broke from the branch, slipped through his outstretched fingers, and split open against the ground at his feet.

Out of the lemon came slithering roots and vines and a great discordant orchestra of bells and cymbals and fanfare that cut peace at its base. Snaps fired against Walter’s eardrums as he backed away, eyes wide, branches falling, withering at his feet. A vine caught under his ankle, the world tipped as he fell backwards amongst the growing sea of vines and slammed his head
into the dirt. The canopy faded, purple-black scabs rippled through the air, one brushing against Walter’s arm, searing hot. A vine wrapped itself around his ankle he scratched and hacked at it with his overgrown fingernails, scream tight and choking in his throat, until it gave up and snaked away into the branches. Freed, head spinning, scrambled for the house, holding his burning arm against his chest, leaving the lemon tree to its chaotic rampage.

Now

“Hey Ralt.”

Walter looked up from the pages. Rebeca. She was on the hill with the height of the sun at her back, curling black hair worn like a shawl across her broad shoulders. He could still feel the sharpness of scrutiny in her gaze. Like daggers. Or generational trauma.

“Hey Webeca.”

A sigh. “We’re waiting for you, Walt.”

The lemon came to rest in his palm. Grandma’s lemon.

“And they can wait a little bit longer.”

The chain link rattled as Rebeca joined him. She was the patient one in the family. The one to get on the grass right next to Walt and try to see the world at his level. Walt loved her for that. He also hated her for that, the level-headedness, the logical security. She rested her head on his shoulder. Her thick, billowing curls cascaded around Walt, blocking the sun from his eyes.

“Putting it off isn’t going to change anything,” she whispered. “It’s going to be hard, we’ll get through it together. Five years. It’s time to set her free, yeah? So she can be at rest with Grandpa?”

“It’s wrong.”
“It’s life, dude.”

“No,” Walter threw up his hands. She didn’t get it, she didn’t understand. “I don’t mean wrong morally, or denial. I mean it’s incorrect. It’s not a correct thing, we’re doing.”

“Denial?”

He knew what she meant. It sure sounded like denial.

“You remember the song she sang us in bed? That’s Amore?”

Rebeca smiled. “I would practice it in bed, whisper it, even after she sang it to us. When you were snoring in the trundle bed.”

Walter laughed, wiping at tears. “When the moon hits your eye, like a big pizza pie. Dingalingaling. I didn’t snore, you were the snorer.”

“Like a little piggy. Oink oink.”

They watched the little smudges of black mill through the headstones. It was nice, the memory, but it wasn’t what he was trying to get at. How could he make Rebeca understand?

“You remember how sometimes, after singing to us, she would teach us some yiddish? There was this one, for when someone sneezed.”

“Sure, tzem laben, tzem langa yur, tzem gitten mazel. To life, to long years, to good luck I remember it.”

“To go down there, to read this,” he shook the paper in his hand, “to place this,” Walter set down the lemon and collected the flat, dull stone on the grass between them, “on her headstone. It would be wrong. It would be to deny the very thing that little phrase stood for. To a promise of a long life, a fulfilling life. You say it’s life to go down there, to accept her death is just a part of life, but what if it’s not?”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”
“What if,” Walter stumbled to a halt. Rebeca’s somber blue gaze peered out from the layers of curls, thin lips pressed white. Walter knew her limitless patience had its breaking point. He’d tested it often enough, he was testing it now.

*What if she’s not dead?*

Why was it so hard to say? Because it sounded crazy. It sounded horrible. It would cause Rebeca so much pain to even hear those words uttered.

“There I… read you something? I wrote it. For her funeral. Everything might make a little more sense. I might be *meshuganeh* but at least I’ll say it in a way that isn’t so…” Walter tapped the crumpled pages. “So bad. A little crazy, maybe.”

Rebeca glanced down the grassy slope, where the Yinkels waited under a towering oak. Where Grandma was waiting.

“Sure, Walt.”

*Then*

Inside, all seemed normal. Grandma and Mom were already bickering in the white linoleum kitchen, Dad lounging in the overstuffed sienna sofa, tapping away at his Blackberry. An oversized grandfather clock stood watch over the tumble of presents under the ashen fireplace. Behind the gifts from her filthy dog bed, Lassie thumped her tail in welcome as Walter staggered through the back door. Walter, still reeling from the dropped lemon, staggered over and collapsed next to her, head on dog-chest, dirt and all. Lassie whined and Walter buried his face deeper into her fur.
It was Grandma who found him there. She had no problem getting right down on the dog bed herself, propping her head against Lassie’s waggling butt and saying what’s cooking good looking, you done forgot to say hi to your old Gram. Meshuganeh, Meshuganeh, my crazy boy, I’ve missed you kid.

From the depths of Lassie’s fur he muttered, missed you too Grandma.

Have you been good to your mom?

Yeah.

Have you been practicing your piano?

Every day.

So if everything’s so good, you gonna tell Grandma why you’ve the shpilkes?

Walter refused to look Grandma in her razorblade eyes. He knew they could cut the truth out of you with a blink. He didn’t want her to be mad at him for the lemon, especially when he hadn’t even said hello to her first. He’d only wanted to bring her a lemon from the tree, just so she would be reminded of their lemon bond. Instead he messed up, like he always seemed to do. He didn’t want her to stop loving him, so instead of the truth, he asked her what shpilkes was. She told him all the jittery things coming off your body making Lassie all scared.

Walter apologized to Lassie for giving her the shpilkes and Grandma laughed a high tinkling laugh.

She still eked the truth out of Walter eventually, he could never lie to her for long. He apologized profusely, swore never to drop another lemon. She just clucked and told him not to make promises he couldn’t be sure to keep unbroken. And Walter shut up. A nugget like that was when Grandma started to say real things, things only people like Grandma knew.
She said it was okay that a lemon fell, accidents were a part of life. It was important to see what would happen if he wasn’t careful. There was wildness and danger in all things with power. But that was why I chose you to be my Apprentice Lemon Wizard, because there was a wildness inside of you too, a thing we call _mishigas_. That’s why I call you _Meshugge_. Wild boy, crazy boy.

Look, kid, there’s a little bit of _mishigas_ in everyone, and everyone handles it a little bit different, the happiness and the sadness and the everything in between, but it’s when you take that _mishigas_, that craziness inside of you and build something of it is when life becomes worth living just a _titch_ more.

Now Grandma was off on some crazy tangent that Walter didn’t quite get but he nodded anyway and wiped at the tears on his face. She said to him very seriously, can I show you something? And he nodded, wondering where the tears had come from. He was such a baby sometimes. They stood up after patting Lassie one more time, and she led him to the backyard.

He wanted to tell Grandma to stop, that the vines would grab them and throw them in her Florida swamp pool and push them under until they couldn’t breathe. But his throat was still tight, and his tongue still heavy pushing up against his teeth, the grit of shame like superglue sandpaper. She pulled him with a vice-like grip under the tree, and together they stepped through the still-trembling vines. Grandma looked around and tutted.

You sure made a mess of things under here.

I know Grandma, I didn’t mean to, you know?

Ain’t nothin we can’t fix, _Meshugge_.

With gentle tenderness she went from branch to trembling branch, practical patience, soothing vines away with the softness of her touch, coaxing them back into the ground, tidy roots. She did it cooing, whispering, just like she’d done to calm Walter.

She pulled a lemon free. Slipped a switchblade from her back pocket, flicked it sharp. She was precise with her cuts, squaring off the first chunk, clean, intentional. It came free. She slipped the knife back into the shadows of her jacket, wrapped her arm around Walter’s shoulders. She smelled like leather and lemons. Walter thought there might’ve been no greater smell in the world. With a squeeze of her thumb, Grandma made a swipe across the air that left the space in front of them blurry. Juice from the lemon dripped from the air and slid slow motion toward the dirt, smoking on its way down, lines that became cracks, cracks that faded into somewhere Else.

Grandma reached in and pulled out a slice of lemon merengue pie on a plate, a fork stuck in the top. She handed it to Walter, who took a bite. The shivers of flavor exploded down his jaw. He grinned a yellow lemony grin.

From my favorite diner in the universe. Outside of LA on the 101, baked the very morning I met your Grandpa, nineteen-fifty-three.

He asked if she pulled a lemon pie from the same diner she met Grandpa at, why she didn’t just pull Grandpa out too and let him have Hanukkah with the whole family?

Grandma’s eyes fogged over, pulled him a bit closer, snagged the fork from his fingers and took a bite of pie herself.

You treat these lemons with love and they’ll give you the sweetest lemon pie you ever tasted. Same goes for the opposite, Walter. Inside here, she tapped the rind of the lemon, and here, and tapped the front of Walter’s shirt. You treat this power with selfish abandon, the whole
world could just rip apart. If we plucked Grandpa from that diner, maybe him and I never would meet. You might stop existing in a spick and span pass of a moment. This whole family could pop out of existence. Magic is about balance, Walt, about finding your center, just like life. You can’t have all good all the time, otherwise life wouldn’t work as it’s meant to. Play by the rules, give back when you can, because taking all has a cost. No matter how much I miss your Grandpa, I think he’d be a bit grumpy to get pulled from eternal rest. He was always a big napper, lazy bastard. Besides, he lives on, you could say he’s in this cake right now. In the way my brain wondered if he left the toilet seat up again just now. See?

That made a lot of sense to Walter. The tree must’ve been angry he didn’t treat it’s magic with care the way Grandma did. He’d taken without care. He had a lot to learn before he was a true Lemon Wizard.

Grandma sat back against the tree and patted one of its branches. It seemed to shiver with delight, leaned into her hand, like Lassie did for a good scratching. Walter had never seen her like this, so comfortable and powerful. Walter reached out, hesitantly, and placed it against the trunk of the tree, next to where Grandma’s rested, blue-veined and twisted. The tree tensed, then calmed, warmed to his touch. Grandma smiled, took his hand in hers. Squeezed love into it.

When I met your Grandpa, I took him under this tree and showed him the lemons, the magic inside them. I was scared he’d think I was a bag of pistachios, but he only said he was nuts in love with me. So I took him to my favorite place in the whole universe, a world where everything is spaghetti.

Spaghetti, for real? Walter’s eyes widened. Can you take me there? Please?

Someday soon, Meshugge. I only wish the two of you could have met. The greatest men in my life.
Gross, Walter said, but was all laughing and smiling, and knew his dropping of the lemon forgiven.

Alright sugar, whadd’ya say we get back inside, there’s a long day ahead, family and presents and all types of Yinkel fun.

I love you, Grandma.

Love you too, kid.

Now

Rebeca took the lemon from his hands. Walter tensed, stopped his story. He swallowed it all down as it biled to the surface, that terrible impulse to snatch it back, to speak nasty words into existence that might send her away. She turned the lemon about gently. “Did Grandma ever tell you the story of where the lemon tree came from?”

Walter blinked. Shook his head. If he opened his mouth he was scared of what he might say.

“It started with Bubbe, you remember her? All grouchy and old and too few teeth? Bubbe came from the shtetls between Belarus and Poland, where there was a cave. Inside it the most magnificent Meyer lemon tree the world had ever seen. Bubbe and her twelve sisters found it when they were young. Built a business with it, lemon soaps and scrubs and candles. Shipped it all over Europe. They were practically famous. But then there was a silent death from the West, coming from Germany, rolling over country lines with tank treads and the stamp of black boots in the mud, that knew nothing but hatred for Jews. So Bubbe ran for America with nothing but her twelve sisters and some lemons with seeds stored inside. And she carried those lemons West,
planting her sisters and their trees along the way, until she planted herself in the city of angels, and planted her lemon tree right in the backyard, where it’s been ever since.”

Grandma never told Walt any of this. “How do you know all that?”

“Because she told me. I was her Historian.”

“Historian?”

“When I was younger, Grandma sat me down and asked if I wanted to be a part of the family. Have a bigger part in all of it. She told me I had a steadfast mind that was perfect for a job. Then she told me everything she knew. Where we came from. How we escaped. The faces of the people that chased us.”

“And the magic?”

Rebeca faltered. “So not everything.”

Walter felt a small spiral of relief course through his stomach. For a second, he’d thought… He’d thought it wasn’t so special, knowing about the lemon tree. The magic inside it. Shame bloomed after it. Here was his sister, sharing with him, and his first thoughts were about himself. Had he learned nothing?

“Do you think the tree is still there? The one in the cave?”

Rebeca handed the lemon back to Walter. The cool rind was comforting in his palms. His shaking fingers calmed against its waxen curve.

“I think people destroy what they don’t understand, Walter. That’s why it’s important to carry history forward. To remember the past, so we can keep it alive. Tell me the rest of your story, Walt.”

And he did.
Then

It was late that same day, witching hour for the Lemon Witch and her faithful Apprentice. The two stayed awake to witness the holiday flames melt to their candelabrum base. The rest of the family, tired after the bright dance of celebration, had melted back to their rooms, spent candles. Walter squinted at the Scrabble board, chewing his lip. Next to him, his new Playstation Portable. He’d played his eyes dry, hacking and slashing monsters to pieces, until Grandma suggested they play a late night game. It was tradition to play, just the two of them. Grandma was good, but Walter was better. The only sound were the faint click of Scrabble tiles as Walter placed *brusque* along a triple word line for 82 points.

Oh, you little shit, where does a *khokhem* learn a word like brusque?

Walter grinned and thought, you Grandma, you taught me these words. He’d always been great with words, but only because he’d been playing word games with her for as long as he could remember. One of his earliest memories was on a walk with her, and she’d point out objects and say their names. *Pomeranian, poodle, pug. Jay, crow, robin. Pine, cedar, cypress.*

She scratched an itch by her scrunched nose, smiled and shook her head, then set down *ware* for 12. Alright I think that’s enough, *Meshugge,* you got me, and she leaned back in defeat.

Say, Grandma? Walter asked, fiddling with one of the pieces in his rack, an M, tracing its etched wood lines, three points.

*Yes, Meshugge?*

Would you show me more about the lemons?

Bah. It’s late. Let’s clean up.

But I won Scrabble! And Grandma shot him a glaring bleed of a look across the table and said and you best act a good sport about it too, kid.
Walter ducked his head. Sorry.
Come on, I’ll tuck you into bed.
Rebeca got the good bed again.
She’s just older than you. Just how things’ll be.
I wish I was older.
Don’t be so quick to say that. If you’re older, I’m older, and I’m old enough, yeah?
That’s silly Grandma, you’ll live forever.
Grandma didn’t respond to that as they walked into the bedroom where Rebeca was already fast asleep, jaw slung open, drool dripping onto her pillow.

Gross, Walter whispered to Grandma as she pulled back the sheets to the trundle bed and gave him a little head nod that said in you go, Crazy. When she had tucked the sheets tight against his body, she pinched his cheek and kissed the top of his forehead. Walter thought he was getting a little too old to get tucked in by Grandma, but he let it happen anyway.

Goodnight crazy one. I love you very much.

Goodnight Grandma.

She left the bedroom, leaving Walter to the echoing snores of Rebeca rattling the walls, the insistent clicking of clocks tapping their impatient toes against the passage of time. Walter stared at the ceiling, tapping his own toes against the metal foot of the trundle bed. If you’re older, I’m older. Was Grandma old? It seemed like she’d been the same age as long as he’d been alive. She was an ageless thing, an immortal witch. She must’ve lived lifetimes before she’d even sat Walter down to his first Scrabble game. He wondered who had taught her the game first. Who taught her magic. The magic, the lemon magic. If only he could see it again. If only.
Only then he realized he’d left his new Playstation sitting on the dinner table, next to the Scrabble box. It would only take a second. Just the Playstation.

Walter waited until the house was silent, except for the clocks, and Rebeca’s snores, then untucked Grandma’s work and slipped out into the hall, and padded across the wood flooring. Lassie rose her head from sleep. Thumped her tail against the floor. Walter placed his finger to his lips and patted Lassie as he passed by and into the kitchen. She let out a soft whine, then went back to sleep.

As he scooped up the black device from the table and turned to leave, the moonlight struck through the pane glass door to the back yard. To the lemon tree. Its leaves waved to him across the pool. An invitation

The thought of new worlds and monster slaying and spaghetti people and low gravity fields and edible rocks and flat planets filled his overzealous mind. He would never tell, and he needed the practice anyway. He had a long way to go before he was a Lemon Wizard like Grandma. Practice was necessary. Required, even. He had the Playstation for a light. Walter slipped into one of Grandma’s threadbare cotton jackets hanging from the back of a kitchen chair, a little small, but comforting in that faint draft of lemon and leather coming from it. He had Grandma’s protection.

Playstation in hand, silently whirring as it splayed a soft white light from its screen, he edged his way through the back door and into the night, bare feet padding across the cold stone. The moon was a full, watchful eye, a cloudless night, the barest chill resting across the yard.

The lemon tree greeted him with a certain coldness, an icy stillness. The lemons seemed to shrink away into its boughs, pulling themselves out of reach of his outstretched fingers. He had to settle for a lemon on the ground, near the edges of the tree, half split from the impact.
Walter began the incantation in the best imitation of Grandma, just without a knife, and a second free hand. He drove his thumb into the fleshy insides of the lemon. It came away glistening. He rubbed at the air in front of him like wiping a mirror down, and when the faint glowing form of a portal began to take shape he grinned. It was real, it was real and he could do it without anybody’s help.

The lemon juice slipped down the air, smoky tendrils curling away into the swaying branches. The air wavered in front of him, then faded away to black. He poked his head inside the portal. It smelled alright, a little funky, like Mom’s special (not so special) hot dog casserole, but it was dark as all heck. The PlayStation light would have to do.

Now

Rebeca’s hand landed on Walter’s shoulder. He stopped. The itch to finish gnawed at him. So close now, then she would know, she would understand that maybe there was a chance… Maybe she was still alive, that maybe Grandma was still out there. Walter set down the paper and went for the lemon at his side. It almost never left his sight. Without it he was lost. Without it, Grandma was lost. He looked to Rebeca expectantly, who scraped her fingers through the layers of browned crabgrass and refused to meet his gaze.

Rebeca shifted. “Is this another one of your stories?”

“This was Hanukkah, five years ago, before—”

“The earthquake.”

“It wasn’t an earthquake, Rebeca,” Walter jabbed, “that’s what I’m trying to tell you, this isn’t some stupid news story. ‘Sinkhole opens below pool after localized earthquake, one feared
‘missing’,” Walt repeated the headline they’d shown him when he awakened at Los Robles Regional. A grainy picture under the headline had depicted a tilted house overlooking the gaping maw where the backyard had been. It hardly looked like Grandma’s house at all. Where was the pool? The lemon tree? “What a load of crap. Did it explain why I didn’t have a scratch on me, or… or why I was found and Grandma wasn’t? If you just let me finish…” Walter trailed off.

Rebeca shook her head. Plucked grass, shredded it between her black-painted nails. “Look, I know what you must’ve seen was awful. Everyone was asleep, you and Grandma were the only ones in the backyard when it happened, and I’m sure what you may or may not have seen could cause you to make up this st—” She turned away, wiped at her face. Was she crying? Rebeca never cried. “There’s something I never told you.”

Echoes of the benistral den skittered across his vision, through his belly. He shook his head. Maybe he didn’t want to know what she had to say. Maybe it was better not to know.

Rebeca swallowed and took him by the shoulders. “I felt it before everyone else. I woke up that night.”

What? “You never wake up.” It was true, Rebeca slept like a rock. Rebeca snored, and drooled on her pillow. Rebeca slept on planes and through fires.

“I saw you weren’t in your bed. I went to look for you. And I saw you in the backyard. Under the tree.”

Walter leaned back. She’d seen what happened?

“I saw you collapse through the ground, beneath the tree, with the tree. I thought… I’ve never screamed like that in my life. I found you hanging at the edge of an abyss, and you were crazy, spouting wild nonsense about how you had to go back, and how you were sorry. And to not touch that,” Rebeca directed a thumb at the Meyer in Walter’s hand, “lemon. Grandma
wasn’t there. I know Grandma wasn’t there, Walter. I remember thinking she was in bed, along with everyone else. It wasn’t until much later did we… realize what must have happened. I don’t know what happened between you and Grandma before the shake. But that’s my reality. My reality. *I pulled you out of that hole, Walt. I believe you. I know you were the only one in the backyard that night.*”

Was it true?

Rebeca reached down and picked up the stone sitting between them and turned it about in her hand. It was a flat and smooth, an eternal grey. She extended the stone to Walter. *Take it,* her gaze said. It would never change, it would take years, decades, millennia for it to fade and change into something else. That was the point of placing stones on the gravestones of Jews. Flowers fade, die, change quickly. Stones are beautiful in their eternality, their unchanging fortitude. Like Rebeca. Like Grandma. *I believe you, Walt.* Then why was she not on his side? Why was she holding the stone out to him? That stone was an enemy. The enemy. Walter gripped the lemon tighter in his fist.

Maybe he was crazy. Maybe he was full of fehkakta, just like Grandma had said.

“This finish your story Walt.”

*Then*

It was much darker than Walter anticipated. Thick too, stale, rancid, like asparagus and spoiled milk. The air washed about him like a stew on boil, bubbling, heavy wheezes, in, out, in, out. The light from the Playstation was nearly useless.
There seemed to be a faint light in the distance, a soft glow of lesser black not as oppressive as the rest. He stepped out of the portal and struck out in that direction. The ground was slimy underfoot, viscous like snot. The light from the Playstation shivered.

He was starting to sweat, and wiping the moisture from his brow, when the first rattling clicks ripped through the darkness. Clicliclicliclick, followed by a long, droning whine. Walter’s stomach dropped. Suddenly he didn’t feel like exploring so much, and turned to leave, but couldn’t see the portal anywhere. Just dark. Black. The Playstation’s backlight sputtered. The clicks came again, closer this time. This wasn’t fun at all anymore. Walter turned and began to run back toward where he thought the portal was, but slipped, his chin bounced hard against the sliming floor.

The lemon in his hand flew off into the darkness, the Playstation quit on impact with the oozing ground. His ears rung, his tongue tasted like metal. Walter began to cry as the clicks came again between the twisted dizziness, even closer this time. He didn’t mean to do anything bad, and now the lemon was gone and he was all soaking wet with this weird slime on the ground, and his tongue hurt really bad and he just wanted to go home, he just wanted to see Grandma.

Click, whine, click whine, the sounds came again, faster this time, excitement, excitement. Right above him. He was sobbing and snuffling like a little baby and he knew he should be stronger and be a brave Lemon Wizard Apprentice but this place was scary, and it was so dark.

Walter pounded at the stupid Playstation over and over, willing it to work, and like some dark miracle, it shone bright for the briefest moment, its final swan song, and cut the darkness in half. Walter wished it hadn’t. There was something on the ceiling, hanging from sliming,

This was what facing death was like. Alone. Cold. Screaming into the abyss. A ten-year old should never have to see such things. The flashlight died. A chitter of triumph erupted next to his ear. Walter screamed into death.

A flash of light and the entire tunnel flew ablaze. There Grandma was, huffing, eyes wide, grasping a lighter in one hand and a can of hairspray in the other. Frizzed hair wild, crisped at the ends. The thing launched itself to the ground, mandibles clacking together in rapid succession, a challenge of its own as the fire licked at the smoky darkness. Grandma stepped forward and the flame caught it, tasting one of its thousand searching eyes. Back, she roared, back, and the chittering whines erupted in screams, and the monster scuttled from the beast that could breathe flame.

Grandma, spluttered Walter, I’m sorry Grandma, I’m sorry.

_Fehkahkta_, she snarled, you’ve done turned it all to _fehkahkta_, get behind me now boy. Walter did as he was told, and she backed herself, and him, slowly, the grizzling flame whipping out of the little can. Was it Walter, or was the flame fading smaller? The alien screams echoed revenge down the cave walls, the dark shapes of reinforcements filed toward them. Walter slipped again, falling, but Grandma lifted him and pushed him back to his feet. The droning whine was deafening, the shapes in the darkness undulated, clicked, swept toward them, a wave. Grandma released the can, turned and launched them back through a portal, back into safety.

It was quiet in the backyard, under the lemon tree. A slight wind rustled the leaves overhead. The moon still watched, staring down at the young boy, sputtering, confused.
“I’m sorry Grandma, I’m sorry,” Walter repeated. Tears blurred his vision, snot ran down over his lips. “Grandma?” She didn’t respond.

“Grandma?” His voice echoed out into the night. He could have sworn she was just right behind him. But there was no portal, no Grandma. Just the tree. And Walter.

This was all just another lesson. Wasn’t it?

He tottered around the base of the tree, dazed. He called out again, and again.

Walter turned to the tree. It was all its fault. He glared at it through the snot, the tears.

“You stupid thing, you stupid tree, give her back, give back my Grandma. I didn’t mean it, I swear I didn’t mean it, just give her back, please let me go back, please give me the magic, tree, please, tree, I swear I’ll rip out your roots and cut you into pieces, I’ll, I’ll…” Walter bashed his fists against the trunk, cold, rough, an inert thing. “To hell with you, to hell with this house, to hell with your stupid magic, just give,” Strike “Me” Strike “Back” Strike “My” Strike “Grandma…” But it was no use. The tree would not listen. He settled against its side, heaving.

What could he do, what could he…

Walter ripped the closest lemon hanging near him from its place among the branches. He had to go back. The rind peeled back against his desperate, trembling fingers. But when he squeezed the juice from its pulp, pungent liquid running down his wrist, under Grandma’s jacket, the portal refused to open. He sobbed again. It must have been a dud, one with no magic. Again, then, again until it worked.

As he ripped another fruit from its branches. The night sky paled mauve as a portal opened, then another. Eyes, watching, through the cracks in the branches. Walter didn’t notice. He snatched another and stuffed it into the pockets of the threadbare pockets. He would take as many lemons as it would take. As many as it required to get her back. More eyes, more
dimensions sprouted across the yard. In the pool, a jagged one swallowed up the scum. Another blotted out the moon, a third set fire to the rose bushes along the fence. So many realities now, a dozen, dozens, dotted like ants, like wounds.

He ripped and took from the tree, just as it had taken from him.

Cracks tattered the sky, flashes of lightning streaked ozone through his nostrils. The Lemon Tree shifted on its roots. Walter toppled back as the tree lurched beneath him. Tilted. The lemons on the tree molded, dripped, fell away in chunks, folded on themselves as the branches withered, the billowing leaves faded, green to grey to black. A great rip in Reality opened below him, a gash that grew and grew black and red and angry. It swallowed the tree whole.

Walter watched the tree crumble, fall into that jagged, purple mouth of Unreality. Only then he realized what he’d done.

Then he fell through Reality too.

Now

Five years. There was no magic without Grandma, without the tree. After he’d recovered and left the hospital, things slowly went back to normal. That was the way of things, time caused people to forget, return to routine. But Walter spent most of his days buried in the center of fantasy novels, reading their pages like recipes, looking for answers, for a way to find Grandma and pull her from Elsewhere. He thought about her every day, that final anger in her face. He had few friends, he ate little, the door to his room closed to his family, behind it books strewn over the carpeted floors, notes on witchcraft sprouted from their folded ears. Five years, he spent searching. Five years, no luck. Grandma was somewhere out there, and it was all his fault.
Did Rebeca save him from falling? Would he have been in some strange world, or maybe back with Grandma in the benistral den? Could he have saved her? He remembered the swarm, a dark wave along the walls. He swallowed. Rebeca believed him after all? Why did it feel like it changed nothing at all?

He always hoped Grandma’d escaped in the universe of things all spaghetti, using the last of her lemon, but he had his doubts. *The tree doesn’t like to be harvested in anger.* When he woke up, at Los Robles Regional, it wasn’t Grandma sitting next to his bed, asking what’s cooking good looking. It was a lemon, this lemon, the lemon in his hand, the last of the magic.

There was a law in California, one that stated after five years a missing person could be declared legally deceased. That their estate could pass on to the family, that their memory could be put to rest. Five years, and the family returned to Thousand Oaks to do just that. And to come back here, to write her *eulogy*, was to pronounce her dead. To give up. Walking down that hill to the open grave, to the empty casket, it was the final steps. To accept her fate, and accept his role in it.

“She wasn’t angry, in those last few minutes. I thought she was angry, but she was scared. Scared for my life. Terrified it would be her fault, that she would’ve done something so irreparable to our family. I understand that now, because I feel it every day.” Walter gripped at the lemon harder, willing the tears marring his vision to go away, but the heat of his cheeks were too much, and tears flowed down wet and thick onto his suit.

Rebeca was staring at the lemon intently. Turning the stone over and over across the black paint of her nails. Rebeca was always the logical one. Not an ounce of *mishigas* in her body, always choosing the best times to fall silent, think, not let situation boil over and out of the
realm of calm and logic. Finally she pointed down the grassy hill towards the milling forms of black through the headstones.

“Your see all them down there?”

“Sure.”

“You know who they are?” Walter pursed his lips and glanced sideways at Rebeca. It was a leading question. He shrugged. “They’re your family, too. I’m your family. And today, we’re together as a family, to do something important,” she reached and plucked the stone out of the grass and shook it in front of her face, “to put aside our perspectives, our egos and realities, and little quarrels with each other. It’s not all about Grandma, not anymore. It’s about pulling each other out of the hole we’ve all fallen into the last five years.” This made Walter start, and really stare at Rebeca. She was nodding, saying things in the way that Grandma might have, so long ago. “Because we all fell into that hole. Not just you. Whether Grandma is ten dimensions away or ten feet, if you can’t find her, you know where we are. We’re here. We’re now.”

“But it’s possible. She found me. She found me in the darkness when I couldn’t find myself. She could manipulate time, space. I could too, I could find her but… she never taught me how.”

Rebeca stood up and tossed the stone down to Walter, who caught it. Lemon in one hand, stone in the other. “Sure she did, Walt. It’s what she was always doing. Like she did with me when she taught me our family’s history.” His sister began to walk down the hill then stopped and turned back. “I won’t force you to do anything, you’ve always gone your own way. It’s how you’ve always been. But I hope you’ll join us. The family needs its Lemon Wizard.”

With that she was gone, before he could ask what she meant, leaving Walter alone, against the chain-link fence at Oakwood Memorial Cemetery, holding a stone, and a lemon.
They were heavy, but Walter realized he’d carried them here. It was only a choice to set them aside. To release yourself of that weight. His hands had been full for too long.

Life was about balance, about finding your center. Someone wise told him that once. He squeezed the stone in one hand, the lemon in the other. That stone would find its place among the rest, above that empty pine box. And the lemon? He would split open that lemon, pull the seeds from its fleshy center, plant them deep in the soil. Watch as leaves sprung from new ground. He would care for the saplings like Grandma had. Get right down on the ground and say what’s cookin’ good lookin. He would find a bit of magic, a bit of *mishigas*, in the lemons that sprung from those Meyer branches.
The Caretaker

The day Yuri left for the woods, a text appeared in his inbox. It read simply: *issues with plumbing – left early – all yours*; Annabelle was always simple with her words. He wondered sometimes if she was the novelist and not he. It was from his recently estranged, the one he was meant to spend the better part of fall with, at a cabin in the old country of Steinbeck’s youth. The idea was simple: search for inspiration from those long dead literary minds so that he might finish his novel, the other romantic miscarriage of his life, the uninspired, lackwit, overcomplex literary misfit of a tome.

And like that simplistic, barbaric, flat wasteland of pages, he secretly hoped for more in that text from *her*, searching the few words for clues of furthering subtext, an idea beyond a simple exchange of information. But knew there would never be. It was her that cast Yuri off, and so it would always be. And so he was left with two things: an unfinished novel, and a small cabin in the woods for the fall.

Cast off to that child of divorce tucked in the winding green-gold stretching hillsides that swallow you with every gentle curve, into the belly of mother California, away from the noise and into the silent rapture of rural woodland. The cabin looked to have seen its best days long ago, cracked brick and faded wood, it stood on the precipice of the Guerneville hillside amongst the sycamore and alder. A crude icon of the Virgin Mary greeted Yuri at the base of a dozen and more crumbling wood steps, her hands pressed in peace, matronly dress a layered cowl of sienna mosses, dead or dying. He would have flipped her off if not for the bags weighing down his hands. The house was aged and drooping as he went up to it, but stoic as well, like a
grandfather who knew more but said little. It invited silence only because it knew noise to be phallic and boisterous.

He promised himself he would learn to love the silence. He’d grown used to the comfort of screaming, of heated argument, of red-faced noise. And none of that would be here, only silence. Focus. It was a tall task but a one given to him by a life left behind and a fragment still smoldering among the ashes. They, when they were they, had rented the place months before, when they still considered escapes into strange places a door to which they might finally reclaim love. By they he meant she. She booked this glamorous adventure, she booked this trip into silence, she she left him. Only, they’d paid the deposit. It seemed such a waste, not to use it. This fragment, this cabin in the woods.

Yuri would be here until the break of Christmas, and he would learn to love the silence, and the books he brought, and the desperate mediocrity of the words from his fingers. His ears still rang from the city, the confinement of a too small studio in Oakland, small enough to step on toes and on throats. But maybe this place would quiet them. Maybe this was the escape he needed to find new life, new inspiration. When he climbed the final step to a bent and cracked patio, his name rang out in the most peculiar manner, a high-tinny drawl meant for children, or cats. A curious tune followed it, a bird-in-a-cage crescendo of ups and downs.

The Caretaker was a heavyset matronly type—thick boxer arms crossed under an asexual chest and over a shapeless cotton shift that did not ask much except to direct his attention toward her cunning eyes. A hawkish nose. A floating curl of white hair. She smiled and welcomed me, he noted an off-color tooth and receding gum lines, and resisted the urge to tongue his own in disgust. She must have been watching all the way as he climbed those steps under duress of backpack and suitcase and duffel, from atop the tree-shaded veranda. The
Caretaker leaned against a rusted, paint-peeling chair whose cushion was so flat and bent he knew it would be no comfort to sit there like he had imagined from the pictures. Yuri dreamt of dexterous fingers dancing across black keys, consuming all that the landscape offered his hungry eye. Instead, Yuri looked at this Caretaker and her strange, tilted grin.

She welcomed him, in a huffing tilted voice, took his luggage and dragged it up along the brick walk and into a waiting doorway. He followed her silently. She pulled the suitcase and duffel into the foyer and dropped them in a heap on the rust and royal carpet. She stood there, in the center of the wood slat walls and antique sculptures of swans and busts of female torsos and candlesticks of every color, metal, shape you could imagine, watching me, appraising, waiting for something.

“It’s a wonderful place,” he nodded at the candelabras arranged against walls and along surfaces. Once he said it she seemed to relax, the lush folds below her eyes flushed red. A pair of vintage skis rested in the corner, under the stairs up to the master bedroom. Yuri thought it odd, to have skis in the wine country. A faint rumbling behind a closed door caught his attention. “Annabelle mentioned something in a text about plumbing?”

“Oh, yes, yes there were some issues, the girls, the four of them they did as girls do,” She gestured for him to follow through the closed door. A bathroom lay behind it that smelled of rust and new paint. A washing machine twisted, twisted, twisted through a cycle. “Annabelle mentioned you write?”

“Yes, the reason for our, my visit,” Yuri’s gaze drifted through the house, noticed the thick eddies of dust curl through the deep afternoon shafts of light. He would have to clean.

“A novel, then?”
“Yes,” his attention drifted back to where she stood in the doorway. Her smile had a queer uptick to it, her eyes eyeing me. “Yes, it’s in the works.”

“Do you mind if I asked what it was about, then, dear?”

He certainly did. “So many things to do with it. Literary highbrow nonsense, surely it wouldn’t be of your interest. I’ll just settle in, if that’s alright?”

“Right. Of course. I’d love to read it, if you’d be willing. You’re here a long time, almost a month, and it’s been so long since I’ve had a writer at the cabin.” He nodded, wishing to be away from her shining, eager eyes. He didn’t hear of any caretaker that would be living here. “Do you stay here?” He asked, going for his suitcase, starting to haul it up the rounded staircase. The house moaned and shifted with each upward advance.

“There’s a small cottage on property. Just right around the back of the house. Did… Did Annabelle not explain?” He nodded, as politely as he could, still holding luggage, wanting her very much to leave. Annabelle hadn’t said much to him lately. He thought he shouldn’t like anyone to speak to him for a long time, that was why he was there after all. He thought he would have complete silence, and already there would be another person on the property. He prayed to the moss-ridden Virgin that She would keep this caretaker far from him.

“Well,” the Caretaker seemed to sense his disdain and backed toward the door. She placed a card on the rounded dining table and tapped it. Looked around at the house, then shrugged. “Well, if you need anything, just ask. My card, just in case you need to call.”

She swept through the door and it slammed shut behind her, sending the whole house off shuddering. He watched her walk by the western-facing windows, cat-whisker lips puckered in silent tune.
The master bedroom was simple, a bed, a dresser, a small, frosted window. Yuri set his suitcase on the bed and looked from the window, but couldn’t see a cottage. It was getting dark. There might have been a ghost of a line just beyond the black and still blacker shadows of trees, but he couldn’t have been sure. He took some time to unpack his meager set of clothes; some jeans, basic shirts, the corduroy jacket that was a gift from his mother the previous year. This ritual took no more than a few minutes, and he was left in the silence of the large house, listening to the overture groans and sighs at the shift of his weight. Out of curiosity, he opened the nightstand drawers. That was when he found it, a folded piece of faded paper that settled dread deep into Yuri’s stomach. He recognized that paper with trembling fingers, pulling it from the wooden cubby, and pulled it open. His bird scratch scrawl echoed down the page, so recognizable. He knew the poem by heart, it was the first thing he’d ever written to Annabelle. There was only one new mark among the faded pen lines, a single dark scratch under the word believe.

He went downstairs, fixed a fire, sat in front, and stared at the curling flames through the chamber glass, holding the slip of poem in his hands, wondering if she meant it as a last thought. A final reminder. Believe? Believe what, what? He thought he might write, but what good would come from such a night, a night passing into the shadow of thirty? Tomorrow then, he would begin. Begin the end. It was his birthday, and he was alone, again. Funny thing, that.

And over the soft crackle of the blaze, and the melancholy tune of his heart, he thought he heard a humming, a faint melody, drifting down from an open window. By the morning, the poem had burned. A last kindling for the fading flame.
The rising sun laughed at Yuri from behind the fading cityscape of pine through the windows by the time he’d done a long, sweeping clean of the house. The dust, the crumpled dry of leaves in corners, all had to be removed before he could be comfortable in the space enough to write. It would be too late to embark on any kind of exploration of the surrounding area, the chores had swept the last dusting of morning away. Winter, always the sun rose too quickly, and set too soon. Yuri pulled out his notebook, and wrote that in the margins, the hard work had made the words actually flow slightly better than any time since the breakup. A trickle, instead of a dribble. He’d take what he could get. One sentence was better than nothing.

The first week had been mostly a wash, but that was natural. He always had a difficult time of settling into routine. But the majority of the mess had been cleaned from the place, the dust hiding in corners behind candelabras and stuffed geese. The pillows had hidden quite the armament of dust bunnies prepared to attack his sensitive nose. But things were now nearly as they should have been.

Yuri wiped his hands dry with a dish rag and left the kitchen, pulling a bottle of leftover wine from the previous tenant (how kind of her) out of the kitchen. He stood in the den, a cavernous, echoing place filled with wicker furniture, and tasted silence for the first time, upending the bottle of wine down his throat. Maybe a few more words might grace his presence tonight.

_Thump._

The sound echoed through the tranquility and he found the next swig of wine dripping down his stubble. Dark splotches spread down his wrinkled undershirt like a Rorschach. Yuri thought of his mother.
Thump.

It came again, rattling through the house. He was not so much a coward, but he hated jump scares, things that popped from the darkness, surprises. There was nothing worse than a thing so unexpected as to scare you. But only worse was the continued unease of the undiscovered thing that had scared you initially, and so he set the dripping bottle on the dining table, plucked an idle jacket from the back of a wicker chair and exited the cabin for the first time since arriving on property.

The air was brisk, the pine green was sharp in his nose; there was something discomfiting about that. Something real, tensile enough to bend about me, but brittle enough to break as Yuri stepped through it and across the mossy brick lain out in its tired, drooping manner. The thump came again and he followed around the back of the house, the crunch of dry brush underfoot was thunderous applause in his ears. He swallowed. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Only now did he consider how remote the cabin really was, how off the beaten path. Yuri thought of the car down the other side of the house, past Mossy Mary. The keys in the house. Should he have brought the iron poker he used to stoke the fire last night?

He rounded the final corner of the house. And through the trees, the glint of metal flashing in the sunshine. Arms like a boxer. Thump. She was humming that faint melody, the haunting echo of highs and lows.

“You’re about as graceful as a coon, and subtle as a deer in the road, dear.” That voice. The Caretaker. he approached cautiously, feeling summoned, cutting up a littered path, a small cottage no bigger than the kitchen of the main cabin slunk into view. Animal skulls littered its front porch. Thump. The Caretaker’s axe flew through the air again and came down on the waiting wood block. It split like soft cheese. The axe was pocked with rust, but the end glinted
sharp as anything. Yuri stood there, awkward, unsure what to say. The Caretaker silently loaded another wood block from the tumbling pile onto the stump and swung the axe with ease again. The halves dropped to the ground. Sweat dripped down her forehead, her plain ochre shirt soaked. “You finish settling in?”

He nodded. “Yes ma’am.”

“Again with that ma’am cockamamie. You stunk to high heaven, Lord Above could sniff last night’s booze on you.”

“Excuse me?” Who was this woman to comment on the private intake of alcohol in his own home?

“The booze. You a professional drinker, Yuri?”

“A writer. You know what Steinbeck said. Write drunk edit sober.” The Caretaker grunted and cleaved another head of wood. He flinched as the thump rang out.

“It was Hemingway that said that, the useless drunk.”

“I’m pretty sure it was Steinbeck,” he said, sporting a knowing grin, “that said that. You should know that, being in Steinbeck country and all.”

The Caretaker jabbed a finger in the direction of the cottage. “Got a whole shelf to prove you wrong. Drunk as a fish, he was, drowning all those demons. Steinbeck country, we’re a few miles north of all that.”

“You read?” he asked, now unsure who ventured to say ‘write drunk edit sober.’ Where was Steinbeck country, anyway? Wasn’t it here?

“Huh,” she grunted, strafing him with her cutting eyes, “the good stuff, anyway. None of that contemporary nonsense. What do you write, Yuri?”

“Literary fiction. The good stuff.”
She grunted, went back to chopping. “Contemporary nonsense, you mean.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Yuri’s voice cracked and he cleared it. “It’s high voice, true writing. As good as any Steinbeck. Or it will be, when I finish.”

“Contemporary nonsense, boy. You ain’t been through no war, no famine, your clothes look about two days old. You ain’t lived through nothing worth writing about yet. Look at you, all of two days wet behind the ears.”

“You don’t need to be shelled to near insanity like Vonnegut to write, respectfully, ma’am.” He’d had enough of this shit. Yuri turned to go, but her response stopped me.

“To write? No. Maybe not, you look like an educated enough boy. To write truth? Different side of things. Different side of the coin. You haven’t flipped that coin yet and bet your life on one of them faces. It’s in your face. It’s in your eyes.”

He was silent. Unsure what to say. Fuming, confused. She hadn’t known him all of two minutes and already making judgements on his writing.

“And you? Who are you to judge? Up here hiding in these woods, off on your own?” The words rang tinny, so false, so weak, defensive. He hated them. He hated himself in that moment.

She grunted, swung the axe down. Crack. “I’ve had an entire life before this, dearie. Was no stranger to truth. Funny, who come to stay here, they’re all similar in a way. Looking for escape, truth in a vacation from their life. They all have,” Crack, “the same flavor,” The Caretaker barked out a laugh and wiped the sweat from her gleaming eyes. Some kind of joke? “Me? I found my truth. My truth is out here, in the woods. Hiding, like you say. What’s your truth, dearie?”
Most frustrating was she wasn’t wrong. This trip was planned to be the next step in his life. The stopover, the escape from the big city, the fast paced job in sales. He sold software to software companies selling software to software companies. He drove a Tesla, even though he hated the gimmicky flat handles and the screen that was bigger than the windshield. He had climbing buddies he didn’t like, and drinking buddies even though he didn’t enjoy the taste of an IPA on the tongue, a hangover in the stomach. He took up golf, not because of the fraternity of it all, but because it was the only time that offered any respite, imagining his boss’s head as the little white ball, flying far far away. He kept his interests, his real interests to himself. The writing, the reading, the innate desire to keep bees on a remote knoll in the center of the UK someday. He liked bees. Bees helped people even though people stomped on bees. Shot bees with water guns. Yuri related to bees.

When he told Annabelle about the bees, she nodded, wise sage. When he told her about the bees, and the books, and the novel, and she asked him what he wanted to write, and he replied he would be like John Steinbeck one day, he saw the light in her eyes die.

_What’s your truth, dearie?_

_He knew his truth. Steinbeck is his truth. Steinbeck, Steinbeck. He thinks there is only one book to a man. It is true that a man may change or be so warped that he becomes another man and has another book, but I do not think that is so with me._

The Caretaker pointed the axe at him and he started to step back. She beckoned with it. “Come here.” It felt like a threat. There was weight behind it. Her eyes bored holes into Yuri’s conscience. A pair of robins chirped through the rustling woods. Yuri stepped forward. She nodded. “Go on. Take it. It won’t bite.”
**Take, the axe?** This madwoman in the woods, all by her lonesome, must’ve have dropped her marbles years back in the brush, and never bothered to find them again. Ridiculous, he should have been writing, not explaining the purpose of his drinking to this stranger. He took the axe, intending to explain the importance of his task to finish the novel, but he felt the heft of the metal in his hands, the smoothed grain of the handle. Heavy. Solid.

“All you kids these days, nothing but skin and bones, all smelling of formaldehyde. Step here.” The Caretaker placed a block of wood on the stump and stepped back. Before Yuri knew what he was doing he had taken her place and was taking aim at the wood before me. “Now swing. Strong. Strike it true. With confidence. The wood will know your weakness.”

He caught a flash of Yoda and Luke Skywalker in a swamp. He shook the specter away. All of this was ridiculous. But the sooner he gave the strange woman what she wanted, the faster she would leave him alone. The sooner he showed this crazy woman anyone could swing an axe in the forest, that he wasn’t some pretty boy with no voice, no strength, the faster he would be able to get back to the important work. The words were the important work. He took aim at the wood. Closed one eye. Hefted the axe back and swung it down into the wood.

The impact sent jolts up the lengths of Yuri’s arms, through his shoulders. Into the base of his skull. Yuri’s animal brain shook its Neanderthal stone tools and hooted, beat its chest. When he looked at the metal embedded in the wood, he deflated. The metal had only sunk a few inches into the block. The Caretaker walked up to it and dislodged the axe with one smooth motion, then handed it back to me.

“Good.” She nodded. “Come find me when you’ve finished the pile.”

“The whole pile?” He sputtered.
Her piercing gaze narrowed. Her iron thin lips pursed. “The whole pile. Sweat out the weakness Yuri. Sweat your truth.” She turned and climbed the steps to the cottage, and disappeared behind the screen door with a clatter. From inside, the sound of pots and pans.

***

The crack of wood became a ripple on a pond. Echoed. Tantalized. Hypnotized.

Of course Annabelle came to him, stepped across those ripples and stared at him through memories, arms folded, disapproving stare. The reason for the break was the same reason for the visit to the cabin. It was the reason for everything. The novel.

“If I was you, I would have finished that thing by now. If I was you, I would have had it done months ago. You know how I am; when I put my mind to something, I finish it. When will you finish, Yuri? I love your writing, everyone loves your writing, but all you do is stare at that computer, fiddle with it, complain about it. All while the dishes stack. You never do the dishes.”

That was the moment he realized he no longer loved her. Cared for her still, sure, a residual melancholy rubbed across the lenses of their life. But no longer love. It was the moment he considered if she ever loved him at all, or at the very base level understood him; after so many months, he’d long since ceased trying to understand her, her logical, asexual manner of looking at life. Not in so much as for a lack of sex but for a lack of sexual passion for the world, only a mechanical clicking toward the inevitability of death. Her motivation was indeed unwavering, her view of the world clear and sharp at the forefront of her mind. They argued about it often.
In a way he pitied her, in a way he deeply envied her. He wished… oh he wished it were all so simple. He wished with all his heart the pain that stabbed at his soul with every word that danced across the page. More than anything he wished it could be done. All done. But could it ever?

His excuse: “If only I could be away, away from everything. It’s so loud here, in this city. If only I could get away. Then I could focus. I need help.”

Her response: “So we’ll go away then.”

So simple. So simple an answer.

Simple as chopping wood.

***

The truth, Crack, was chopping wood led to an innate desire to chop heads. The Caretaker’s head, specifically. He could have stopped any time he liked, gone back to the house and shut himself in, writing his fury in long-winded spirals of diction, but he decided that would only make the Caretaker smug, women were always smug when they were right. She would see the unfinished pile in front of the cottage and think to herself, that Yuri, another failure, he could never write like Steinbeck, can’t even chop wood correctly.

It’d taken him an hour to get the cadence of the swing into a proper rhythm, and the angle of the axe head coming down clean enough to slice through the hardy oak blocks after two or three swings. After an hour his arms felt like rubber, but his body was like a rubber-band, snappy, an unending loop. He had become the axe. The sweat down his eyes. The dry, mossy bark flying from the blade. The anger flowed through him. The wood was his shit job, his shit ex,
his shit Roth IRA. But most of all it was the shit Caretaker, the Caretaker judging his writing without seeing it, without smelling the crisp mornings in the margins and feeling the crumpled bedsheets between a tangle of slow-twisting limbs in the dead of a turned page. He knew truth, he knew, Crack, truth.

The last log fell split on either side of the bashed stump. Yuri let the axe slump from his hands to the ground, his chest heaving. He realized he had been crying. Probably just a reaction from the pollen, the dusty earth flying from the chopped wood. He would need to take his Zyrtec. But first he would give the Caretaker a piece of his mind. Yuri could hear that damn humming from the cottage, the humming, the whistling, always in the back of his head, mocking.

Yuri climbed the steps to the drooping cottage and pounded the screen door until it rattled nearly off its hinges. The song stopped. Yuri paused his pounding and looked back across the small clearing. It was deathly silent without the chopping, the humming. A crow screamed through the twilight cutting across the back of the main house.

***

“The soup, it’s good isn’t it?” The Caretaker swung her matriarchal presence through the cabin, fetching more fuel for the wood furnace. The soup was thick, potato and cheese, rich with flavor that sent his eyes watering. His tongue burned, and he nodded his approval. Funny, how quickly the anger had faded when she offered him a bowl. His stomach, the traitor. Then she asked a peculiar question. “Do you have it?”

Startled, soup slipped from Yuri’s mouth and down his chin, burning.

“Have what?”
“The novel. With you.”

“Of course. I came here to write it.”

“Let me see it then.” The Caretaker held out a hand as if he’d magically had it in his back pocket. What a lunatic! To ask such a thing of a stranger, his most unruly thoughts, his most chaotic endeavors. This was only a first draft, no one would read a first draft. No one would want to, besides.

“I don’t have it on me, it’s back in the cabin. It’s not ready for public eyes yet, anyhow. I wouldn’t burden you with—”

“Oh, no burden, Yuri, no burden. I’d love to see it. An up and coming writer such as yourself, in my own home. A story in its own right. Get it. I’ll wait.” Her hand hadn’t left the space between them. Yuri felt a deep, curling terror inside him. She was serious, it was in those cunning eyes, shining, penetrating. It was fine, all he had to do was say no. Simple. So simple. He wasn’t ready, simply wasn’t ready. She’d understand.

“I’m not so sure. I just… I’m not sure. Thank you, really. It’s generous, the offer.”

“It’s not an offer Yuri. Bring me the manuscript.”

And it was there, in her eyes, the devious, cunning eyes. The truth, hidden behind those eyes. She was going to steal it from him. His ideas, his words. He’d heard stories, stories where people died, their colleagues mysteriously produced award-winning books only soon thereafter. It was genius, she would lure renters to her cabin, take their hard-earned work… no, no absurd. How could he think that, his mind, so scattered. She couldn’t be… another writer.

He laughed.

He laughed, and laughed when the thought coalesced. He laughed and took another hearty gulp of soup, then stopped. The soup, it’s good isn’t it? The question rattled in his mind.
She hadn’t… surely… surely she hadn’t poisoned the soup? He went for the water. It tasted like glass. There was a bottle open already, on the counter, in the cabin. He would wash it away, dilute it.

Yuri pushed himself from the chair, grabbed the back as his vision swam, stars fired disco gunshots across his vision. He laughed again.

“No, I’m sorry, I won’t let you see it. It’s too precious to me, see, and I’ve too much work to get done. Thank you for the dinner, and the woodcutting. It was… an interesting experience.”

He was very joyous, smiling from ear to ear, nearly shaking with the joke still rattling deep inside him. He could hardly maintain a straight face, staring at her own, stoic one. The taxidermy, the candelabras, all seemed suddenly so funny. Yuri bowed, stepping backwards, and ran out the screen door and across the shadowed darkness of the yard, back toward the safety of the cabin, where he drank, and drank, until he passed out, dreaming of the laughter of murderers, chopping rusty axes into fountain pens, their plastic gushing, gushing like blood.

***

He awoke with a blinding headache. That was good, the last thing he wanted was to see. And yet, he thought, stumbling down the stairs toward the rusted espresso machine in the kitchen. And yet. As the burbling machine steamed life into a mug he’d fished from the sink, he squinted through the window out at the rolling forests laden in morning’s light. And yet, sipping through a black shot, then a second. Around noon his resolve cracked. The first pair of crumpled Levi’s on the floor were empty, as were the second. In the left pocket of the third he found what
he was looking for. Peggy Hardaway. The name up at him from the business card. Peggy
Hardaway. He typed the name into a Google search on his phone, followed by writer.

It was as he’d thought. As he feared. The page was extensive. She had her own
Wikipedia page. The first ten images were of her, varying ages. The same cunning gaze stared
out from his phone, analyzing, evaluating. Guggenheim scholar. MacArthur grant. Eight
published novels. Thirty-seven stories, various awards. Phrases like modern classic and
contemporary masterpiece itched at his eyes. She damn well played him for a fool, all that
nonsense about contemporary dribble. She was contemporary dribble. He spent the afternoon
watching her BYU visiting lectures on YouTube; her pacing across a stage, expressive, engaging
with the rows filled with students in the lecture hall, their raised hands pressing toward the sky,
her fluid, sharp answers pressing at the base of his mind. His head hurt like a motherfucker.

He fished through the bathroom and found a bottle of Tylenol. Popped three. Her voice
vibrated against the walls at full blast as his empty stomach rejected the medicine into the toilet,
her descriptions of metaphor wormed their way through the curl of his cochlea, squirmed
through the ribbons of his brain. When it’d all finished, he remained lifeless on the cold tile
floor, curled about the toilet, the slow rattling gasps of his breathing filling the empty space
where her lectures had been.

And Annabelle. Had she known? A final joke, played in a final hand of cards? Would she
have done something so horrible? It seemed so unlikely, so unlike her. But this had been all her
idea, after all. The cabin, the woods, all save the novel, she’d been too insistent, he should’ve
known. A thirtieth birthday trip. Oh, how she tortured him still from the relationship grave!

He spent the next week checking locks on doors, listening for that pale whistle to come
haunting through an open window. Hell, he even sat down once to write, the scalpel scrape pen
across paper a distraction to the horror that lay just beyond in the autumn woods. Those words, created in fear, he burned that night, in the fireplace, watching the ink fade purple, orange, back to black — slowly sipping at the narrow neck of a bottle. The alcohol dwindled quickly - the wine went first, then the tequila, oh the tequila, how he danced on tables and wicker chairs that one night, screaming red-faced at the candelabras, the painted stuffed geese! How he regretted it in the morning. How he loved the pounding of his brain against the inner grooves of his skull, instead of the whispering words against the palette of his itching fingertips.

Annabelle came to visit, more than once, a ghostly vision, in his drunken rages. He’d argued with her silent figure, her crossed arms, her knowing gaze. He told her he knew, he knew what she would say to him if only she was here, oh how he wished she was here, just so she might tell him the truth, the truth that he already knew. Failure! Failure! Failure of a relationship, failure of deacon to the words inside your head, failure to step outside and only ask for help. Failure to ever ask for help from her. What did she know, anyway? He argued, he scraped at his own face to rid himself of her haunt.

When the alcohol ran out, he was hardly human. He’d fought every apparition until his throat rang raw. And then, too exhausted to be any longer capable of thought, head hanging, legs trembling with fatigue, half asleep, he settled into a shaken daze. There was no fight left in him. Only embarrassment.

The whistling continued to haunt the evenings, the mornings, his thoughts. Each time it rang out he retreated further and further into the house, up the rickety stairs, into the depths of unwashed sheets. Often a thought came to mind, *Could he still endure any other air than prison air?* Sometimes there was a knock at the door. Sometimes there was a second. Eventually she went away. Eventually she stopped coming to knock. Only then did he decide to escape, run. It
was afternoon and he was still in bed. The summer heat baked through the shut eastern windows. He shivered in a cold sweat. The air tasted of sallow death. He needed to get out.

He packed the bags in a rush, scooped shirts from the bedroom floor and stuffed them into the suitcase in the corner by the door. Gathered toiletries above the toilet into a plastic bag, ignoring the stains ringing the toilet, the sour taste in his throat. The screen door echoed behind him, a paper dart gunshot through the cobbled brick and down the frayed wooden steps, through the boughs of oak leaning over him, watching him take flight.

The trunk to his hatchback caught. It wouldn’t open. Damn thing wouldn’t open, things never worked as they should have, his attempts grew more wild and feral. The keys, the keys, he’d left the keys on the table in the den. Back up the stares, Virgin Mary glared at him from under her moss veil. A chittering squirrel sent crashing through the dry brush. His heavy, labored breathing as he stumbled up the steps and into the waiting arms of The Caretaker.

***

She held the axe, the rusted axe, that rust must have been blood after all, he thought, mind racing as she stared at him, brow raised, sweat dripping down the creased folds on her frowning cheeks.

He pushed at her. She barely moved.

“D-dont,” he moaned, stepping backwards.

Her beady eyes grazed past him.

“Are you leaving, dear? So soon?”
“P-please, it’s no good, its no,” the breath flew from his chest as his next step back met graceless air. He tumbled, back, back away from the Caretaker. The flash of green, of brown, leaves. Pain.

He came to, a face, concerned, leaning over him.

“Annabelle?”

“No, dear. It’s just me. Old Peggy. Good Lord above you gave me a fright, tumbling back like that over the stairs. Are you alright?”

The fear shot through the pain. He was trapped, hurt, this was the end then. Nowhere to run.

“Please don’t kill me,” he begged. Tears began to leak from his eyes. “The novel, it’s not worth it. Nothing is, please I see that now, I can be better, I just need more time. More time.”

“Kill you?” Peggy Hardaway leaned back onto her haunches. The oaks waved their leaves, framed her figure. One fell, twisting, lazily, through the sky. He thought, how beautiful it was. A single thing, to fall, from a tree. To take flight. “Why would I ever in Lord’s name kill you, Yuri?”

“Aren’t you… isn’t that why…” He sputtered off, then let out a groan. His head, his head. She reached back behind him and he flinched. It returned into his vision, streaked red.

“Oh, dear, dear, dear. Let’s get you back to the house. Come along now.” And she pulled him onto her shoulders like a great sack of potatoes.

The Caretaker brought him back into the cabin, set him on the couch, and the two spent the next few minutes in tense silence. She brought a wet rag from the kitchen, tended to the back of his head. Gave him water, which he sipped at slowly, wincing. She handed him the rag. Took a seat on the coffee table across from him.
“What’s all this now about killing?”

Shame flooded his cheeks. Saying it out loud, in such a bout of panic, it had seemed so logical… but now… Yuri squeezed the rag in his fist.

“I thought…” He looked away. Stared at the skis on the wall. “I thought you were going to murder me for my manuscript.” How absurd it sounded now.

Peggy was silent for awhile. Then stood up without a sound, and left though the screen door. Yuri sat there, unmoving, staring at the skis. Wondering where they came from. What kind of life they had lived before being pinned to a wall. He sat for a very long time. When Peggy returned, she’d brought his luggage from the car, and placed it on the inside of the door.

“Stay as long as you’d like, Yuri,” Peggy said simply, approaching him. She handed him a sheaf of printed pages. He glanced down at it. It looked like an email correspondence. Between her and Annabelle? “Read these, I think it will help. When you’re ready, come to the cabin.”

Then she was gone, and he was alone again.

After a time he wandered to the fireplace, intending to set flame to the pages. He didn’t want to read any more of her words. He’d had enough of Annabelle. And then, on the fireplace, he found it.

Not the keys, no. A piece of paper, green, faded, folded time and time again, burrowed creases as if it had made a home in the bottom of a leather-bound wallet for a long, long time. He opened it. The soft caress of woodsmoke ash filled heady his eyes. He recognized the lettering, the scrawl. A poem. One he thought he’d burned, with a single word underlined, bracing out against the rest. Believe. Believe. Believe. And he thought, maybe, he understood that word, for the barest moment.

And the keys, the keys were in his pocket all along.
The Caretaker’s tune faltered and faded against the walls of the small cottage. She smiled from the dining table, a book parted between thumb and forefinger. Lolita, Nabokov. The soft rustle of pages ran like drumbeats, heartbeats as she set the book down, and folded her hands. He gripped the pages of his own manuscript tighter in his sweaty palms. He was nervous, but he thought, maybe that was okay.

“You’ve already read it.”

“She sent it to me.”

“This was the plan all along? She set this up?”

“And me, I wouldn’t have invited you otherwise. I like your work. Not enough to kill you perhaps,” a small smirk skittered across those thin lips, “and Annabelle, well she believed in it very much. She still does. So much she was willing to give you the space you needed. We talked about it many times while she was here. I’m not much a therapist, but I have endured heartbreak. I know its sting.” She shifted in her chair. The wicker creaked, the hairs on her chin shone in the light as she smiled, offered a hand to an empty seat across from her.

Annabelle’s plan all along. For the two of them, to come to the cabin, to work on this all together. To face it together, only, it was him… He thought he understood, maybe. His culpability in all of it.

“But I don’t understand, why would she… if we…” Yuri’s questions faded off. They didn’t seem so important, now, and Yuri knew that. He was here.

“Are you ready?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Nobody does.”
The door swung closed behind him as he took his seat at the table.

END
And the tip jar was empty when he’d finished the show. There could not have been a more typical night. The bar, a dark wasteland of absent seats and absent souls, a place for the wandering and the lost to find their way in the deep shade past dusk, down stone steps and under neon light, their shuffled movements like the ruffling of feathers to warm themselves; the bar was faded, an old photograph. Something that could have been, something that might have been, once.

An old fashioned had appeared under his palms like magic before he’d been able to sit, and that was a problem. He’d no way to pay for it. They’d put it on his tab. He’d no way to pay for it. The shows were all he had, the bar was all he had.

It could not have been a more typical night.

She was in all black; black dress, black rings that tapped at the base of an empty glass as she sat down next to him. He was still standing. She was beautiful. He was young, and still thought all empty glasses to be invitations.

“Did someone die?”

“Black is the color of life,” she responded, staring at an aged painting on the wall. Two ducks on the water, below the soft arch of a bridge. “It absorbs all color, it contains everything. You just have to look closely enough.”

He was shocked, awoken from the depths of his dreams. His eyes were open. He told her so. She shrugged, the golden wisps of her hair slipping across the cavernous darkness resting on her shoulders.
“I’m married to a very famous, influential man.” There was indeed a diamond on the correct finger, a black one. He wondered if it mattered, there was boldness in his eyes now. “He often says these things, I’ve learned a few of them.”

“And this husband, this influential man…” He trailed off, made a show of looking about the bar. The bartender was resting on a stool in the corner. Staring down into a phone. The light lit the shadows of his face. He was not watching them.

She met his eyes for the first time. There was an endless feeling pouring out of them. Gary couldn’t understand what. Fear, maybe, or hope. Or sorrow.

“Tell me something real and you can stay.”

Stay? Real? What was real to her? What could he say?

“I’m a magician.”

The laughter from her echoed through the bar and he blushed. He’d ruined it all, almost immediately, surely.

“I said real, not your affinity for parlor tricks. I saw your show.”

“Magic is real,” he insisted. “Maybe the most real thing we can do.”

“You, you can do,” she replied, eyes softening. “And why do you think that?”

“It’s the only thing that declares its honesty,” Gary said, “or rather, dishonesty. It is real because its very nature is to be understood as an illusion. It tells us lies and still it captures you in those lies - and that itself is real. Look here.” Gary took the wet bar napkin from under his glass, and crumpled it into his fist. He released a bird, a dove, white, soft paper it floated into the space between them, flapped its tired wings about the woman in black, coming to rest on her shoulder, a napkin once again. “It distinguishes reality from falseness by pointing out the very nature of the two, right in front of our eyes. It makes us question what is, and what isn’t.”
She leaned back, and smiled. She had very white teeth.

“Show me real magic, and you can stay.”

He did. He plucked the maraschino from his drink, and held it out in his hand. It grew into an apple, a honeycrisp, fresh as the day it fell from a vine. He nodded to it. She took a bite. Juice flowed down red lips, from her chin.

“Transfiguration,” she said, after swallowing. “I’ve seen it done. Just in a different way. It is still a lie, a fake. It is not really an apple. The taste of cherry still remains, the apple is not quite enough to chew. I can taste it.”

“But you know it to be so, and that itself is truth. And so you know more about what is real and what is not. Because of magic.”

“Maybe.”

Gary took his chance. “Tell me something real, and I’ll stay.”

She was surprised, her eyes flashed in a way they hadn’t as the cherry grew in his fist.

“Something real.”

“Anything.”

She thought for a moment. Spun the apple about against the tip of her finger. Glanced at the painting.

“I like birds. I think about being one, often. About flying. A seagull. I’d like to be a seagull in my next life, live on the beach.”

“Why not now?” They were so close to the beach already, not fifteen minutes walk. He thought they could’ve been there in ten. No time at all, not a next life. Away from here, away from this life. He’d never attempted to change anyone. He didn’t think he could.

“We’re not birds.” She nodded, as if what she said made perfect sense.
“We could be. Be birds,” he felt ridiculous saying so, but it came from his mouth so confident it surprised them both. She laughed. Real laughter, so unlike the first bout. Time melted like magic from that laugh. They spoke for hours. Of birds, of weightlessness, of change. He thought he knew everything about her, in those hours. Understood her. That she understood him.

As the bartender passed them, lifting stools to rest atop tables. They were the last ones there. It had gotten late. He wondered what he could say, to stop time again. “We could fly, the two of us, be free from this city, couldn’t we?” Had the drink gotten to him? He’d hardly taken a sip.

She stood. Pulled a letter card from her purse, and handed it to him.

“I’d like that. There’s a party, tomorrow night. I should hope you’d like to come. I’d like to show you a magic, altogether different. You tell me if it’s real, or if it’s fake. You tell me what you’ve learned from seeing it.”

He swallowed, gripped the card in his hand, watching her gather her things. So smooth, so confident, it was magic, it was real.

“Why not tonight?”

“Goodnight, Magic Man.”

“Gary.”

“Goodnight, then, Gary.”

Then she was gone. The bar was once again dark. Empty. It was again all he had.

The bartender slid the tab across the table, and the tip jar was still empty. It could not have been a more typical night.
He looked down at the card, the gilded, flowing lettering on heavy card stock. An invitation, a gala, in the hills. An unveiling of the greatest advancement in alchemical science since sulphuric burning. An unveiling of the Philosopher’s Stone.

***

It was past nine o’clock and the night was windy, free, and cold; a heavy coat of fog wrapped itself about the darkened avenues of lit windows. It was quiet in the streets, and the quiet was like its own weight, heavy and dragging behind Gary’s soft steps up the hill like a sledge tied at his back. The wet air swept down over the rows of watching houses, and Gary wiped the moisture from his eyes, his hair. High above, a flock of misplaced parrots flicked green and out of streetlamp beams; their feathered screams echoed against their concrete forest. Gary was on the way to a party, where he would steal the Philosopher’s Stone.

It was the object of desire for alchemists, the passion of crusade for the kindred of alloyists whose bloody hands held its ethereal power aloft from the masses of clambering souls. And now, only a night away from sitting in Gary’s hands. Only a week before, he’d had no desires to live forever, or be inordinately rich. There were too many minutes in the day to fill, and time was not a thing that could be touched by human hands, or the infinite flow of wealth. But these were the powers of the Philosophers Stone. Gary wasn’t one to pass up an opportunity so easy and simple as stealing the Philosopher’s Stone from a party filled with alchemists. For a street magician like him, it would take only a flash of glamour, a bit of sleight-of-hand. Maybe someone else would know what to do with it. Maybe they would pay him a great deal for it; two pennies were not always enough to rub together.
She, the Alchemist’s Wife, was a fleeting type, all butterflies and hand grenades; he thought himself to be doing the bit of magic but it was her who drew him in and twisted him up in knots. If he could have her, he would, he would take the Stone and carry her away, the two, away from the party. They would fly, until they were two ducks under a bridge.

These airy, lifted thoughts carried him through the streets toward his Babel. Whistling as he plucked a stone from its place among a dozen others in a decrepit, unfilled planter; the stone would soon be The Stone. He admired it - the plain brownness of its curves, the unassuming edges of its uneven shape, the crooked, dent posture of its magnificence in his palm. Just as Gary had imagined it to be, the Philosopher’s Stone - and as he held it in his palm the the subtle warmth from its core radiated a thing entirely different - the promise of gold from iron, everlasting life, power unimaginable for he that would hold it, claim sovereignty over its domain. This plain stone would be transformed, altogether changed, and no one would be the wiser. This stone would become the Philosopher’s Stone. From dirt to glory, the two of them.

***

The wrought iron gate lay open, yawning lazily at the empty street curled high above the city cliffside, overlooking the endless dark waters of Pacific. High on a hill but the property was flat as if laid atop the cover of a closed book, cut deep and away from the hill itself, stretching itself over the cliffs, just so the salty winds careened, pressed at the boundaries of the property. The walk, panels of inlaid copper pressed into a silent army of perfectly sawn grass. The garden topiary, all bent men under the weight of the world, under the weight of deep thought, silent, they threw shadows over Gary as his feet struck metal underfoot, a striking difference from the
concrete greys and flagstone browns he was used to. And the house, a towering metallic beauty, wrought iron columns held long buttresses of copper faded just the slightest oxidized. Long walkways to short stairs, short stairs to wide patios filled with pretty, sculpted things. Metal abstracts, bolted to the ground, shaped just so, as to invoke a certain impression of emotion.

She was leaning against one, cool burn of a cigarette fading at the tips of her fingers. Her melancholy gaze tilted down, toward the ground, where ash floated about crystalline shoes.

“Oh, good you’re here!” The Alchemist’s Wife flung herself into his arms once he’d climbed the steps. He could feel the rattle of bones beneath her azure chemise. He thought about asking to take her for some food, then immediately passed it off as absurd. They were at a party. Surely she had eaten already. Surely things had been taken care of. “I’ve need to tell you of some things, Gary, I’ve missed you,” She hugged him tighter, as if it was him that might float away on a slight breeze. The metal

“Beautiful,” Gary whispered into her ear. A piece of her hair (like honey, like gold) slipped through his lips as he spoke. It tasted of shampoo, perhaps, apricots and honeydew. It reminded him of something, something long ago, when he’d been just a boy. “I’d no idea you were so close to places like these.” A memory under a moonlit sky, a confession of love, an unfurling of belief.

“Oh,” She released herself from his arms, flitting back, the burning ember lighting the cool brown of her eyes as she took a long drag, the cigarette curling inwards between two rings.

She had many, she was covered in metal, inlaid stones of varying shapes and sizes against a half-moon chestplate, rings of animals, the ruby eyes of a snake, the opal tongue of a dragon. Platinum bangles. Twisting silver earrings. “Yes, it’s beautiful, no one can deny that. The inside
is just marvelous, The Host spared no expense, he’s quite famous in the alchemy field, one of the world’s greatest. Been at the top for years, having mastered the use of Mercurial Prime.”

“Your husband, he’s the one who’s discovered the Philosopher’s Stone, then?” Gary looked at the trellises laden with bougainvillea protecting them from the hard salty breeze, the sculpted marble pillars where ivy attempted to climb.

“It’s one of a kind, a thing all its own. It’s known for granting eternal life, and riches beyond anything you could believe.” She sounded like a mechanic listing off a battery of car parts that needed replacing. “It’s the solution to everything, they say.”

“To everything?”

“They say.” Her voice lightened. “I’m glad you’ve come. Everything will be okay, better than okay, everything will work itself out, won’t it?”

Gary pulled the smoldering cigarette from her fingers and took a long drag, then handed it back. “Why’ve you invited me, then?” Gary asked, watching sharply.

The Alchemist’s Wife swayed, her darting eyes looking for freedom from his own.

After a moment: “Why, because I’ve invited you. And you’ve come, haven’t you? That should be enough. You think, the Philosopher’s Stone, could it take us anywhere in the world, you think? Away from all this? Far from this, far from here. I’d like to think its possible, to only have the courage to say so. To Stockholm, to wear mink coats under the Aurora. Grecian isles, to wear nothing at all. I should like that, to wear nothing. This silly dress, all the jewelry, its too much.”

“It’s hardly anything at all,” Gary said.

“Exactly,” The Alchemist’s Wife shrugged, “and that’s everything.”
“Your husband, he must be excited of the discovery, to advance humanity like this,” Gary changed the subject, trying to veer back toward the Philosopher’s Stone, “surely it’s displayed?”

“My husband, well,” She took a final drag then dropped the cigarette to the ground, stamped it out, “he’s so busy with the party, always making the rounds, I’ve no doubt he’d talk to you at another time about it, perhaps,” Her gazed drifted to the garden beyond Gary. She shook her head. “It’s all a dream anyway. Distant, impossible.”

“It would mean quite a lot to me,” Gary pressed, “to see it.”

She stared at him for a long while, twisting the cigarette butt underfoot, head tilted. Her fingers strayed to her rings, played with each of them. She looked as if she might say something. As if she wanted to. “Well, it won’t be that hard, it’s out for everyone to see. Let’s get out of the cold, it’s absolutely dreadful out here.” She turned, pulled him toward the door, a red door, wide, shining, almost glistening, newly oiled. A contemporary piece worth an inordinate amount, Gary was sure of it.

“Have you been out here long?”

“No, no, just for a moment, I just needed a moment is all.”

Gary followed the flow of her dress inside, through the towering door, silent as is opened, to cut away the silence of the night.

***

Gilded railings and cherubini vaulted ceilings, the main hall was filled with moving bodies but the heavy weight of industry and success rested stacked on the shoulders of those who attended, the gala guests, the guests of the Host, in their diaphanous dress and crisp pressed suits.
Blacks and whites and golds and greens flowed through the space that Gary was pulled through, he felt crushed between the riptide, only the small warmth of the Stone in his hand, the only warmth of the Alchemist’s Wife in his other, staved off the cold feeling of being dragged out to sea. This was not his sea, this was a sea made of Alchemists, an entirely different ladder, a different collection of beasts and sea creatures, a different food chain which he was not a part of. He wondered if they had noticed the slightly frayed corners of his coat, the extra creases along the pleats of his pant legs for laying too long at the back of his closet unused. Everything here seemed so fluid, so clean, even the air smelled rich with the perfumes of these seraphim dancing about the columned walls.

Only the automatons seemed to command the respect of ample space within the crowd. Silicon-transparent they marched, balancing glittering platters of untouched finger foods, overflowing glasses of crystalline champagne. Mercurial silver passed through their veins, pumping constantly to maintain the fluid march of limbs, metallic organs. Gary felt as if he’d seen something he shouldn’t, a flood of indescribable shame passed over him, as if he’d seen not an unthinking robot, but the body of the Alchemist’s wife there instead.

The air here was hot and dead, though the swirling bodies made it to seem lighter, it was protection from the cold windy night outside, the thick coat of warmth that spread about the floors like balloons. Gary looked at the cherubini ceilings and wondered if they could breathe any better, their little wings spread, cheeks rosy as if having run a marathon.

“They’re beautiful aren’t they?” She squeezed Gary’s arm, meeting his gaze at the culmination of winged innocents. “The children, they’re like the future watching over us. The first time I came here, I swear I could see their wings move. They smiled at me, and I had the most wonderful feeling. Like everything could happen here with them watching over us.”
The faces of the guests had the look of shining perfection - stone smooth, bone white, lifted chins and prominent cheekbones, they laughed with glass in their throat and teeth so white as to reflect the sparkling reflections of crystal chandeliers drifting lazily from high above. The perspiration of their champagne flutes ran cold down stems like tears. Sweat ran down Gary’s sides like he should not have walked here. He walked across the marble floors wondering if he was the only one who might leave dirt on its surface. Was there dirt under his nails? Had he cut his nails? Had he dirtied the hand that guided him through the party? Was it him or were they stealing glances from behind crooked elbows and tilted smiles?

High above, looking down at the crystalline flow of the party’s foyer, The Host, framed by a host of buzzing drones, those who sought a moment with the lord of the house, a single twitch of his ear, a single word from the depths of his mind. Walter wondered what it might be like to be up so high as to see everything, to see only everything, instead of wading through the riptide, caught in cold distant shores foreign to him. He must have been so free, up high tasting the crisp ocean spray of laughter dedicated to his empire. A man of stature, he might know what to do with the stone still resting warm in the palm of Gary’s hand. He seemed to be looking directly at them, a god in his world, omniscient understanding of each patron. Could he have known why Gary’d come? Would it only be a moment before he snapped a finger and the automatons dragged him away? The fraud? The deviant? The hopeful? The hopeless?

But where was the Philosopher’s Stone? The display?

He squeezed The Alchemist Wife’s hand and brought her closer. The swinging of bodies, the heat, The Host quickly faded from his mind. They were so close, so intimately close again. He wanted to mention something about her jewelry, her hair, how he’d thought about her many times since they’d last seen each other.
Instead: “I thought you said the Stone was on display.”

“What?”

“The display?”

The Alchemist’s Wife bit her lip, her eyes hardened. “These parties, they’re never right without champagne, would you like one?”

The Alchemist’s Wife disappeared into the crowd before he could answer, her billowing dress flickering through the sea of colors. Gary sucked in a breath of heavy air. He’d come on too strong, he had to be better about things, not let too much come to the surface. He needed to act comfortable, casual. He’d been to a party before.

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He’d been to a party, and knew where to hide. To admire art on the walls was a good of place as any.

An automaton hung from this one, a tucked away alcove hidden from the bulk of the party. The automaton’s platinum skin chafed to a bright sheen, every light reflecting from it. Pieces of its body had been ripped open for display, the dull, unmoving mercury sitting in its transparent veins. Gary had the terrible urge to rip the corpse from the wall, drag it through the marble entry, and bury it beneath the manicured grass out front. Give it its last rites. But instead he merely nodded. Stared at the limp limbs lifeless, legs, arms, screwed against the wall, hung like the Vitruvian Man. Gary imagined silver blood running from the stabs in it’s palms, down its wrists.
“Magnificent isn’t it? The Host’s Magnum Opus, the original Metal Man. These models, they used to need a sulphur core, constantly burning to heat the mercury for a fraction of the new models’ lifelike behaviors. Still, it’s a marvel to see where we’ve come from. How the Stone will change everything.”

The speaker was a plump man, with a shaved head, half-covered by an engraved metal helm, the style of Alchemists, showing off the symbols of his studies. A way to keep the rank in file. Gary only recognized the hard carved triangle of fire across the front. Accompanying him, a woman of extraordinary height, tight-lipped and carrying with her an untouched glass of champagne. She watched every move about them, seemingly trying to listen to every conversation in the room. The man continued. “You know, it wasn’t The Host who discovered the similar attributions between mercury and blood, only his idea to match-pair metals of the body to metals of blood for the original vessel to coalesce into autonomy. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

The mention of the stone caught Gary’s attention. “The Stone?”

“You must be new, surely.” The man shook his head despondently, looked at Gary with what seemed to be pity. “The Stone is what’s powering the new models. They say a single touch from it will provide consistent heat stimulation for the mercury to flow for years. They’re even said to speak, now and again. Only basic phrases, of course, nothing more than a confirmation of course.” Gary looked out onto the crowd, and realized the number of automatons moving about the room. The way they garnered attention, the way the guests grabbed them, touched them, treated them as novelty. He realized only too late his mistake. The unveiling of the Stone was of its power, not of the Stone itself. To steal an automaton… maybe... But hardly what he’d had in mind. Surely, the Stone must be in the house somewhere, still.

“Can I let you in on a little secret?”
He winked at the woman, who rolled her eyes.

“Oh don’t, Paul, it’s his first go-around.”

“He’s got to know before they eat him alive,” then leaned in. The champagne rolled saccharine from behind shining teeth. “The Philosopher’s Stone. It’s a myth. A farce. A fucking joke. No one here believes it exists. Even if it did, I hardly think it would matter. A single stone, in a single hand, could hardly be more powerful than say… the unrivaled support of millions seeking to make their lives a fraction easier? Limitless wealth? Look around you. You’re in it. This is the Philosopher’s Stone. People would kill to hold all this in their hands. I know I nearly have.” The two laughed in unison as if there was some joke passed between them.

The woman stepped in then, the three of them now pressed closer than Gary would’ve liked. “Think about it, really think. If someone’d found an alchemical recipe for the Stone, it would all be over, this would be gone,” she snapped a finger, and Gary jumped, “this party, the people in it. It would all be just a dream. A fake, stupid dream. Nobody wants that. Least of all us. The young ones.”

“Isn’t it already? A dream?”

The two stepped back, and the masks fell back across their faces. Ice-cold once again. It was the man who spoke.

“That’s a silly notion. You’d be best not to say that. We build things here. We’re important. This is as real as it gets. Look around you, do you think a house like this could be based off farce? The myth makes the reality. The Stone, it’s a representation of what we do, who we are. Without us, humanity would be nothing but a lump of coal in the ground.”
Gary made a show to look at a passing automaton, its shining face reflecting the warped grimaces of the two in front of him. “I suppose. Then these automatons? How do they run, if not from the power of the Stone, as you say? What’s all this extravagance for?”

The woman shrugged. “Who gives a damn? What’s your name?”

“Gary.”

“Who invited you Gary? You don’t seem like an alchemist. No offense.”

It was the only compliment Gary’d received all night. He turned toward the crowd and away from the towering fountain, looking for the Alchemist’s Wife. She was there, between two men draped about her like tweed in the summer. Still she smiled, still she laughed.

“Ah. The Alchemist.” The man’s voice softened a bit, and he gripped Gary’s shoulder.

“Yes, his wife,” Gary agreed, then followed with a lie. “I’d no idea she was married.”

“His wife? Lord, man, she ain’t the wife. She’s the Host.”

This caught Gary, and he glanced at the man and his partner. Their helmets shined lights in his eyes, they tilted, ever slightly, into pity.

“But, she doesn’t…” Gary stumbled for the words. “Her helmet?” There was none on her head.

The man laughed. “Why would she need one? We all know who she is. This is an important moment for her. She’s done the impossible. For all of us. She’s a right to be free of the helmet in her own home.”

The three of them stared across the marble floors as she ducked in and out of stretched hands, smiling faces; each movement seemed so calculated now, on the verge of perfection. She seemed so far away, now. Not at all like the night before.
The man grew close. “You like the way she moves but you don’t see she dances to the strings with the rest of us.”

“Paul.” The woman stepped in, pulled the two of them apart. “Don’t.”

“He’s harmless, not even—”

“Still. It’s not worth it.”

“Right,” the young man shook the gaze from his face, replaced it with something more solid, more ironclad. “Good luck then, Gary.”

As they turned away and passed through the crowd, the woman leaned up to the man, and whispered, just too loud, “God knows he’ll need it.”

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“You must be Gary.” The Alchemist’s hand was warm, dry in Gary’s clammy own, stretched across the vast space between them. A perfectly practiced handshake, crafted from nothing. He was tall, almost the same height as some of the passing automatons, nearly a giant. He stood next to Her as casual as anything. As if he belonged there, and made sure his presence was opportunity to tell Gary he did not. “I’ve heard much about you from Harmony.”

“Have you?”

“Oh yes, she’s mentioned you became quite fast friends.” His golden eyes were sharp, cutting into Gary’s patience.

“Oh, I’ve many friends, Henry,” she retorted, finishing her glass. “Don’t be so jealous.”

The Alchemist’s Wife pushed past both Gary and The Alchemist, diving into the party, disappearing before Gary could protest. The Alchemist was a large man, larger than Gary by half
surely, someone that felt high stature and placed it into the physical disposition of his body. His eyes, beady, quick things, searched Gary from behind a gratuitous nose. He sniffed, took a sip of his wine before surveying the party.

“Do you like it here, Gary? The party, does it serve you well?”

“It’s certainly… extravagant, sir.”

“Extravagant, yes I suppose that’s one way of putting it. You know that’s a three hundred dollar bottle of champagne in your glass? The real stuff, from Champagne, not the corner store garbage.”

Gary took care to look at the glass, observe the bubbles rise from the base. The condensation had coated the glass in beads rolling down the stem, collecting at the base, dripping to the marble flooring. The glass was nearly warm. It looked like any other glass of champagne Gary’d ever had. Only the vessel was different, made the liquid inside seem more than it really was, maybe.

“It’s very nice.”

“Yes, well, take care to understand how nice it all is. Harmony’s done a thing for you, inviting you. She often invites friends, it’s true. They just never seem to last. Don’t know how to handle themselves properly, understand? She always seems to forget her responsibilities.”

Gary nodded, sipped at the champagne, pretended to savor it. He’d tasted the stuff before. Been to the small factories in the Italian hillsides. He chose to withhold this.

“So the Philosopher’s Stone, she said? I didn’t know you to be of the Alchemical disposition, Gary. I heard you were more of the Magical believer, like my wife. Such a noble pursuit, you and Harmony. I’m jealous of you two, really.”

“Not so much a belief as a practitioner, sir. Jealous? Of me?”
“Oh sure, to study a thing that lives in antiquity, something so removed from reality it exists as nothing more than a parlor trick? We must have people like you to fiddle with those things, to remember where we came from, the Dark Ages.”

Gary wasn’t surprised. Statements like these were always swirling. His fellow magicians often joked about the short-sightedness. *If only I’d had more time,* they’d posture, *I’ve always wanted to learn a trick or two. Seems fun.* And his favorite, *Magic? Would you perform at my son’s birthday next month?*

“Respectfully, sir, I think there’s more to magic than antiquity. It’s deeply steeped in history, sure, and has been carried generation to generation by a long line of influential people. Moses, Houdini, *Circe.*”

“Frauds, hearsay, the lot. Heretics with abnormalities that created centuries of strife, war, murder. And what good’s it do, lifting and moving things with the mind, turning a chicken back into an egg? We’re not in the Middle Ages, we’ve hardly need for much of all that anymore.”

“There are many practical application within modern industry for Magic.”

“The magical nature of things is merely a shortcut for more practical methods of work. At most you might automate a single process with extended concentration, but you require rest, food, silence to produce your work at a maximum capacity. Now imagine, if we were to take the alchemical processes of say, mercurial imbalancing, and use it in the day to day milling of grain? This might offset the human costs for a fraction of the effort. Imagine less injury, less human error, less inefficiency.”

“And what would happen to the human?”

“Why, they would be free, free to do whatever they would like, I suppose!”

“And the cost of food, the cost to live for those freedoms?”
The Alchemist took a small step back, a flash of disgust flashing across his face. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those Socialists, Gary.” How The Alchemist had made that jump was entirely a mystery to Gary. The Alchemist grinned a mirthless set of silver teeth. They must have cost a fortune. “The sort of labour they do is redundant now anyway. It should have been made redundant long ago; there’s simply no reason that weaving, spinning, carding, or roving hasn’t all been automated. It’s only the natural movement of humanity. Alchemy has always been the highest form of human existence, the pinnacle of science. What has alchemy done for this country over the past century? Increased agricultural and industrial productivity to a unimaginable extent. Magic was always Alchemy’s baby brother, a simple stepping stone, a crutch we’ve relied on for too long. Of course,” The Alchemist shrugged, “That’s simply my opinion. I’m sure as a Magician you’ve come up with much better logic.” The irony of the statement made Gary nearly choke on his tongue. The Alchemist continued, eyes drifting off, across the scene of the party, nodding, agreeing with himself. “And if just those that we’ve saved with our technologic advances would only use their wits to learn a skill that might actually be useful, like alchemic maintenance, they would have access to higher paying jobs, they would earn a living far greater than they ever have. But they would rather complain about the cost of living in the cities. Darwin would only say, ‘adapt or die’. As do I. As has everyone in this room. Well, most of us, anyway.”

These were dark, inhumane statements, and Gary nearly wanted to fall down through the rabbit hole and be caught in the darkness for the sake of wearing shoes too big for his stature. But it would only be pointless. The Alchemist, he was a man forged in the fires like the others, had time to cool and found steely for being pounded against the hammer of Alchemy. The sweat against his brow, the sweat falling from his neck, the slight trembling of the wine in his cuffed
hand, pointed toward the sheer willpower it took to maintain such a front. A front it must have been, Gary concluded. Let the man exist as he may.

He had to speak to her. He turned and left the Alchemist there, without another word.

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She was standing at the railing, bare back glittering moonlike against the black night, another burning ember like a landing starship against the cosmos of her swirling hair. Her hands gripped the thick iron parallels, so tightly it seemed as if she was unsure of her own weight, of the solidity of the bars, the pattern of the breeze pulling at the hems of her dress. As if everything might change in just an instant. As if the whole world might change if she only let go. Below, the waves crashed, sent salty spray just high enough to nearly taste, far enough to leave them dry. He perched himself against the railing, just to her right, and she leaned, leaned ever so slightly closer to him. He imagined she was so cold, nothing to cover her thin shoulders, but she stood steely, not a shiver, where he felt the moistness of the sea air begin to creep into his bones.

“The beach, I’d like to live on the beach, I think, I’ve never thought about it more clearly, like a picture, a painting, so real, so lifelike, I could just step through and feel the sand against my toes.”

“You lied to me.” He rolled the Philosopher’s Stone between his fingers, over the railing. How easy it would be to let it go, to release it, let it fall against the cliffs and into the sea below. Let it sink, slowly degrade against the waves of time, until it was only seafoam on the cliff face. He thought he understood what the Alchemist’s Wife meant. He thought it would be nice to be
that seafoam, to exist as something natural, to give oneself back to the waves, the rocks. But he could not say anything.

“The gulls,” she continued, drumming her ringed fingers against the metal rail, “the waves, the sand, all so free, aren’t they? Obeying only the wind, and even then the breeze is kind, soft, it makes the beach a bit cooler when it gets so hot. You could almost feel an immortal life on the beach, enough riches for anyone who walks there, who, doesn’t everyone want to live on the beach, Gary? Why must we all hide in houses and surround ourselves with people and dresses and talk? All this talk? For what? Wouldn’t it be just so easy …,” the dress flowed back behind the Alchemist’s Wife as she stepped onto the railing, and stared at the cliffs below; the wind was fierce now, biting, cold in a way that sent Gary into an uncontrollable shake. He was frozen, paralyzed. She balanced a stiletto heel against the metal, so sure, so practiced she might’ve stayed there as one of the Host’s pieces forever, “… so easy to be free, you think?”

“You could live on the beach.” The words felt false as they fell out of his mouth, and they could both feel the air get colder between them. What Gary had meant to say was it looked like she lived much closer to the beach than most. But it wasn’t true. They were just as far, far enough to imagine the sand and not feel it. He meant, she could live on the beach with him, if only she stepped from the railing, and into his arms. He meant, freedom was not so far as she thought, she was only looking in the wrong direction. He meant to say. But words never seemed to work as well as he’d like.

“Everyone lies.” She ripped her gaze from the ocean below. “Everyone. But if everyone believes the lie, isn’t it just another truth?”

“Step down from there.”

“Tell me why you came.”
“Tell me why he called you Harmony.”

She swung a leg over the rail, then the other. There was no barrier now, nothing stopping her.

“Holly.”

“The truth, Gary.”

The truth? The truth was he came for her. Of course he came for her, wasn’t it obvious? She’d asked him to. But everything seemed too complicated, everything so easily turned on its head. To say so would change nothing.

“It’s yours, then? All of it? The house, the Stone?”

“The Philosopher’s Stone. So that’s it then.” The energy between them severed, so easily, threads drifting out into the ocean breeze. Evaporating. She lifted her hands from the railing, the wind whipped her left, then right, as she pulled a ring from her hand and tossed it at Gary’s feet. He reached down and plucked it from the cobbles, careful only to touch the metal. It was a snake, eating its own tail, only the mouth swallowed a small black stone, a thing that seemed so insignificant as to not exist at all. “There it is. Take it, see what I’ve seen.”

“Why?”

“They say suicide is the worst of all philosophical deaths. But what of the choice to live forever? What of choice with that in your hands? Chaining you to eternity? If death is infinite, then infinitude would certainly come to an end at a point. Infinite is not infinite. It never was, only a choice to exist in entropy, in Nature. But that. Why should we want that? To live forever when forever is nothing more than a different length of now? Of torture?”

“Is it even real?” He turned it about in his hand. There was no glitter, no significant depth.
“Go ahead. See what I’ve seen. Infinite is not so beautiful as it seems.”

“And if I throw it into the ocean? For you?”

“You won’t. You haven’t yet. You never will.” How real he’d imagined it would feel in his hands, the certainty of its weight, its promises. Now, it was cold. Hard. Silent. The silence between them hardened. Coalesced and thickened. She was right. He couldn’t throw a thing of infinite power into the ocean. But he placed it back on the ground, and stepped away. “No. No I don’t think I could. Live on the beach. I don’t think I do, or will. I never really wanted to anyway. Just a silly dream, a silly thing. You should leave. Do not come back. If I find you here again I’ll have you in chains.”

It seemed there was nothing left to be said. Gary could not think of another word. He left the Alchemist’s Wife to stare into infinity.

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Gary left the party, back into the frigid, icy night that sent blood to his cheeks. Had it always been so cold, he wondered? Had the wind always rustled the topiary, the grass, his hair? They all moved, moved, how could they not, so precisely they were placed, so delicately cut close to the ground, to the branch their leaves, but still they were moved. It was the nature of things, of all things. To move and be moved, to exist within the bounds, not exist without. It was quiet in the streets; the birds had all gone to roost. Fog had settled once again across the slick, steep streets he walked. Here he was going down the hill to somewhere where a city lay dying, and he couldn’t see it. Why couldn’t he? And it seemed to him that the chill of champagne, the
automata smiling, voices, laughter, the smell of sea breeze was somehow inside him, a fog, a fog so heavy inside him. How strange!

The broad hill had been crossed, and it seemed to him the fog, was so smoky and dark, how quiet it filled the city, how quiet it poured down the hill after him.

END