

# **BLACKBODYING**

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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## ABSTRACT

### Blackbodying

Dimitri Nasrallah

This conceptual novel is a meditation on exile and memory. Beginning at a point shortly after the protagonist has left his place of birth, Beirut, the work builds through a passage of various perspectives and locations as it slowly builds into a bildungsroman. Along the way, the reader meets the handful of people who, along with his surroundings, come to shape his life. Of great importance is the idea of how we remember, and how these memories inform our present situation. The narrative concludes with a novella written by the protagonist, a summation, not only of experience, but also of artistry. The principal locations over the course of the twenty-three years encapsulated by the story are Athens, Toronto, and Montreal. Characteristics of traditional narration are circumvented; rather, this novel builds a space that adheres to a complex system of intertwining imagery.

*Reality is to be sought, not in concrete,  
But in space made articulate*

Charles Tomlinson (1955)

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# JUVENESCENCE

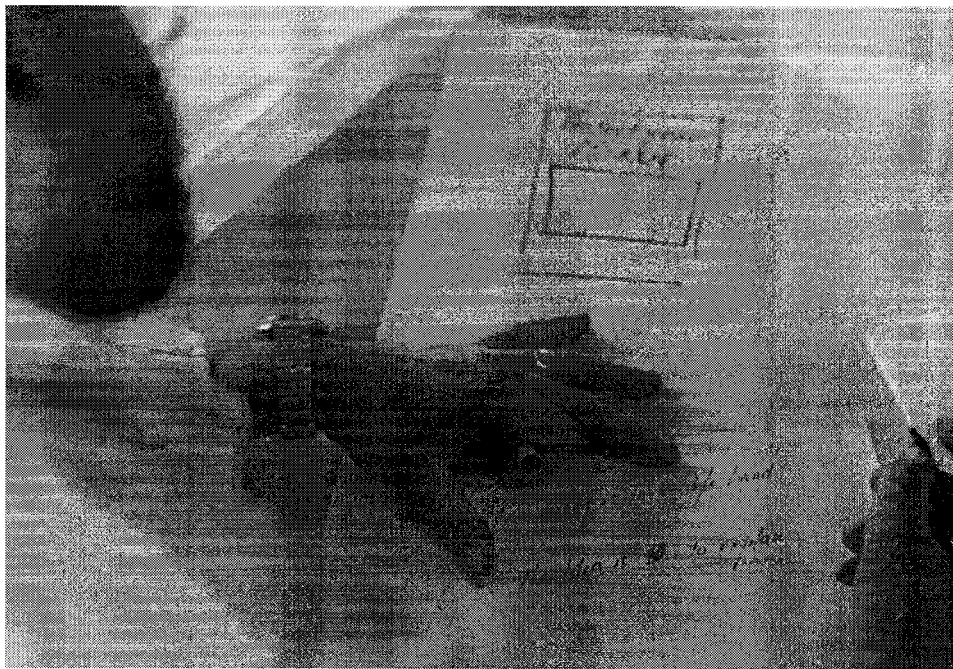
## SOMETHING IS

The drive from our apartment on the Messogion, in the heart of Athens, to Glifada took no longer than three-quarters of an hour on a Saturday. I often asked my dad, “Hey, how come we don’t live in Glifada if we go there so much?” to which he would reply, “We don’t need everyone knowing we’re Lebanese.”

Every Saturday, sometimes Sunday, I sat in the back seat of that black Mercedes, wriggling around to keep my thighs from sticking to the leather upholstery. I remember that, at five, my preoccupations had little to do with civil war, nothing with religion, not with my passport, only with a distinctly awkward sense of personal grooming. My shorts had to be just as their name: very short. And I always insisted on tucking in my shirts as far into my shorts as they could go. What I asked for in a good sock was, to my mind, very reasonable. A sock had to be long, it needed stripes. A sock needed good elasticity as it would have to hold the sock at the knee throughout the day. If I could get the sock over the knee, well, then I was unspeakably happy.

If I wasn't pushing in my shirt I was pulling up my socks. Whenever my dad saw me doing this he would say, "You're worse than a cat," to which I would respond with a cackle of laughter as I licked down the hairs on my arm.

We had two reasons for driving to Glifada, the beaches and my parents' friends, also Lebanese. Most of their friends they knew from their jobs. My dad's office consisted of three small rooms with ceiling fans and balconies. He had never explained to me what he did exactly, but I'd gone to work with him once or twice and this was what I saw: five grown men using very expensive markers to draw very simple drawings.



My dad drew like I did, with his tongue nestled firmly between his teeth. The better the drawing, the tighter his teeth held his tongue, and in this way throngs of pain offset his greatest achievements. Mssr. Alfo was the oldest of the five draftsmen and, from what I could see, had the job of smoking all day, getting in and out of small talk



with the other four, and occasionally giving in to fits of complaining, for which he was duly ignored.

Mssr. Alfo was by no means Mssr. Alfo's real name. I called him Alfo because he made me nervous, and when I got nervous I developed a bad lisp. His ears could not bear listening to Alfonsh Alfonsh all the time. And I called him Mssr. because he was an old man with pungent old-man breath. He was older than my dad was but that didn't stop them from working together; I thought he was as old as my grandfathers were if I could imagine how old that was. I tried but they were dead, dead and buried somewhere in Beirut, one of pneumonia and another before my time.

I asked my dad, as he drove, "If both your dad and mom's dad died, then do I still have granddads?"

"Of course, why wouldn't you?"

"Because they died."

"Dead people are still people."

I asked my mom the same question; all she allowed was, "Both your grandfathers loved you equally."

"But how? We've never met."

"One loved the fact that you were alive, the other loved that you would be one day."

When I first met Mssr. Alfo, he introduced himself by saying, "I don't like children."

My mom's work was altogether different. She taught Arabic to students at Green Hill, an Arabic school in Kifisia, where all the European and American companies housed their employees, in a building which had once been a sister school to the

American private school I attended in Halandri. When a very rich Lebanese businessman bought that old building, all the American students were moved to my school. From what I'd gathered, the man who bought the building had always wanted to be a principal at a school for Arab children. He walked the halls every morning as students ran in and out of classrooms, and he admired the posters in Arabic on the walls. And when he looked into classrooms, Arabic adorned the chalkboards. All around it seemed he had drafted a small piece of his Lebanese childhood onto a land that would consider him a foreigner as long as he stayed. For this reason, I assumed, behind his serious demeanor he must have been the giddiest man around, as every day for him was a re-enactment of his aspirations.

On the days I accompanied my mom to Green Hill, the principal would greet us at the gates, as he did everyone, and ask, "And why, why does this little one not come to school here? Our children are our seeds, we need to nurture them with care. They need to know their history, their heritage, their roots. He's not American yet he knows more about the U.S. than he does about his home. We need to care for our own. What will he know when the war is over and he moves back?"

My mom would smile as he said this, sometimes nod, but in the end she would always answer, "I don't think we plan to return."

That Saturday in the car we drove to Glifada not for teachers but drawers. And not any drawer but Mssr. Alfo, the drawer who never drew. The drawer who never drew who openly disliked children, no less. This had me worried for the duration of the drive. Mssr. Alfo was inexplicably unmoved by everything I did. No matter how long I followed him around the office, no matter how many times I asked him to tie my shoelaces, he did what

was necessary to keep away from me. That someone did not like me was incomprehensible.

“Baba baba, why is Mssr. Alfoo such a big poo?” I asked, leaning into the space between the front seats.

“A big poo? No, no. Mssr. Alfo is a very talented man. You should see his drawings, then you’d think twice before being disrespectful.”

“But why is drawing such a big deal anyway?”

“Why is drawing such a big deal he says -- look around.” He laughed. “Who do you think put all those trees on the side of the road, who put the sea by the land, who put you with us?”

“Who?” I asked excitedly. “Who?”

“God did, who else? Where have you been? Why do we send you to Sunday school?”

“God is a drawer like you?”

“Of course. He draws all day. With the best markers anyone has ever seen. I’ll let you know a little secret, but you can’t tell anyone. Me and Mssr. Alfo and Pierre and Yousef and Wahid, we all work for God. Why do you think they give me so much trouble at the airport with my Lebanese passport? They can sense we’re special people. God, he takes care of the big pictures and every so often He calls us on the phone to give us our next project.”

“Is that why Mssr. Alfo smokes all the time?”

“Exactly, he gets nervous waiting for the phone to ring. And he’s afraid that if he starts playing with you that he’ll like it so much that when the phone rings he’ll be having so much fun he wouldn’t hear it. And who wants to miss a message from God?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Neither would I.”

“Can I answer the phone at your work next time?”

“Oh no, you’re too young.”

That Mssr. Alfo received special messages from God had me puzzled; still I would have much rather gone to the beach than his apartment. I recall I’d secretly worn a bathing suit under my shorts. Just thinking of the beach on such a nice day and not being able to go to the beach and having to sit with old people all day had me irritable. Suddenly, no matter how hard I tried no shirt could be tucked in far enough, no sock could be pulled up high enough. How I wished my dad would stop his catcalling and, instead, announce that we were going to the beach.

The drive took not three-quarters of an hour but an hour and three-quarters. We passed two small accidents and one big one, and along the way we saw many drivers yelling at each other from their windows.

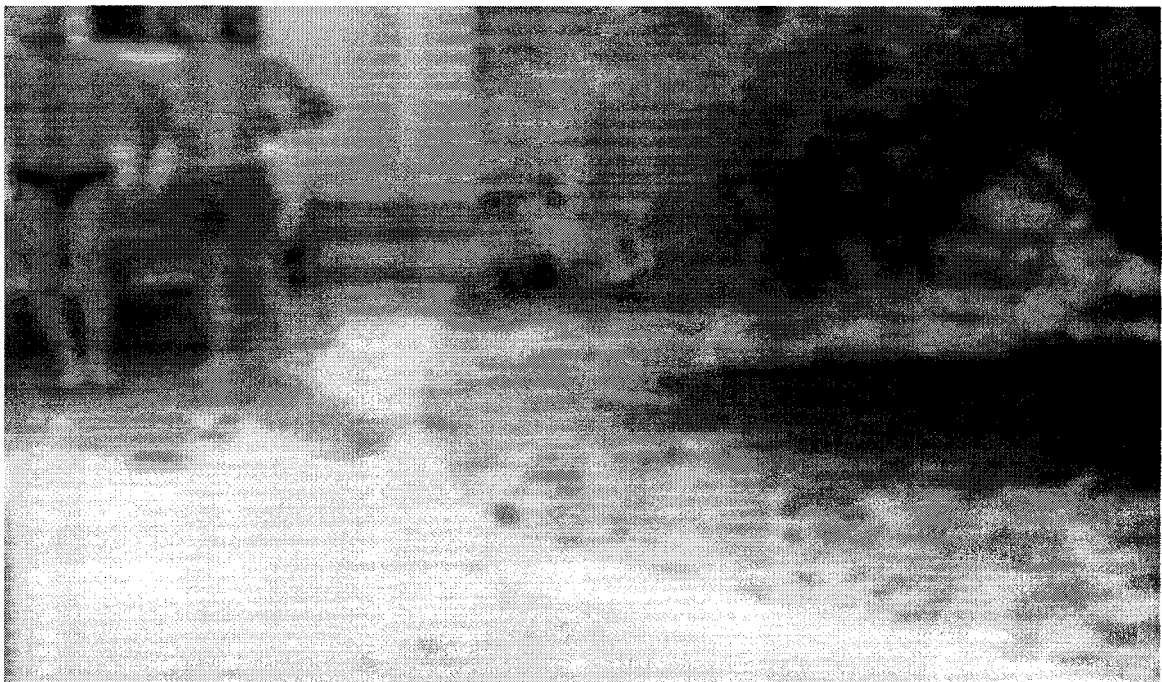
“The Greeks are very primal drivers,” my dad explained, “They drive like mad, like no one else is on the road. But when they get into accidents they have no regrets.”

We stopped only once on our way to Glifada, at a truck selling watermelons for thirty drachmas a kilo. My dad found this price so irresistible he almost caused an accident of his own by slamming on the breaks and swerving onto the gravel. Before my mom had a chance to catch her breath and give him an earful, he rushed out to the truck. My dad hoisted himself onto the bed, searching for the perfect watermelon. When he found one, he cradled it with such affection we thought he had a baby in his arms. After haggling with the seller over the weight and threatening to go to another vendor, he paid and returned with his prize.

“Ninety-five drachmas,” he announced proudly, as he held it out for us to see.  
“Should I go buy another one for us?”

“Get in the car please.”

As a rule my dad refused to keep watermelons in the trunk. My mom had the job of cradling it in her lap as he drove. We didn’t arrive at Mssr. Alfo’s apartment building until one o’clock. I began complaining as soon as I stepped out of the car. The air was very dry -- we hadn’t seen rain in weeks, and the news had talked of another heat wave on the way. The sky during a heat wave looked worn; the blue faded as though it had been washed many times. Passing clouds looked not white but translucent, like oil stains.



It did not help my temper that, at this time of summer, the heat forced itself under the skin. The sea wasn’t even a kilometer away. I could smell the salt in the air. I closed my eyes and imagined my parents as they were when they went to the beach.

“Enough!” my mom snapped, but I wasn’t listening. I stamped my feet, began to cry, and at that moment all I wanted was to jump into the waves crashing along the shore. My mom grabbed my wrist, tried to pull me forward. I resisted.

“No, I won’t go! I wanna go to the beach. I wanna go right now.” And my words melted into a long wail of disapproval.

My dad, fed up with my antics, set the watermelon down on the sidewalk and marched back to where I stood to make sure I had a real reason to cry. The backside of his hand flew back into the air, down came his hand, and spank! He threatened me with the bagmen if I didn’t quiet down; the whimpering settled to a snuffle, I tucked in my shirt and pulled up my socks. Soon we turned into the gate of Mssr. Alfo’s apartment building.

I was threatened with the bagmen almost every time I got on his nerves. The bagmen were, as I understood it, a police for children. They drove around the city streets, two or three to a car, in search of bad children, and when they found them, the men would force them into a large bag, tie it up, and toss them into the trunk of the car. Then they took the child to an orphanage and that was how children became orphans. For a long time I only half-believed in the bagmen. Then one day at the market with my parents, as I was chewing a piece of dried apricot, I saw three men forcing a screaming boy into the back of a car, and I could’ve sworn one of them was carrying a bag.

Mssr. Alfo accepted the watermelon graciously. He handed it to his wife, Mme. Muna, who promptly disappeared down a corridor as he led us into the living room. An old man was already seated on the sofa. The man stood, and shook hands with my parents as Mssr. Alfo introduced everyone. His name was Mssr. Sameer Gerdak. Despite the

temperature, he wore a red sweater. He was no more than five feet tall; still his stockiness lent him stature. Mssr. Sameer was Mssr. Alfo's brother-in-law. He was from West Beirut and was vacationing for two weeks.

"I hope the ferry wasn't too bad," my mom said.

"It was as I had expected: over-crowded, yet expensive. We spent one night at sea and they gave us deck chairs to sleep outside. Luckily the weather cooperated. We docked in Cyprus the next morning, where I spent the day walking around Nicosia. The next day I took another ferry and here I am."

"And how long have you been here now?"

"Long enough to have settled in."

My mom and Mssr. Sameer continued their talk. As I listened in I found out that he no longer had a job because the architectural firm he worked at had gone bankrupt. Inevitably their conversation turned to bombs, as this was a topic which my mom had a strange fascination with, and Mssr. Sameer began to run down a list of buildings that had been shelled, and my mom erased them from the map of Beirut she still had in her head. She asked about the university. Mssr. Sameer said it was still unscathed. They spoke in low voices, reliving a kind of tension they had cultivated while listening for explosions at night in the cellars of buildings. But it seemed that the only bombs going off now were those blowing away the doors of the past. Doors, which, in my home, had always been kept under lock and key.

"And what will you have to drink?" Mssr. Alfo asked my dad.

"I don't understand how my drinks would change just because we're not at the office."

"Alright then. That's settled. And you, Madame?"

“I think I’d like to find out what he’s been drinking at the office.”

“And this one,” he gestured toward me.

“He’ll have juice,” my mom answered.

“Tang?”

“That will do. Thank you.”

Mssr. Alfo wandered down the corridor, passing his wife, who was returning with a large plate of watermelon wedges.

“A wonderful idea. You can never have too many liquids in this heat. Now can I interest anyone in something to eat? Maybe *terropitas*? And before you say no, I should warn you that I’ve spent the better part of the morning in the kitchen so you’d better eat.”

“Alright then, we’re famished!” my dad replied, laughing as he threw back his arms in defeat.

She needn’t have threatened us so playfully. When Mssr. Alfo returned, his tray carried not only a bottle of Ouzo and a glass of orange Tang, but also a plate of *terropitas* alongside. My mom scolded me for having my shoes on the couch; Mme Muna calmly assured her that it was nothing to worry about. Mme. Muna asked my mom about the school, remarking how large the Lebanese émigré population was getting. Mssr. Alfo remarked that the Greeks must love the idea of an Arabic school in Kifisia.

“At least they’ll have us quietly,” my dad said.

“Yes, much quieter than the French,” Mme. Muna agreed.

Drinks were poured. Mssr. Alfo proposed a toast to peace. All toasted, even though everyone knew that peace was not in the foreseeable future. I remember my dad made mention of the recent involvement of the American troops, which led to a discussion with Mssr. Sameer over the ineffectiveness their participation would have on



the course of the war. All agreed the Americans' inability to comprehend the delicacy and history of the situation would only lead to failure.

"It's not like they'll get very far. They're still based at the airport and how many did they lose in that bombing?"

"Too many to stay. They don't understand that our problems are bigger than their remedies."

I decided that the watermelon wedges tasted better than the terropitas. I nibbled hungrily at the wedge as juice dripped down my chin and onto my shirt. Mssr. Alfo began going on about the uselessness of a Lebanese government that had no power and that, to add, was rife with corruption. More drinks were poured, and my dad proposed another toast. This one to the recently assassinated president Basheer Jemayil.

"It was his father's doing. Who puts their own son in such a position at such a time?"

Mssr. Sameer began talking about the present state of life in Beirut. My mom asked whether or not they had electricity; the electricity was sporadic at best, as were the telephone lines. On a positive note, he added with a wry smile, there was less of a demand for electricity and telephones without the buildings. Communication within the country was troublesome; from the outside it was not an option. My mom could attest to that, since she had been trying to contact her brother, a professor of mathematics at the American University of Beirut, for the last seven months. She asked Mssr. Sameer if he knew anyone from that house. Mssr. Sameer replied that he had a cousin who knew my uncle's family, and said that they were doing well, but that they were still mourning, as he expected she also was, the death of their sister's eldest son.

"Oh, I - I hadn't heard. How did it happen?"

“I’m so very sorry. I thought for sure you would’ve known,” he said. He breathed a deep breath, then sighed, seeming uncomfortable with being the bearer of such news. He looked to my mom imploringly, but she in return awaited his response.

“Now you must forgive my memory but I’m not too clear on what exactly took place. Let me see. It all happened not too long ago, two weeks, ten days maybe. From what I recall, I think the boy had been riding his bicycle home one day when a car bomb exploded. Poor thing, not too far from his doorstep. I’m sorry I don’t know more about it. There was an article in the paper. My cousin mentioned it only in passing. What is your sister’s name?”

My mom sat back for a moment, then crossed her legs. The room fell into a sort of reflective quietude. More than once my dad looked as if he were about to say something and then thought again. When my mom finally answered the question put forth, she spoke very slowly.

“Her name is Souad. I don’t know her son, Eid. Please forgive me. This is all so sudden. I think you’ve caught me off guard. You see, my sister and I had a falling out, oh, what is it now, over thirteen years ago. I was very young, still in my teens, and Souad was a good eleven years older. My God, I can’t even remember what it was all about it was so long ago. So much was going on at the time. So much is still going on. I remember it was right after the death of my mother, and that had something to do with it.”

“I’m sorry, Madame,” Mssr. Sameer repeated, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was not aware that you hadn’t heard.”

“Please don’t be. I’m quite alright. Just a bit of a shock, that’s all. As I said, I haven’t talked to my sister in years. I don’t even know her boy.”

Another round of drinks was poured. My dad complimented Mme. Muna on her terropitas. She commented that the alcohol affected her all the more in this heat before turning to me, caught quite unaware with a mouthful of watermelon, and confessed how adorable I looked and how fortunate my parents were to have such an adorable boy. She ran her fingers through my hair and began telling me how she was too old to have another child now, but if she did she would want a little boy just like me.

“Please Muna, you’re embarrassing the child,” Mssr. Alfo quickly interrupted. He changed the topic, asking my dad about a small item at work that did not appear to concern anyone else. His talk seemed laborious, as though his mind was elsewhere, and before my dad could answer the question, Mssr. Alfo began going on about his disgust with the warlords on either side of the war, and how they were cowards to recruit young boys to fight their battles. His talk accelerated as he ranted against these, as he put it, mongers who armed young boys with guns, machine guns larger than themselves even, and sent them into the streets to kill each other. He then picked up my glass of Tang, mumbling something about the drink feeling warm, and stalked down the corridor.

I remember that everyone sat quietly, and I began to think this visit was becoming very wasteful, since no one was talking. My mom was staring out the window. My dad was stirring his drink with the tip of his finger. Mme. Muna, seeing that we needed more watermelon, set off to the kitchen with the empty plate. We sat in silence for a good few minutes, and it was Mssr. Sameer who broke the silence in the end.

“I have a riddle, maybe you’ll know the answer,” he said, and almost immediately I perked up, ready to win this small contest of wits. He leaned back in his chair, as if resigned not to tell his riddle after all, and then he began again.

“Something is as nothing was, but that something is not nothing at all.”

I thought about this for a while but came up empty-handed. My mom and dad both looked stumped, and by the time I turned back to Mssr. Sameer, I couldn't help but shout out loud, "Give us a clue, another clue!"

"Alright. Another clue it is," he said. "You return to it without turning, and you collect it only for recollecting it."

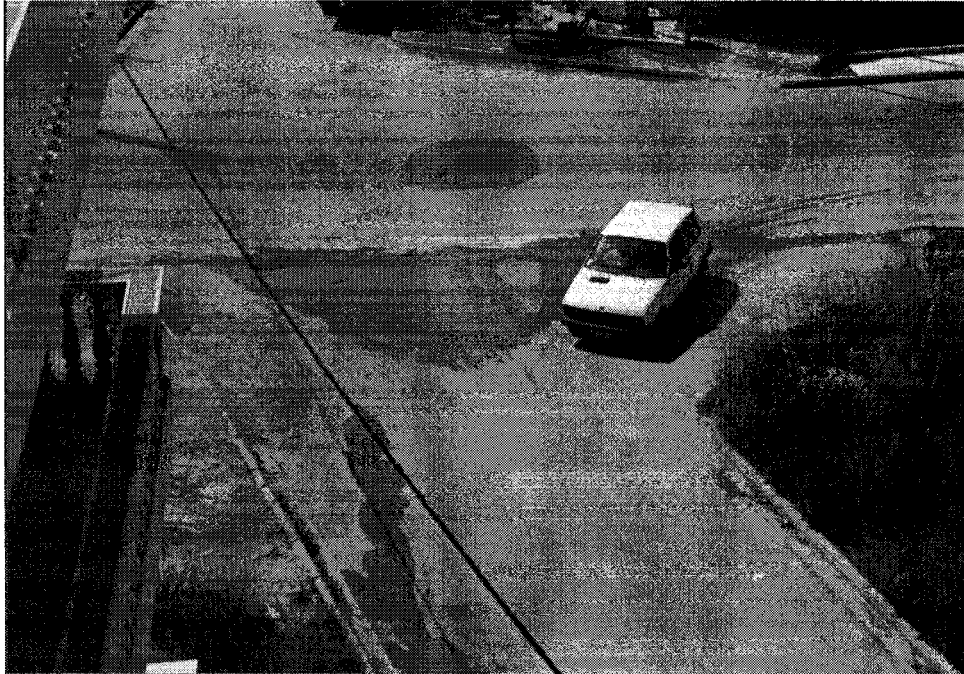
I still had no idea. My only certainty was that it was not an animal of some sort, unless it was a combination of animals. Then I could not be faulted for not knowing the answer because combinations were seemingly infinite. I thought long and hard. I even felt compelled to tuck in my shirt my thoughts felt so active, but my mom was the one who answered first.

"The memory?" she asked.

"Yes, the memory," he repeated.

We had lunch. The afternoon waned. I began to suspect there was little hope of getting to the beach at all. The conversation was boring me half to sleep. In the end I asked if I could see their balcony. My mom thought it too hot outside, still I begged and pleaded until my dad could not see the harm in it, and off I went with the two largest watermelon wedges in my hands.

Mssr. Alfo's apartment had a very long balcony, a good third of which was immersed in shade. I quickly discovered that I could see the coast from up there, so my first fifteen minutes on the balcony were spent with my face bent into the wrought-iron bars that formed my cage, with my hands taking turns pressing watermelon into my mouth. The sun burned against my face.



I made a game of spitting seeds as far out as I could. One reached the sidewalk, and the rest got lost in the trees. I began to think that a seed on its own didn't have enough weight to make it across the street, which was my desired target, and that a whole watermelon might do the trick instead. Watermelons were still too heavy for me to carry, let alone throw. My dad never let me carry the watermelons. Once after I had pleaded with him during a whole car ride (for we used to sometimes drive out of town, the two of us alone, in search of watermelon trucks) he allowed me to carry one from the car to our front door. But it was lot heavier than I expected, and even though he offered to help me with it, I had refused. It fell splat out of my hands onto the concrete and broke in two. After that, he'd lost faith in me and my watermelon-carrying privileges had been suspended indefinitely. But to throw a watermelon off a balcony and watch it explode on the street, with a big bang, and have the seeds splatter out in all directions, that would be a sight. When I was older, I decided, I would do that.



When my face had been creased sufficiently by the bars, I took to inventing games for one. On the wall beside the sliding doors Mssr. Alfo had a potted plant, and I tried to reach it by jumping. The pot was too high, and when I took a running start my knees kept scraping against the wall. I tucked in my shirt, then retucked it when I thought it would hold better if tucked not only into my shorts, but my bathing suit as well. When I sat on the ground to pull up my socks properly, that was when the idea came to me for the perfect game. The idea popped into my head as the sun shifted, causing a lighted strip to appear down the length of the balcony. I would race from one end to the next, my only competitor the shadow that lapped alongside me. And so I began running, running fiercely with the sole intention of outdoing my shadow. That first course, with the sun burning into my chest, I managed to touch the bars first. I took a deep breath, relieved to have shown up my shadow on the first try in my own game. The second course in the

opposite direction was not so fruitful. My shadow stretched ahead from the very beginning and maintained his lead, reaching the bars a good meter ahead of me. We ran back and forth, back and forth like that for a good half hour, each time exchanging our wins for losses regardless the pace, and I began to think that I was not only trapped on this balcony but also in an irresolvable duel with my shadow. His strategy was beyond me. He managed to replicate my every move as if he'd had access to the very thoughts that composed them.

It was not until I stopped running that I realized the full scope of the heat permeating my lungs, and found it difficult to catch my breath. I limped over to the shaded part of the balcony, my hands balancing against the wall and, instead of sitting in one of the two foldout chairs, I lay down on the marble. I heard the phone ring inside the apartment. I wondered if it was perhaps God calling with an assignment. Maybe He had Mssr. Alfo's home number too. Or maybe it was for my dad. Or maybe it was for Mme. Muna or my mom or Mssr. Sameer or even for me. After all, my dad said we were all special, so it would only follow that God would call all of us sooner or later. And I began to wonder how long it would be before I received my call with my assignment. Granted I couldn't draw very well, but I could do other things. I was learning to swim without the floaties; maybe God was waiting for me to swim on my own. But what could He have been waiting for with that boy Mssr. Sameer mentioned, the one riding his bicycle? I wondered if maybe the bagmen had gotten to him. Hopefully God had put him in his bag when he was collecting people that day and taken him up to heaven. As I stared at the sky I imagined how He would plant that boy's cracked seed in the clouds, and from it would grow vines that would trail all the way back to earth. And he would return as a

big, ripe juicy watermelon of a boy, with a hearty thick skin and sweet juice coursing through his veins.

I hadn't even known my mom had a sister. Of course I'd talked to my uncle Murad on the telephone and my parents had pictures of him holding me as a baby in the photo album, but an aunt – who knew? I guessed at what she looked like, what color her hair was, and whether she liked to take naps in the afternoon. But what shade were her eyes and what day of the week had she been born on? And her son -- that made him my cousin. I hadn't thought of it that way before. Did he know how to swim, did they even have beaches in Lebanon or did he have to learn in a swimming pool? When was his birthday? Where was his school? How old was he when he had learned to ride a bike, and how long had it taken him? How tall was he? I closed my eyes and tried hard to imagine but all I came up with was an outline of a boy I couldn't fill, like those coloring sheets they gave me at school where I had to color between the lines. I had all the crayons I just didn't know what went where and, in the end, my cousin too remained a dark shadow. Still, we were attached and I felt all of a sudden that I was attached to much more than I actually knew.

I lay on the marble until I felt a sharp burning in my groin, and suddenly I felt an irrepressible urge to pee. I ran into the apartment. My dad noticed the frantic expression on my face and pointed me hurriedly down the corridor to the bathroom. I ran to the door and turned the handle but the handle wouldn't turn. I tried again, hoping for a miraculous change, without luck. My knees locked together and I squeezed just like my dad had told me to do when I had to wait. I bent forward out of sheer pressure, pressed my ear to the door to hear if anyone was inside. I couldn't hear any voice, no water from the tap, no toilet flushing. Only a soft whimpering, as if someone were crying. I could practically



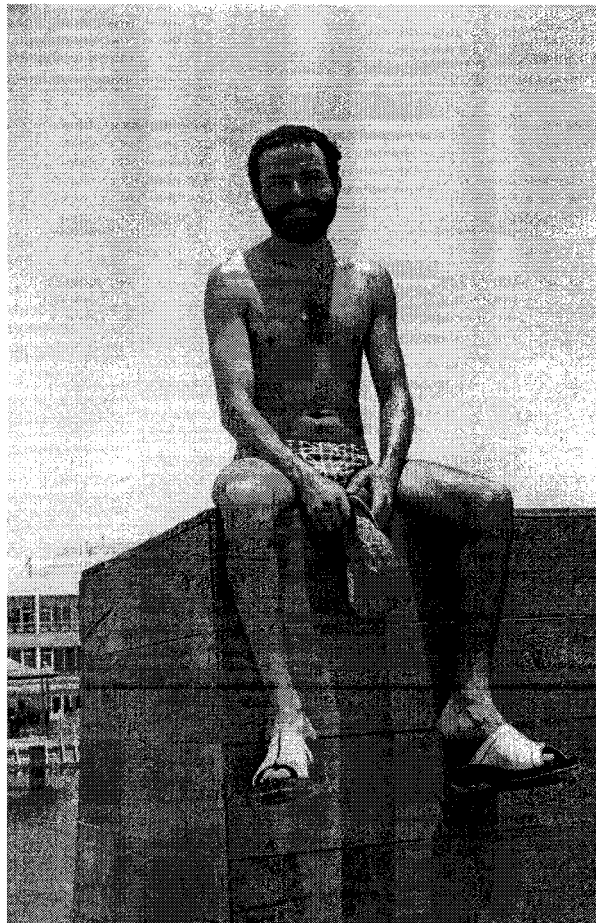
hear urine rumbling in my insides. I can only attest to trying, trying to hold it back but it was too strong. Through the satisfying but altogether humiliating release, a stream flowed down my legs. Soon a puddle formed around my feet. And I wailed at the top of my lungs, and the wailing only got louder as everyone from the living room ran to see what had happened. I'd never been so embarrassed. All of them hovered over me, Mme. Muna asking if I was all right and Mssr. Sameer with that expression on his face, as if this was all very cute.

But then the bathroom door flew open and my mom came out, took me in her arms. She swung me up in the air and I felt like I was flying away from the aftermath of a violence in my shorts, away from all the spectators who had gathered only to look. I wrapped my legs around her waist and she held me very close, her head digging into my neck, and she kept repeating how much she loved me and how everything would be alright as long as we gave it time, that time was a very difficult thing to sit through when you wanted it to run its course, and I think that was the best part about that day.

## IN THE MIX

### SIDE A

My father likes to dye his hair. But his hair has thinned and grayed beyond the false reassurances of the supermarket-brand hair dyes he buys.



As he stands in front of a mirror in the small bathroom adjacent to the master bedroom, his hands toil over the scalp with disposable plastic container and comb. He uses a cheap Greek hair dye that, for the most part, merely coats the hair and then slowly rubs off on almost everything it comes into contact with over the next few weeks. But the low price is irresistible to him. He makes a passing comment, for the most part under his breath, that it was only last year this particular dye introduced the free comb and container feature. Previously he'd created a makeshift container from a discarded mustard tube. The mustard tube still rests on the counter, between a jar of feminine foundation product and the ear- and nose-hair clippers. He stands quietly in a worn undershirt and polyester exercise shorts, his feet bare on the tiled floor as drops of dye run the course of the comb down his hand to his elbow, coming to final rest at a puddle about his toes. This puddle is a murky black. After some time passes, the mixture separates, the water losing its form as it spreads, the dye pushed to the edges of the water, filling in the creases between the tiles. His hands too are stained from finger-tip to wrist with the same black ink. Residue from the running of the comb sprays outward, building along the counter and mirror. He does not waver at the appearance of a mess, thoroughly absorbed in his work.

Once the hair is restored, he turns his attention to the coarse beard.

\*

My father likes to listen to music. On a shelf in the living room, beside the stereo, he keeps six cassettes of songs he has taped from Greek FM radio, and he has labeled each cassette with a large black number. His greatest pride comes from keeping them in order.

On weekday afternoons, he comes home from the office at lunch, undoes his shoes, eats a cucumber and spends the length of the siesta listening to the radio instead of napping. He keeps a tall stool by his stereo, and when he listens to music he places the

tall stool squarely in front of the stereo so that he can listen through large black headphones. He keeps one hand on the tuner in search of the peak of each frequency, and he keeps one finger perpetually hovering around the record button. His tongue, seemingly in an act of determination, slowly curls over his upper lip throughout the course of an afternoon. When a song comes to an end, he stops mouthing along with the lyrics, and his eyes tremble, always anticipating the next song to be one he may want for his cassette. He does not speak, but sometimes he smiles and sometimes he sings aloud and sometimes he sways. His fingers run through his hair. Only when the sewage trucks arrive to salvage the neighborhood pipes of our excess does he interrupt this vigil, and then it is only to shut the window. He undoes his collar, rolls up his sleeves. Without the circulation of air, sweat beads along his forehead and sweat marks the armpits of his shirt. Quickly then, his hand shoots down to the tape deck and, with practiced efficiency, he presses the button to record. His *petite mort* realized, he is happy, and as they are then, the lines under his eyes crease and fold. The finger that has pressed the record button has also impressed a faint black fingerprint.

\*

My father likes to eat black olives and yogurt. After a day at the office, he finds a great deal of pleasure in preparing this snack.

On a small plate he spreads the yogurt round with the belly of a spoon, and then carefully arranges olives around as trim. To finish, he lines the yogurt with olive oil, which he keeps in a miniature decanter to ensure the strips are all evenly thin. And then the plate is ready and then he stands back to admire his handiwork. He wipes his oiled fingers on the lining of his shorts.

A dog down below howls. From the streets the laughter of two boys can be heard.

My father doesn't wear a shirt at home, only an old pair of running shorts. He carries the plate out onto the balcony. He dips a black olive into the white yogurt, lets it carry and collect along the yogurt's surface. He sets the black olive against his lips and bites. He spits the seed over the ledge onto the street. Across the street our neighbour Karl Heisen leans against the railing of his balcony. Karl Heisen has been living here for six months, working on a special contract project for the German embassy in Athens. Karl Heisen is growing a beard like my father's. Back and forth across the street, they talk and laugh in French from balcony to balcony as the sun sets. The sun sets at 9:43 PM.

In the streets below, a speeding motorcycle disrupts a game of soccer played with a crushed can, and throngs of boys scatter. Dust rises from the vacant lot, and mingles with milk-warm evening air. Now dark, the ground cools slightly, and the haze slowly rises. My father switches on the balcony light. The warm, yellow glow glistens against his back. My father is bent over laughing. My father is singing to our neighbor Karl Heisen a song from the radio he recorded earlier that day. My father, yogurt tracing his lips, sings, serenading Karl Heisen to the accompaniment of stray dogs howling at the effluence of a new moon.

\*

My father likes to smoke a cigarette on his birthday. Not that his birthday is the only occasion he celebrates with a cigarette. In the kitchen, with a half-eaten marble pound cake between them, Karl Heisen and my father pass the birthday cigarette back and forth. They take long, wistful drags. My father is a Taurus.

It is early afternoon on a cloudy day. My father has taken the day off work; he is wearing his house shorts. Soon after they have finished the cigarette, my father says, "Shall we listen to some music?"

Karl Heisen nods emphatically. They stand up, make their way to the living room.

"Shall we listen my way, or the regular way?" my father asks.

"Your way," Karl chides.

My father pulls out his stool for Karl, sets it in front of the machine, and plugs in the black headphones. He places them over Karl's ears, then takes Karl's hand, takes Karl's index finger, and fixes it over the record button. As he does this, his cheek brushes against Karl's, their beards bristling against one another.

"There is a tape in the machine," my father explains. "To listen properly, or to listen my way, you keep one finger over the record button at all times and, with your other hand, you carefully tune through the radio band in search of not only the best songs, but also the best frequencies. You want to avoid hisses, static, frequencies joining in unexpectedly. Also, the more you record, the greater your responsibility to make sure there is continuity. In the end, if you are successful, your tape will tell a story, not of the radio but of the way you make things."

My father is leaning over Karl's shoulder as he explains his method. Karl turns slightly, brushing against my father's neck. My father squeezes Karl's shoulder. Later that afternoon, they take a walk together.

\*

My father likes to dance once he's had a few drinks. With a Bloody Caesar in hand he saunters over to the stereo in the living room, swaying gently as he walks. He is drunk.

And when he is drunk he tries to hold a straight face that keeps slipping into a sheepish smile.

Sheepishly smiling, he fingers clumsily through his six cassettes and decides that, on this particular evening, an evening that has my parents entertaining company, his tape number four, with its carefully integrated collection of dance hits and rock ballads, with its swank rhythms and irresistible choruses, he decides that on this particular evening he will entertain his company with his masterful tape four, into which the minute but -- to his eye -- readily noticeable flaws of tapes one and three, the middling record-pause-record hisses, the obvious impatience evidenced in several of the weaker tempo transitions, are finally overcome.

Soft rhythms fill the room.

His right foot, seemingly at the behest of the music, begins to tap. His knees take turns dipping into bends. His right foot takes a swift step back and then returns just as quickly. This is how my father dances when he is drunk. When he is not drunk, he does not dance.

Tipsy thoughts distracted by the music on tape four, he closes his eyes and for a time forgets that he is not alone in the room, that my mother seated on the leather sofa behind him has her arms crossed, that Karl Heisen and his wife Stella are seated on the adjacent leather sofa, and that their six eyes have watched his every move. Look at my mother cross her legs. She is wearing a burnt umber knee-length skirt that she purchased only days before. Quietly she sips at her Sprite through a straw; my mother does not usually drink alcohol. More than two drinks, she says, and she loses her memory.

Stella is already tapping her long plastic nails against the rim of her Ouzo-and-Coke glass, silently mouthing the words to a song by the Pet Shop Boys. The Pet Shop

Boys, who figure prominently on tape four, have already had several hits in Greece this year. People can't resist the deadpan vocals, they can't resist the allure of the cold, synth-based production. Stella has thick black hair cut to her shoulders. Listen closely and she is not so silent after all. She too can't resist a chorus.

Karl Heisen scratches his budding brown beard, then runs his hand across his chest as if to feel the fabric of his shirt. His fingers pass through the open buttons and run through his thick but buoyant chest hair. He has the top four buttons of his shirt undone. The temperature reached 43 degrees Celsius earlier that day, and although the radio has called for thunderstorms, the sky holds its hue and they (the thunder, the storms) have never materialized. Karl Heisen stands. He has his drink in one hand, and he snaps his fingers with the other, as if to say *I like this song*. A wry smile drifts into his expression. He steps forward then back, as if to say, *Look, I'm dancing*. Then he actually says to my father, "Look I'm dancing."

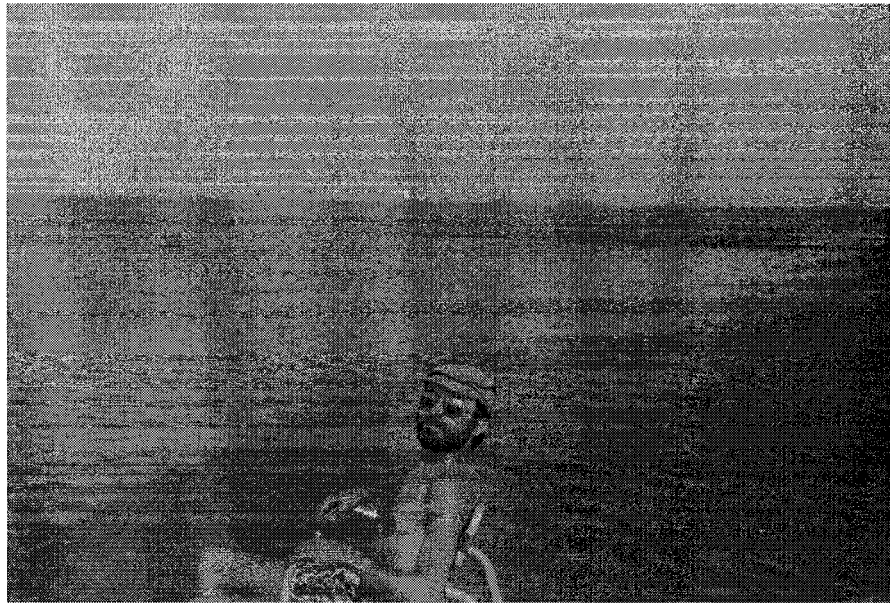
My father, who the moment before had been merely standing with his eyes closed and his hips swaying, comes to from his daze and laughs at the way Karl Heisen dances. Everyone laughs at the way Karl Heisen dances. Karl Heisen dances like a bear on a leash, the kind that dance for money. Then Karl Heisen is dancing by my father, and then he is dancing with my father. My father and Karl Heisen are dancing together, Karl Heisen's hand is slipping behind my father's back. In unison they swivel their hips.

Bloody Caesar spills out of my father's glass, Bloody Caesar slips through my father's fingers. Bloody Caesar drips onto the marble floor, beside where my father's foot taps.

\*



My father likes to go to a beach in Glifada on Saturdays. He likes to leave in the morning so we can maybe find a good spot under a tree where we can park the car and sit for the day.



He stresses the necessity of shade for the car every Saturday morning as we have breakfast. The drive is silent. My father prefers not to listen to the radio unless he is prepared to make a tape. There are wasted-looking trees lurking along the side of the road, and scraggs of bushes branding the bends. Halfway there, we skirt the side of a small desert. The day is clear, the sky is empty. There are trucks selling watermelons and bananas at rest stops along the way. Unbeautiful dark daughters handle the money for their fathers who, while seated in fold-out chairs, flag their arms through the smoke-trails of their perpetual cigarettes. The drive is distant.

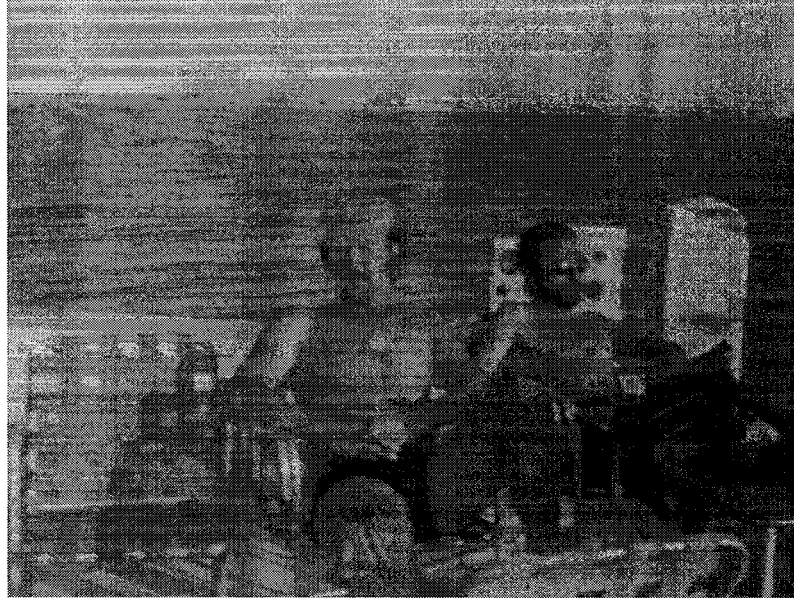
At the near-empty beach on Saturday mornings my father parks the car under the shade of a tree and sets a towel down for himself on the far side of the shade's lip. He

prefers the sun, so much so that straightaway he stands up from his towel and, his Walkman in hand, he goes for a walk along the pebbled shore. At the beach my father goes for a walk along the pebbled shore, walks a good distance to where the beach is still deserted, so that he can sunbathe in the nude. The sun bronzes his skin evenly. The bridge of his nose burns red. He listens to his Walkman, playing back and considering the strengths and weaknesses of the almost-complete tape seven, the imminent greatness of tape seven awaiting its final song. Throw off the atmosphere even slightly and tape seven is ruined. He mutters something mostly to himself concerning Paul Anka, then nods and allows a self-satisfied smile.

Exposed to the elements, black beads of dye slowly separate from his hair and collect and dribble down his temples. The batteries of his walkman begin to fade and the monophonic tin sounds of tape seven grind down to a slow howl. A lone finger marks the sand with a disaffected-looking letter K. Above, a seagull trails through a lazy figure eight. A crushed can, brought in by the waves, laps against the shoreline.

\*

My father likes to go sailing. Which is fortunate because Karl Heisen owns a boat he keeps at a marina on Euboea, an island so close to the mainland it takes only a bridge to get there. Bronzed and newly blacked, my father's body in bathing suit bravely absorbs refractions in light as he stands hands at his hips on the deck. Karl Heisen stands beside him, they stand and look out at the horizon, pointing and nodding, discussing latitudes, longitudes, numbers they can conceptualize as they make plans to touch this distant line. Karl Heisen scratches his budding beard. The temperature on this day is 37 degrees Celsius.



They have a map between them, and there is talk of a remote scrag of land somewhere off the coast of Euboea, an island no bigger than a rumor, too unimportant for coordinates, known only to hobbyists and fishermen. The water is completely still. All is as silent as it looks. The afternoon sun has driven most people into the hulls of their boats or back to their villas for naps. But this rumored island needs to be verified, given validity through some kind of empirical evidence, and the more my father and Karl Heisen discuss it, the more anxious they are to set sail. On this rumored island, wild banana trees grow bananas the length of forearms. Rumor has it there is a beach with black sand on the far shore. Of course, none of this may be true.



My mother says the sea makes her sick. Also, her skin is sensitive to the sun. She stands on the cement dock with Stella, who in her hand carries a basket. Inside this basket there are a jar of cherry jam and a thin loaf of brittle asiago cheese, and some biscuits, but underneath the biscuits there is a blanket and underneath the blanket, five small pies filled the day before with leftover chicken.

The boat is released from the dock, the boat steers away. The boat sets sail, and Stella and my mother seek shelter under the shade of a tree. My mother holds the jam, the cheese, and the biscuits as Stella unfolds the blanket and spreads it along the ground. The blanket is checkered blue. The boat slips further into the distance, drifting away, disappearing behind a bend of boulders out in the open sea. The afternoon is hazy. My mother and Stella spread cherry jam on the biscuits, they slice away slivers from the asiago. It hasn't rained in weeks. The radio talks of a drought, and the leaves on the trees are beginning to lose their colour. Overhead, a plane passes through and then fades away, leaving only a white trail to mark its path. A stray cat, black from the nose to the tip of its

tail, sidles up to my mother's leg, sniffs her fingers, then loses interest and saunters away. Dust rises in circles, threatening to gust into our eyes, then recedes. A car drives by, but its only impressions are the sound of the engine and, faintly, the tires through the gravel. Everything that passes through fades away. Then all is quiet.

The afternoon light shifts as the hours fall away, and when the boat finally returns its sight is preceded only by the sounds of a recently completed tape 7 blaring loudly. The boat drifts in, slowly the sail is brought down. Karl Heisen and my father both seem satisfied; their moods are pleasant. Karl Heisen has his hand on the small of my father's back. My father is grinning. They tie the boat in place, then walk to where my mother and Stella sit under the tree. But Karl Heisen has black ink on the tips of his fingers, and there are smudges of it on his neck. My father has faint black fingerprints on his shoulders. When Karl Heisen turns, his back is also marked with ink.

“What took you so long?” my mother asks.

“We had some trouble with the engine,” my father says.

“What happened?” my mother asks.

My father pauses and looks back at the boat. He takes a few steps in its direction and then for a long while stares out at the open sea.

“What happened out there?” my mother asks.

“We found something new,” my father says.

## IN THE MIX

### SIDE B

My mother doesn't like it when my father dyes his hair. She says he's trying to reclaim a part of his life that has long since passed.



She sits in the living room nervously flipping through a magazine she doesn't even read. Her hair is tied back in a knot. Then she has put the magazine aside, and then she is standing. My mother walks the length of the living room to the hallway leading to their bedroom, where at length she changes out of her teaching clothes and into old jeans and a worn out shirt. Next, she walks to the laundry room. Beside the washing machine, she finds what she is looking for, a bucket. In the basin beside the washer, she fills the bucket with hot water and then mixes in detergent. Above the washer there is a shelf, and on that shelf she finds a large sponge, which she then tosses into the bucket. As she carries the bucket to the bathroom, the sponge expands, its turquoise pores slowly turning blue, pores filling with water, pores filling with soap. By the time she reaches the bathroom, the sponge has grown markedly. She lifts it from the bucket, letting white soap water stream down the length of her arm, onto the tiles. And then she begins scrubbing away at the black stains left by my father's handiwork, stains that have dried and crusted over the course of a mid-morning and an afternoon. The stains are stubborn and my mother has to get down on her hands and knees in order to clean the bathroom tiles properly. It takes upwards of half an hour. Afterward, she shifts her attention to the speckled mirror and walls.

In due length, she stands. With the dry part of her sleeve, she wipes the sweat from her brow. The sink is barely recognizable under its web of black veins. She sighs. She tosses the mustard tube in the garbage.

\*

My mother doesn't like listening to music. A house of hers requires silence. Otherwise, she is prone to horrid headaches.

The curtains are drawn in the bedroom, yet the windows are ajar. From the corner, a fan whirs along in near silence. She lies on the made bed, her shoes still on, a damp rag covering her forehead. Sometimes the heat gives her headaches too. That morning the pain had made teaching laborious; at noon, she'd taken the rest of the day off. A cat wanders in through the window and sniffs at some clothes strewn on the armchair, then leaves as quietly as it came. An hour passes, and my father comes home for his siesta. From the bedroom, she can hear him singing aloud to himself, taking off his shoes, opening and then slamming the refrigerator door. Then he's talking on the phone, he's turned on his stereo and he's having a conversation with Karl. To her, he sounds amused, happy, without a care in the world. "So this is how he is when he's alone," she whispers, although her eyes are closed. His voice changes, she notices, when he talks to Karl. He hangs up the phone. She can hear him drag his stool across the marble floor, she can hear him rustling through his tapes. And slowly then, she falls asleep. Later in the afternoon, she can hear him shuffling around the bedroom, getting changed for his return to the office. Through her haze, as the four aspirin she has taken for the headache have made her drowsy, she says, "Is it happening again?" He walks over to her side of the bed, sits down and puts a finger to her lips. "Sshhh. Nonsense. Go back to sleep." And he kisses her on the tip of her nose. And then she is asleep again.

By the time she rises, an entire afternoon has waned and it is no longer as stiflingly hot. She turns off the fan. Her mouth is very dry; she is thirsty. On her way to the kitchen for a glass of water, she looks to the stereo, stool still squarely in front, and notices that some of the buttons bear black fingerprints. At length, she fetches a Kleenex and wipes them clean.

\*



My mother doesn't like black olives and yogurt. As my father prepares his dish, she says, "I thought you said we left that all behind in Beirut. I thought you said it would be different here." Then she says, "I can't take this happening again." And then she stalks out of the kitchen.

She stalks out of the kitchen and right into the bathroom, and locks the door behind her and hides. Once there, she turns on the sink tap, sits at the edge of the bathtub, and cries. The bathroom has a high ceiling. The ceiling fan turns gently. The early evening sun shines in through the open window. The benevolent sounds of little boys playing soccer in the streets slowly drifts up to the fifth floor. My mother is still partly in her teaching clothes, her long pleated skirt and a tan chemise. She steps up onto the toilet seat and peers out the window. The breeze at this hour has cooled, and she breathes in deeply. She closes her swollen eyes. Tearstains mark her cheeks. Furtively, a remnant dribble escapes the crevice of her eyelid, condenses along the lashes until its weight grows too burdensome, and then breaks a trail down the side of her face, all the while being eased back by the breeze from the window. In due time, the tear reaches the jaw, wavers, and then falls onto her collarbone, rolling swiftly, jaggedly, across slight folds of skin, down her chest, down her chemise, until the silk fabric absorbs what is left and darkens and then disappears. She takes a further step up onto the toilet tank. With her arms now resting on the window's ledge and a full third of her body outside, she peers down. The building's white stucco walls descend past pipes, past wires, past air ducts and still other bathroom windows, to the pavement below. A girl quickly runs past, perhaps entangled in a game of hide and seek, perhaps hiding, perhaps seeking, perhaps hiding unaware of not even being sought. What loneliness, she thinks. That girl is no larger than a coin.



The clap of her sandals fades under the belly of the building, and then all that is left is the stray squawks of seagulls, the hoarse barks of the street dogs. And then, silently, the sun touches the horizon. A motorcycle tears through. Somewhere, in one of the many buildings around this one, someone practices the words of a song along with a cassette. And then they stop.

My mother steps down from the toilet tank, then the toilet seat, and then she is back on the tiles. In the medicine cabinet, she finds one of my father's old razors. When she opens it, she discovers the blade beginning to rust. She unlocks the door, sits at the edge of the tub again, and takes a quick slice at her wrist. The sight of her blood bursting unexpectedly from the gash, flowing and heaving that heavily, down her arm and down her skirt, onto the bathroom tiles, causes her to scream. Somewhere beyond the door, a screen slides open, and footsteps stamp closer.

\*

My mother doesn't like it when my father smokes cigarettes. She says, "We moved away from all our friends and family to get away from the war, and now you make it so I'm lonelier than ever."

They are in their bedroom and the door is closed. Yet the smell of cigarette smoke still wafts into the hallway.

"When are you going to grow up?" she asks. "I can't live like this."

"It's all in your mind," he says.

"If it's all in my mind, then why do I keep seeing evidence all around me?"

"You're too sceptical," he argues.

"And you keep deceiving me. You say one thing, then do another."

"You said it was a phase -- a thing in the past," she says.

"You said it was over," she says.

"You said that once we left we could be a normal family," she says.

There are rules to follow in this household. Otherwise, the skin of it slowly comes loose.

"You can find things buried in everything I do," he says.

"You look too closely and see things that aren't there," he says.

"I can't live in this façade," she says. "I can't go on knowing it's hollow inside."

"There are rules to family," she says. "There are rules to love."

No course of action can be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. My mother comes out of the bedroom and closes the door behind her. Meekly, she shuffles to the kitchen. From the cabinet she pulls out a bottle of sherry and a glass, then sits down at the kitchen table and pours herself a drink.

The night is still, and crickets can be heard from the balcony. The air has cooled. Patiently she sips at her drink, savors the acrid sweetness, and then pours another. After she has finished her second, she walks to the bathroom where, in the medicine cabinet, she finds the gauze and bandages given to her at the hospital, and she sits at the edge of the bathtub and at length goes about redressing the sutures on her wrist, which after three days still bleed through. Behind the toilet and underneath the sink, stubborn spots of blood still mark the tiles. At the tub's edge, remnants of black dye still mark the caulking.

\*

My mother doesn't like when my father dances after a few drinks. After Karl and Stella have left for the evening, she lies on the couch in the living room. He sits on his stool, squarely in front of the stereo, with the headphones covering his ears. Quietly she says, "You keep spitting in my face. I think I love you too much."

Drunkenly, he sways back and forth to the music. She continues. "The truth of the matter is that without you I'm alone. I'm not as rigid as you make me out to be. If this is how things are going to be, then we can come to an agreement. We can compromise." She pauses, takes a sip of her drink. "I can look the other way. I would do that for you."

If everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made to conflict with it. He snaps his fingers to a rhythm only he can hear, and at times he sings along. She goes on. "Just don't make me feel like I'm going crazy. I can't deny what I see and hear. I can't be made out to feel like my mind is playing tricks on me."

For a time, she looks at his back slumped over, as if awaiting a response. Then, as though resigned to the fact that he hasn't heard a single word, she sighs. From under the coffee table, she pulls out a notepad and pencil and begins to write a letter.

She writes:

*Hello,*

*We haven't spoken in a while. I'm so sorry for the way I behaved last week. And for the mess it made in the bathroom. I'm having a bit of a hard time with all this. There are so many things we can't say out loud in this apartment because of D. He's just a little boy. We should let him be that for a little while longer. I miss my sisters and my brother, and I feel bad for not having talked with Souad for so long. You should be a little nicer to me please. I don't know anyone else here, so you get to keep all my secrets. I love you. I know I'm not very good at showing it, but it's true. If you want, I'll keep your secrets. We can be friends again. Do you remember how we used to drive into the mountains before the war started? That war has taken everything apart. I keep hoping it won't take us apart also. I love you so much. I don't know how else to say it. Please don't leave me alone in this strange place.*

She tears the note from the pad, folds it twice, and stands up. Not used to drinking, she stumbles and falls back onto the sofa. She laughs to herself briefly, and then tries again. Languidly, she walks over to the stool where my father sits and wraps her arms around him, pushes the note into his breast pocket and kisses the top of his head. Then she holds him a while longer. In the tape deck, she sees that he is listening to tape seven. His finger is perpetually over the pause button, and the volume is turned down to zero.

\*

My mother doesn't like going to the beach in Glifada. Long hours in the sun give her a heat rash. She says - she says nothing. She goes regardless, in spite of herself.



As the sea ebbs and the shore stretches, the late afternoon idly traversing over the deserted beach, my mother and my father lie in the front seat of the Mercedes Benz, under the shade of a dying tree, windows ajar, arms tressed in arms, the parking brake dividing them, the steering wheel looking on. She wears an old plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a faded pair of cut-off jeans. He wears his bathing trunks and large sunglasses. Her back leans against his chest, his chin rests atop her crown. There are moments when it seems as though they manage to elude the burden of circumstance and slip into a love-like ether of childlike motivations -- a slow drunk-stumbled dance had at a taverna, a quiet morning had at a kitchen table, this. She closes her eyes, smiles. Now his head leans back against the window, now he's looking deep through the leaves and branches at the brightness of the sky. His fingers drift across her chest, then his hand has her breast. Her palm extends, covers the length of his fingers and presses down. In unison they squeeze. Their synchronicity is obscured only by the web of light piercing through the

belly of the dying tree. Otherwise, having reached this contended point, they patiently await the rise of their respective temperatures, the sweat beading along their foreheads, mixing in their hair, waiting in lasting for their skin itself to concede and melt so that they can form a fluid puddle together, of skin, of clothes, of hair dye, on the brown floor mats, seeping and mixing along the leather upholstery, between the seats, in amber on the parking break, allowing their temperatures rise to a heat at which they steadily begin to simmer, then bubble and steam. For it is in their gaseousness that they co-exist, in the slack orgasm they exude when they are simultaneously in excess. They steam and collect along the tapestry of the car ceiling, in their ascent joining at the atom, the steam builds a film along the tapestry and then darkens and then turns black. After their passing, their *petite mort* cools and condenses, at length they drip down, back onto the seats and the floor, uncollecting and reseparating, receding from each other like the late afternoon tide, congealing into awkward deposits and then back to fingers, back to palm, back to breast. To her surprise she finds that her body is covered in smudges and stains from his black hair dye and they laugh; she is marked on her stomach and around her neck. So from the handbag on the dashboard she fetches her bathing suit, puts it on, steps out of the car, and runs the accentuated distance down to the far end of the shore, where in the water she haphazardly and contentedly washes herself clean.

\*

My mother doesn't like to go sailing. After the afternoon excursion to the marina with Karl and Stella, once we've arrived back at the apartment, she says, "You're a horrible and deceiving man. You said it wasn't true."

He says, "I've tried to make it not true. But for me it's too real. I can't lie to myself about who I am."

She falls down on the sofa and buries her face in the cushion. "I don't know what's real anymore and what isn't. The longer I look at this picture, the more uncertain I am of everything that holds it together. I try to put it together, and then you go off with Karl and take it apart."

Hesitantly he sits down beside her, puts his hand on her thigh. "Try not to assume too much."

She turns to face him. "I assume we are married. I assume that we have a child. I assume that together we left the country we grew up in. I assume that life, from the time we left, will be difficult. I also assumed that you had the capacity to stop acting like a child and own up to your responsibilities. Take a look around. Our lives are not carefree. They have conditions."

There are rules to family. There are rules to love. Take for the example a stream of light as it passes through a prism. That light is composed of conditions that hold it together, that keep it singular. However, in passing through a simple piece of glass, in passing through a particular shape, the conditions set upon the light change and it refracts, breaking into a spasm of colors.

My mother does not like to cry when others are in the room. Quickly she picks up a magazine from the coffee table, and flips nervously through its pages without reading any of the articles or looking at any of the pictures. She crosses then uncrosses her legs, and twitches. My father sighs and then stands. In resignation, he takes hold of his stool and sets it in front of the stereo, and plugs in his headphones. Her eyes well and redden, they glisten. She tries to subdue her frown, but it holds. He turns on the radio. His finger hovers over the record button. And then he presses down, and this is what happens. My mother suddenly rises and walks to their bedroom. From underneath the



bed she pulls out a suitcase and begins to pack her clothes. High in the closet she has an envelope, which she presently takes down, and from it removes seven hundred U.S. dollars. Once she has packed her clothes, she walks into my room where I play with toy cars on the floor. She rummages through my closet, grabbing all the clothes she can carry. Then she says, "Come on. Let's go."

I look up from my makeshift raceway and ask, "Where?"

Pause.

THE ARMCHAIR LEARNING  
THEORY

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## **BULL'S UDDER**

Meanwhile in Toronto, seven-year-old child actor Genevieve Tallia was forever being directed from magazine photo shoots to commercial productions. Three years earlier, she had impressed the people at Osh Kosh B-Gosh with her playful demeanor and ardent concentration. Since then, the telephone had been ringing continuously with inquiries about advertising campaigns for plastic dolls and picture books and mayonnaise and children's headache pills. She had even won a semi-prestigious regional award for a full-sized billboard ad.

Genevieve had what every seven-year-old child actor at her school desired. She sat in the back of a rented car on the way to an audition for a cable-television pilot, agent at her side, small carton of milk in her hand. And she wondered if, playing a child detective who week after week foils the plans of an independently wealthy if misguided East European socialite, she wondered if such a role probed deeply enough into her

potential as an actor. The previous evening, Genevieve had overheard her father ask her mother that very question on the telephone.

Drizzle spattered the pane. Genevieve stared out the tinted window of the car. Outside, a stream of midday pedestrians clotted the dry half of the sidewalk beneath the overhangs of storefronts. As the car came to an abrupt stop at a red light, the carton of milk tipped forward and milk soaked into the lap of her pleated skirt. Upon hearing her anguished gasp and seeing the slow trail of milk on the leather upholstery, her agent acted as though she'd been provoked into argument.

"Look what you've done to your skirt!" she scolded. "Now we can't get back the deposit. And these seats. Who's going to -- it's leaking toward my skirt!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Kate," Genevieve managed.

"You can forget about the audition today. They won't see you like this."

Kathryn Malstead, known to all clients under ten as Miss Kate, asked the driver to pull over at the next pay phone, all the while keeping one fearful eye on the wayward trail of milk edging toward her ass. Once the car stopped, she called the casting agents, and haggled and kneaded until she had them agreeing to a rescheduled audition the next day. She then instructed the chauffeur to drive back to the Tallia apartment.

"To Mr. or Mrs. Tallia's?"

"To Mr. Tallia's."

Mr. Arthur Tallia had lived in the apartment on Benson Street ever since his separation from Mrs. Margot Tallia two years prior. He kept a sparsely furnished space, and spent much of his time making calls to prospective funders of his independent film-making

habit, having in the past twelve years completed three features and five shorts, all ambitiously artful, all poorly received.

His first feature, 1975's "Process and Reprocess," had been accepted by the people at the Berlin film festival, where critics and pundits alike had roused what amounted to a small controversy over a full fisted depiction of a prepubescent farmhand being buried alive by manure during the film's climactic seeding accident. Although the film had managed select distribution in several European cities, Tallia remained an unknown in North America, a fact he never failed to mention whenever discussing what he referred to as his artistic martyrdom.

Of his next two forays into feature-length film, 1977's neo-realist epic, "Bullshit," a four-hour existential meditation on the coming-of-age of a wayward steer, most ably capitalized on the slight attention of its predecessor, and earned him the nickname "The Bull" for his bullish and jarring anti-sentimental outlook. Those who saw the film before the untimely bankruptcy of its distributor two weeks into its run considered it an unsung landmark of Canadian cinema. The distributor, who had also financed the lavishly expensive film, blamed Tallia for ruining his life. In a local newspaper he went on record as saying that Tallia's work attracted, apart from critics, only lonely young male types who still lived with their parents, spent rainy afternoons at university libraries reading back-issues of the *Cahiers du Cinema*, and were generally shy and unsuccessful with girls.

1981's sex-collage trilogy, "Custody or Cock," an experimental film in which all actors were depicted only at crotch level and distinguished by symbolically designed pubic hairs, was banned everywhere except in France, where critics found it to be bland and boring.

When Miss Malstead arrived at the apartment with Genevieve, Mr. Tallia was out scouting locations for his third self-financed feature. She used her key to get in. After setting down her purse in the foyer, she said, “Jenny, please go to your room and find yourself a clean pair of pants. And put the skirt by the washer when you’re done.”

Genevieve ran to her room, which contained little more than a single bed and a brand new desk, and took off her soiled skirt. She rummaged through the closet, which contained film lights and a mike boom, but no clothes for a little girl. Bottomless, she ran back into the living room, only to find that Miss Malstead was talking to a client on the phone.

She interrupted. “But all my clothes are still at Mom’s house.”

Miss Malstead let out a frustrated sigh, and cupped the receiver. “I’ll see if we can find you a long sweater in your dad’s things.”

She led her by the hand to her father’s bedroom and distractedly sorted through a drawer of stylish but sombre sweaters. Genevieve stood still with her arms up in the air; eyes fixed on a framed two-tone poster of a derisively grinning Antonin Artaud hanging over the bed. Miss Malstead pulled an olive turtleneck over her head. Mr. Tallia had unopened boxes piled in one corner which, judging by the collection of industry magazines and soiled ashtrays covering their tops, he seemed to be using as tables. Miss Malstead kicked off her heels, lay back on the bed and lit a cigarette. Still on the phone, she patted Genevieve’s head and gestured to the door, which she took to mean that it was time she went to her room. Exhausted from the stress of the impending audition, Genevieve quickly fell asleep.

An hour passed, and when Genevieve opened her eyes she immediately drew two conclusions. Firstly, she had wet not only her bed but also her father’s olive turtleneck.

Secondly, her father was home; he and Miss Malstead could be heard having a rather stern conversation.

With the long arms of the turtleneck dragging on the floor beside her, she tiptoed out of her bedroom and into the hall. Silently she made her way past the door of her father's room, where Miss Malstead, now wearing only a slip, was still in the same pose she'd last left her in on the bed, having a cigarette. Arthur Tallia was pacing back and forth in a pair of torn jeans, compulsively pulling his long hair back away from his eyes. Genevieve made it past her father's bedroom door and into the laundry room without being noticed, where she took off the turtleneck and soaked underwear, and stood naked on the white linoleum. She stared at the wall separating the laundry room from her father's bedroom. She could hear their conversation.

“So she missed the audition then. Because she spilt milk on her skirt?”

“Keep your voice down,” Miss Malstead said. “She's sleeping next door.”

“I need for her to get that contract. Or else I don't have a budget.”

“Don't worry. She's practically a shoo-in. They know her work.”

“Well she better not let me down. No contract for her, no film for me. I've got a lot riding on this. I owe people money. We're already in pre-production.”

That evening Arthur's sometimes live-in girlfriend, Sandra Flemming, the twenty-two year-old semi-Scandinavian actress of “Custody or Cock,” in which she was recognizable only by the wineglass design of her netherhairs, came by the apartment to spend the night and wound up buying groceries and making dinner for both Tallias. Sandra was a diligent vegan, but not a very good cook. They had before them an egg-substitute omelet littered

with lentils and barley and made with special cheese that she announced was actually made of rice.

After the meal, Genevieve was instructed to go wash her hands and, when she returned, Sandra and Arthur had moved to the living room. Seated on the sofa, they were sharing what looked to her like a small, badly made cigarette. A glazed Arthur offered to make tea. He stumbled to the kitchen, leaving Sandra alone with Genevieve. They shared an awkward silence, and then Sandra suggested a game of tic-tac-toe during which she proved to be fervently competitive. When Arthur returned with a tray, Sandra suddenly grew very excited. She insisted they bring out the projector and view one of Arthur's films. Arthur was in an uncharacteristically humble mood, but after some cajoling the projector was brought out.

"What are we going to watch, what are we going to watch?" Genevieve yelled excitedly.

"I'm not sure," Arthur replied.

"I want to watch one I haven't seen yet," Sandra requested, hovering over the plate of biscuits.

"Something with kids!" Genevieve begged.

"Let's see what we have." Arthur perused the shelf where he kept all his film canisters neatly filed. He fingered through them until he landed upon one that struck him as appropriate. Carefully, he pulled the roll from its canister and set it onto the projector.

"What have you decided on?" Sandra asked, lazily stretched out on the couch, her chest covered with crumbs.

Arthur dimmed the lights and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. He pressed his hands together and brought them to his lips.



“It’s a short film, about five minutes long. I made it two years ago. I call it ‘The Circle Is the Only Shape of Things to Come.’”

“Oh how interesting,” Sandra cooed. She giggled to herself, and then looked quite confused. “What’s it about?”

“Well, it’s interesting you should ask.” He sat down beside her and crossed his legs. “I like to think of it as a meditation on the cycle of mistakes that eventually comes to define who we are. We put ourselves in situations that we grow to dislike and then we break free from them. But then we begin to rebuild that very same situation around us all over again.”

Sandra looked confused, and Genevieve was no longer paying attention.

“Take my ex-wife for example. Two years ago she left me because she said I was naïve to want to be a film-maker, and that I was acting childish. And now, she’s about to get married to this man who, from what I can see, acts childish all the time!” He paused and stared pensively out the window. “Yes,” he added distantly, as if a question had been posed, “this short film is about her.”

The projector was turned on, the flickering reel could be heard passing through the machine, and imagery began flashing against the white wall before them.

THE CIRCLE IS THE ONLY SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME  
Written, directed, and produced by Arthur Tallia

INT. BATHHOUSE - DAY

A MAN (52) stands in a wood-paneled bathhouse wearing nothing but a towel, as one of the two bath ATTENDANTS (8 and 10 respectively) carefully shaves his back. The bath behind them is filled to the brim with a milky, white substance.

MAN

I take this mixture with me everywhere. It's good for the skin. Keeps the skin taut and young.

ATTENDANT #1

Sir, I've finished with your back.

The man raises his left leg, and the boy swivels underneath to shave the back of the thigh.

MAN

I first discovered this special bath in a small mountain village seventeen years ago while travelling through Peru. There this ritual has been passed down for generations. I met a man who was one hundred and twenty-seven years old. He was so old he could no longer remember time.

ATTENDANT #2

The bath has defrosted to the proper temperature.

MAN

Good!

(clasping his hands in anticipation)

The MAN walks to the tub, his towel removed by an attendant, and steps into his bath of human seeds, sinking in slowly, steadily, into slippery sperm until he has been swallowed up to his neck. He closes his eyes and hums. The attendants have also been instructed to hum; without three monotonous tones the ritual apparently does not work. When the man rises from his bath he stands very still, his thick coat slowly drying, his shell slowly setting, until he looks as though he has been wound tightly in a cocoon of white threads, from which he then breaks free like a butterfly.

THE END

The film sputtered off its reel, the images ended, and again they sat in the dark living room, staring at a blank white rectangle. Although the film had only taken three minutes and forty-eight seconds to run its course, Sandra was already asleep, Arthur, in awe of his own capabilities, had yet again made himself weepy, and Genevieve was curiously thirsty.

After Genevieve drank a tall glass of orange juice, Arthur carried her to bed and tried to lull her to sleep with a few passages from a book by Thomas Mann. But Arthur's dry mouth tired of reading aloud before Genevieve was asleep. He checked his watch, and promptly excused himself by saying there was an important telephone call he needed to make. He left the room. Soon after, Genevieve could hear cold krautrock coming from the living room.

Genevieve looked around the room, at the new desk and innocuous shadows, and wondered in earnest if she would grow to like this bedroom, this apartment, Sandra, as much as her room at her mother's place. Previously, she'd only ever stayed at her father's every second weekend. But now that her mother's wedding was fast approaching, and she was quite busy with calls to caterers and florists, with bridal showers and shopping excursions, she had thought it best for Genevieve to maybe spend a bit more time with her father. After all, as Genevieve had overheard her mother reminding her sister just last month, Margot had been seventeen when she'd had her. She'd given up a large part of her life with that first marriage and, now that she was remarrying, she wanted to go back and reclaim it, if only to start over again. She and her fiancé had already bought a new semi-detached house in Kleinberg, some ways north of the city, and when they settled in, in a month's time, all of Genevieve's things would be moved into her father's apartment. Genevieve tugged her light blanket into her chest and curled into a ball. She buried his face under the pillow. She had a knot in her throat. After the underside of the pillow had grown damp with her hot breath, she lay her head back on top, cupped her ears, and at last fell asleep.

Two hours passed, and she awoke to another wet bed. The sour smell of urine wafted through the sheets. She lay there unmoving until the puddle had cooled and her clothes had thickened against her skin. A rash like slow fire was spreading across the inside of her right thigh. The orange juice had upset her stomach. Her stomach gurgled and chewed. She winced. She got out of the bed.

On her way to the bathroom to wash herself down, Genevieve noticed that someone was still in the living room. Images flickered once again against the wall. Arthur, his feet up on the table, one empty wine bottle beside them and a second well on its way, seemed deeply entranced by his own work. Sandra was asleep on the couch. On the wall, in black and white, a young girl in a barn was crying as she tugged the teats of an indifferent cow that would give no milk. Quietly Genevieve tiptoed into the room and curled into her father's side. She burrowed her nose into her father's chest like a blind calf.

"All my work has been shit," Arthur moaned. "I can't even apply for a loan on my own to finish my film."

And Genevieve felt quite sad for her father. With her arms wrapped around her father's burgeoning belly, she said, "I miss mom."

Arthur slowly ran his index finger through Genevieve's matted hair.

"You smell like piss," Arthur said.

Genevieve nodded.

## MY LITTLE GENEVA

I remember Genevieve Tallia first joined Ms. Kennedy's class in the eighth grade after being held back one year. She had recently moved from the city to the suburbs. I, with my ability to divide numbers to the fifth decimal and read at a tenth-grade level, had moved up one grade that same year. She was the only person I knew who lived in an apartment, not a house, who had a dad, not a mom. And she was the only person I knew who'd been on television. For a time, although we had between us two years in age, one foot in height, and over forty points in IQ, we were inseparable.

If the world could allow a young boy his own city unto himself, then mine was Genevieve. That mythical city of Geneva, Switzerland, small photo in our social studies textbook, what I imagined to be birthplace to the United Nations, in my imagination housed not delegates and intellects but my daydreams of her and ends to that effect. And for that reason I never called her by her given name, which rolled off my tongue awkwardly and never as I imagined it. I never called my Jenny Tallia the more colloquial

Jen neither. To me she was always My Little Geneva, only unlike the one in Switzerland she seemed unaffected by the rest of the world.

When we went to the convenience store I would say things like "Would My Little Geneva like a Pepsi?" and, of course, she would giggle and blush, she would stamp her foot and bury her head into my shoulder. And perhaps that is why I called her that.

Sometimes when we sat on the bus, I would ask her loudly (using a bad British accent I happened to like at the time) "Chocolate for My Little Geneva?" and she would laugh her irrepressible laugh then punch me in the side. I'd curl into a ball before the shock released its sharp pain, then moan during those few seconds when it felt impossible to open my eyes. But what a small price to pay for having an excuse to keel over into her lap. If I stayed there long enough she began to play with my hair, twisting it around her fingers strand by strand.

My favorite daydream of her involved the two of us in my room, on my race-car-shaped bed, at a time when my parents had gone to the supermarket for the afternoon. My Little Geneva in my room, sitting at the edge of my race car bed, beside the front-tire drawer, with me at her side looking on. She would take off her shirt, and underneath I'd see what I'd previously only caught glimpses of in my mother's fashion magazines. I never considered how My Little Geneva hid things so large and mouth-watering, as I imagined and hoped they would be, in her flat little shirts. But that was not important. Once I imagined those large breasts in my room (expanding like gaseous particles to fill every corner!), any flame of illogic that may have been at work was quickly ignited. I'd lie prone on my bed, intoxicated as the image burned, pressing my eyelids tightly together to ensure the fantasy would not seep out, tilting my head panoramically so as not to forget it for a long time.

Only after these episodes became a habit did I anticipate my nights in the race car bed. With flames of fantasies brushing across the fields of my mind like fire, I would gladly skip to my race car at bedtime, even early, and tug away at the gears to her approving smile, driving until I had run out of gas or fallen asleep at the wheel.

I began spending less time at my desk with my homework and more time in bed driving under the influence. Even when I grew tired of thinking these things, I harvested a necessity I could not -- nor felt the need to -- explain. The slightest implication and I was off. A lick of the lips, her brushing against my leg, her silhouette on the sidewalk, and I was running to the nearest bathroom for quick relief. When she grew suspicious and began asking questions, I explained away what I could, gave up my little run-offs, and sheepishly bore through my time with her, doing my best to suppress my body's involuntary urges, happily failing more often than not.

\*

Richmond Hill was small. There was little to do. My Little Geneva and I sat on the bus, she with arms crossed and I with my head buried in her lap. I, after the third provoked punch, having willfully allowed a happy failure yet again.

The Major Mackenzie bus passed Bathurst Street for the third time when my little actress suddenly found herself bored, and pushed my head from her lap. This was so unexpected I nearly rolled onto the floor. She reached for the cord that rang the bell. The bus came to a stop. As far as we were concerned, beyond Bathurst (in those days) was practically the edge of civilization. Nothing or no one ever came here for any practical reason and even the driver gave us a surprised look when we got off the bus. The bus

pulled away and we were surrounded by fields of brush, all partitioned by wooden fences and lines of trees.

Since it had been her idea to get off here, I wondered if the time had come. Relegated to boyhood for far too long, I hoped I was going to become a man and see tits for the first time without the annoyingly reflective gloss of my mother's fashion magazines. My Little Geneva ran to the wooden fence separating the farmer's fields from the roadside. She looked back, saw that I was still standing where the bus had dropped me off. She ran back and grabbed my hand and dragged me to the fence where we stood, hand in hand, watching the brush grow untended.

"Come on," she said and before I could react she had already crawled under the fence and was standing face to face with me and how I wished at that moment there was no fence dividing us. My Little Geneva leaned over and kissed me. She laughed as only a Little Geneva can laugh, a laugh that soon turned into that approving smile of my daydreams. She ran off into the fields. I crawled under the fence and chased after her.

She ran over the sloping hills and disappeared behind the tree-line divide. Not in the best of shape, I wobbled along, panting, my run reduced to little more than a crooked walk. When I finally caught up, the roads and traffic were over the roll of the hill and beyond our senses. In this slight valley there was she, there was me, beyond that only barren fields stretching like skin over the inclined horizon. A breeze rustled through the brush. I bent over, breathed deeply, spat. My Little Geneva tackled me to the ground, and we rolled around. We came to a stop where she lay on top, her fiery hair tangled in my eyes. Her closely trimmed nails, their purple polish peeling, parted my lips and touched my teeth. Crisp air clouded the breath between us. When she kissed the tip of my nose, I immediately closed my eyes and gave in to her as though she was a dream. All



my efforts, the applications and re-applications, the politics and non-politics, amounted to this one meeting of immigration. And now more than ever, I wanted to become a citizen of My Little Geneva and live peacefully within her borders forever. She kissed my nose again then my forehead and cheek, before coming to a final rest on my lips, the seal of approval on a final set of documents.

I decided that no matter how hard it would be I would never tell anyone about this moment for at least one month, until I'd had time to tell and retell it to myself, until it glazed with a televised shine. All I could see through My Little Geneva's hair was a burning light. Any moment My Little Geneva, her legs straddling my body, would sit up and peel away her layers. She would smile and all would be complete. I kept quiet, intent on not ruining the moment.

And then she did sit up. I bit my lip in anticipation. I didn't blink to ensure that I would not miss even for one second this sequestered sighting. But My Little Geneva was sniffing the air. At first I thought my happy failure had been sniffed out, and I quickly filed through excuses. Then she began listening intently for something in the distance. Then I also heard something. She stood up and began to search it out. I stood and saw that she had wandered off. As she abetted her curiosity I waited for her in our spot with hands in pockets, squinting up at the sun, hopeful she would return and I would get what was surely coming. My Little Geneva's search ended at the foot of several trees. She called me over and I, under the impression she had found an even better spot for our entanglement, ran to her side.

I was not expecting to see what I then saw. In what had, from a distance, appeared to be our ideal scenario, a horse lay on its side cushioned in the wilting leaves. It had a clean white coat. My Little Geneva and I hovered over the horse in awe. Its belly

inflated and deflated with every coarse breath, like a balloon being blown by an inexperienced child. One look at its weakened, bloodshot eyes and we knew it was in too much pain to contest our presence. Sporadically, its hind legs would shudder and twitch. I had no idea how the horse had arrived at this spot, how it had been brought down. There was blood seeping into a small puddle from beneath the horse's tail, and flies had gathered. My stomach began to turn and before I'd had the time to think it through, I was keeled over with my recently digested smoked meat sandwich at my feet, splattered on my shoes and socks. The sight of that animal alone was one thing but with that smell of blood, it was too much to handle. So you can understand my surprise when I turned back and saw what I saw: My Little Geneva down on all fours, her ear pressed against the belly of the animal. Her hands slowly worked across the underside, feeling the nipple, stroking the hide, fingers running through mane. My first inclination was not disgust or repulsion, but envy. Like a cuckold, I had been deceived. An animal had stolen My Little Geneva's hands and attention away from my body for its own. I could barely watch without tears flowing from my eyes. Her eyes lit up. Her mouth gaped open. I was repulsed by the fact that she was enthralled.

"I can feel her heart beat," she announced.

She immersed her ear in the hide and listened closely for a long time with an expression that soon verged on determination. The longer she kept her ear pressed to the animal, the closer they became. She waved me over without raising her head. I, still caught under her influence, involuntarily went over to her side. She pulled me down to my knees, and we sat in front of the horse's belly as we would a church altar.

"Listen to its heart beat," she said.

"No," I said.

But I was not given a choice. She pressed my head down for me, I resisted momentarily then gave way. And as I heard the faint beating of that dying animal's heart fading into the distance, like footsteps walking away, I began to cry. It was all too much for me. I had never seen anything die before. I did not want to see this horse this way. Horses were meant for carnivals and races. Yet My Little Geneva was in a world of her own.

As she listened she whispered slowly, "I can feel our hearts beat at the same time."

She took my hand and held it to her chest, right above the breast, and I saw that she was not lying. I moved away from both her and the animal as soon as she let go of my hand. We stayed on for another two hours. She listened to each beat until the horse finally died.

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A number of strange things happened after that day. I still spent much of my time with My Little Geneva but soon began to realize that all she cared to talk about was the dead horse. She wanted to know everything. For every white hair of the horse's pelt she had a question.

She wanted to know how long it had been lying there before she found it -- if it had walked to that spot beneath the tree on its own, or if a farmer had led it there. Why the farmer, if he indeed existed, hadn't shot her (for *it* invariably became *she*) to put her out of her misery. How old did a horse have to be before a farmer had no use for it anymore? Was that what old horses really looked like? What if it was actually a young

horse? Why did young horses have to die? Shouldn't death only claim the elderly? Shouldn't a horse have a chance to live a full life before it died?

When we were at school, no one made mention of any horse and My Little Geneva was her old self again. Only when we were alone did the topic of the horse come up, as if it were our subject. No matter what I said it could not be avoided. I began to think she saw me only to have someone to listen to her go on about the horse.

For a while she pursued the topic with curiosity, more intrigued than anything, until everything she knew led to questions she could not answer. Erratically dramatic, at that point she would sit down and tell me, never ask me, to hold her head between my hands. Not in any sense of adoration that I might have enjoyed, but as though I were carrying a bowl of hot water in front of me.

She tired of asking herself the same questions day after day and resigned to filling the holes she'd invented within the horse's life. She said it was a technique she had picked up as an actress, to fill in a character's past in order to make sense of them. According to My Little Geneva, the horse had been born in a stable in Keswick -- no, Kleinburg, just like her mother, whom I'd never met. She explained in full detail how the horse had been named Cosmos because she was as bright as a star, and how she had taken to galloping, at the farmer's amazement, earlier than other baby horses he'd raised. She spent much time dwelling over the assumption that Cosmos had been very attached to her mother, but also how it was the Kleinburg farmer who one day decided the young horse would be sold to a farmer in Maple when the crops hadn't yielded as expected. He must have been in desperate need of money, she said, to sell such a good horse, because she had never done anything wrong, not to its mother or farmer. She went on and on in great detail about the eventual depression of the young Cosmos, triggered of course from the

premature separation from her mother, and how at first she had worked for the Maple farmer only reluctantly and then stopped working altogether. And then the inevitable weeping when she asked me who would dare leave a young depressed horse to die when all it asked was to be reunited with its mother not even twenty kilometers away. Was it a crime to miss one's own mother? Was the world filled with cruel men like the Maple farmer?

She would begin to accuse even me of being a cruel man but choke on her words before the accusation was out, and then break down completely, grabbing my hands and cupping them around her ears. Her pigtails would sway against the back of my hands. I would hold her head like that in front of me, at arm's length as she wanted and never closer, as she wept. This continued, as it happened and in my uprooted memories of her, until a stranger walked past or until she tired of crying. She would lift her head, clean off her face with the ends of my shirt, and sniffle.

These times with My Little Geneva were, to be honest, a bit overwhelming for me. It was very difficult to imagine her seated at the edge of my bed smiling approvingly when she cried all the time. And it was almost impossible when I had to hold her head in my hands. Although I could not bring myself to care more about Cosmos, I never let her know this. On occasion, I faked crying along just so she wouldn't feel so alone in the act. When we sat on the bus, I still called her My Little Geneva in the same rather loud voice just to get that old reaction but she no longer punched my side. She merely answered with a distraught "what?" or "huh?" Although I did not understand the whole preoccupation with Cosmos, I could not bring myself to confront her about it. I thought that would humiliate her, and have her think I was belittling her or laughing at her. Soon my appetite for her breasts diminished. I had always wanted her to touch me, but now she

threw herself at me at the first mention of anything that might associate however illogically with that horse, and, in a way, I felt unnecessary.

By the time three months had passed, and February had covered the ground with snow, her emotional tantrums subsided into mourning. One day, she arrived to class dressed in black. It was not in the style of the kids from the high school but a respectful black. The long pleated skirts, the wool stockings, the modest vests. Around that time, she also began being more forward with me. In the park, as we sat shivering on the picnic tables, she would kiss me for long stretches at a time and sometimes leave marks on my neck that I felt I needed to hide. Once she tried to force my hand under her skirt and into her black stockings, but I ran away.

I, too, began to think rather involuntarily about Cosmos whenever in My Little Geneva's presence. So closely associated were the two by now in the scenarios I envisioned that I could not think of one without invariably seeing the other. I was alarmed when the imprint of that dead horse branched off from My Little Geneva to my mother's fashion magazines and, soon, even they grew unappealing. I would lie in my bed, thinking of Cosmos and how I never wanted to touch or think of another girl again.

Another month passed, and My Little Geneva's physical advances turned even needier. She would ask me sudden questions such as "Do you love me?" or "Say you love me," and I of course would say, "Yes, yes, I love you!" But by then I did not mean a word of anything I said to her; I was only playing my part. Only a few months before that day, if she were to have asked me I would have kissed her feet and held her till she pushed me away. Now, I could no longer bring myself to feel. I was numb. When My Little Geneva became needier, I became more distant. I did not want to love anymore. I

decided, those heady days of love were finished. I wanted to spend the rest of my life alone.

In due time, I stopped returning Genevieve's phone calls and when I saw her at school I made sure to hide. Rumors began to drift in from older boys at the neighboring high school about her promiscuous nature and her unbalanced temper, and I thought: good thing to have washed my hands clean of her when I had.

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It was also a well-known fact around the schoolyard that I'd taken up smoking, and that every day after school I could be found at the high school hunting for discarded, half-finished cigarettes beside the storm drains and along the curbs. One day, as I was kneeling down to collect a stash of four (four! I couldn't believe my luck), I heard someone walking up behind me. I turned and there she stood, barely a shadow of the girl I once knew so well. At once she tried to embrace me but I was quick and darted to the side. Then she tried to kiss me, and I had no choice but to push her away. Perhaps in private I could have been less crude but I was fixated on the people at the other end of the street who were sure to be watching intently. I didn't mean for her to fall to the ground.

A group of high-schoolers walked past and slowed down to see if they could catch any gossip, but I stood completely still and soon they went on their way. Genevieve got to her feet. I felt as though I should apologize but could not bring myself to say anything. She began talking and, for the first time in a long while, it was not about the dead horse. She professed her all-too-predictable love for me, how she had kept so many feelings secret, how in this whole universe I was the only person she could trust, how since we'd

stopped talking she hadn't said a word to anyone, not even to her father. She went on about how she felt as though a balloon around her had burst and how she felt so seemingly small without her role or purpose -- all this went over my head, still I nodded sympathetically. She told me she was going through a rough period and that she had a lot, too much, to think about. She hadn't been feeling all that well.

I listened and my stomach softened as I swallowed her confession, and for a while I kept nodding as though I was listening, but in fact I was planning all the wonderful things I would say to her when it was my turn. How wonderful it was to be talking with her again and how I wanted to call her that and have her punch my stomach so I could curl up in her lap and stay there as long as I could. Suddenly, I could not see how we'd parted ways in the first place, and I wanted to tell her that I'd regretted every second apart. How I'd missed her, how I wanted back across the border into my Geneva, how I could never imagine, not even now, my life without her. But I did not get the chance to say anything because I turned -- as she was in mid-sentence -- and ran down the street.

I heard her yell, "Stop, I --"

But her words faded into the distance as I turned the corner.

I ran to the convenience store and stopped only to buy a chocolate bar, and then I ran all the way home. I could never tell her all I thought in public, even though everything I thought was true.

I lay on my bed for a long time and nibbled at my chocolate. I felt awful for what I had done, leaving My Little Geneva on the street like that. She must have hated me, absolutely abhorred me. I could not live with the fact that someone anywhere hated me. Just then, I wanted to be close to her, I wanted her to sit at the edge of my bed. I decided



that after an hour of television, or maybe after dinner, I would phone her and, on a full stomach, explain it all.

Dinner came and went. We had a roast, which I thought was a little too well done. My mom's friend, Geoffrey, who had by then been living with us for several months, talked about his office. We had dessert, and I had a second helping. Throughout I kept thinking of my eventual call to My Little Geneva but quickly left the issue when my thoughts drifted back to images of Cosmos flashing past.

After dessert I decided to quickly flip through the channels before making that call. While I played with the remote, I decided that I did in fact love My Little Geneva, or at least enjoyed her company. Well, the company of the old Geneva who didn't love me back so much. But for her sake, why not? I'd tell her I love her. Maybe if I did, she would recoil and then I could love her from the beginning as I once had. Nevertheless, I got caught up in one television show I watched religiously and then another that I did not usually follow but had a funny first few minutes. During the commercial breaks I thought of calling. However, the urge to appease that third helping of pecan pie was slowly wearing me down with its siren call from the fridge, and so I went to it. I returned to the television and found myself laughing hysterically at the previews for the upcoming show. I spoiled myself and stayed on watching. I would talk to My Little Geneva at school tomorrow. I was too tired to make any calls now as it was. Smoking exhausted me. Briefly, I fell asleep in front of the television with the plate of half-eaten pie resting on my belly.

When Geoffrey came in, I pretended to still be asleep. He picked me up in his arms, carried me to my room as he always did, like there was a hidden manual somewhere he followed, and tucked me into bed. Before turning out the light and leaving

the door slightly ajar, the way I liked it (so I could see the night-light in the hallway), he kissed my forehead. I slept soundly that night.

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The following morning, nine o'clock came and went and still no teacher. Some made paper airplanes, others threw paper balls, some swore, others drew rude caricatures on the chalkboard. Even in my good mood I could not shake the nagging insistence that I still had something to do. A scan of the room once over, then twice, failed to materialize My Little Geneva. At her desk, her chair was empty. I sat in my chair eyeing the door.

This idleness gave me time to conjure a plan of execution. After school we would walk to the convenience store and I would buy her some candy, and then we'd sit at the curb and perhaps, just as an outside chance, I could convince My Little Geneva to split a half-finished cigarette with me. Then we'd walk to the park and lie on the grass before dinner. It would be an apology of actions. A gesture of reconciliation.

I was struck in the head, dangerously close to my eye, by a paper airplane. When I turned I saw none other than Mick keeled over laughing, his fat finger pointed straight at me. I yelled, launching the airplane back at him. It missed. I threw a pen next and that also missed. But it did strike Mark (or Sticky Fingers, his nickname derived from an incident involving a waterlogged porno he'd found in the woods behind the school, and a random desk inspection), who was standing behind Mick. Sticky Fingers began to sob -- even by the eighth grade he was still an overly emotional boy -- his overbite seeping spit all down his chin, for which he was made fun of to no end.

Just as he was tiring of his sobs, Ms. Kennedy walked in and we all hastily took to our seats. I thought she would be fuming at the mess we'd made. But Ms. Kennedy looked pale. She explained that she had some very bad news for us. Maybe, I hoped, that asbestos problem that had closed down the other school was also a problem at our school. Maybe we were going to get the rest of the day off. Ms. Kennedy said that our parents had been notified and that it was very sad the situation could not have been resolved before it had reached that point, everything I'd expect a teacher to say about an asbestos crisis. Asbestos in our schools was no laughing matter. Geoffrey had said just that at dinner once so I considered myself an expert on the subject. To save time, I packed my bag.

Then Ms. Kennedy explained that Genevieve had had an accident, that she would no longer be joining us in class.

“What kind of accident?” asked Megan.

“Well, Genevieve fell off her balcony last night.”

For me, the room went silent. I slipped into a short, repetitive scenario, in which I imagined that balcony I knew so well, and then I imagined my little actress dropping out of the scene. Two girls in the back row were by now in tears and many others looked as if they were holding back. For a while it seemed the whole class would have a good cry in unison. But not me. I had no urge to cry or do anything else for that matter. I noticed the other kids looking at me, watching for my reaction, as if this whole situation was arranged for my reaction. Throughout the day, classmates pulled me aside to ask the inquisitive “But aren't you sad?” to which I replied consistently with a curt no and returned to whatever it was I was doing. Still, I sensed they were whispering things behind my back or as I walked by. Even Ms. Kennedy pulled me aside at the end of the day to ask if there was anything I wanted to discuss. But I knew she was hiding her real

motives and thus exhausted several minutes complaining about asbestos before running out of the room.

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What is real, and what is a deception? I spent the better part of that afternoon climbing trees in the park. I ran up their trunks and, luck permitting, caught a branch. When my hands grabbed hold of air I tumbled down, bounded back, and tried again. My hands blistered, my sides bruised. I was exhausted. Still I was compelled to climb those trees even though I'd never taken an interest in climbing before. Higher up in the trees branches shook under my weight, balance was lost, and down I'd come. I'd sprawl on my back, winded, aching, imagining that my skin was made from bricks and mortar, my bones from rods of steel.

When I arrived home, my mom was waiting for me at the front door.

"The school called today," she said. "Is there anything you would like to talk about?"

"Well, I think we've got asbestos in the walls and I talked about it with Ms. Kennedy but she didn't know but they had that problem over at the other school you know like dad said but what I can't figure out is why they don't close the school down and clear it out already before someone gets sick..."

She put her arms around me as I went on about various forms of insulation. Her fingers ran through my hair and her body was warm; she put a finger to my lips, interrupting me.

“Come, sit.” She walked me over to the sofa. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to. We’ll just sit and if you feel like it, we can have a chat.”

“Oh no mom I can’t sit on the sofa in these clothes. I’ll get dirt all over the cushions I’ve been on the slides and swings all day. You can’t imagine --” and before I had finished that sentence I was running up the stairs and into the bathroom, where I quickly stripped and jumped into the shower. I scrubbed my skin vigorously with a sponge.

At dinner my mom and Geoffrey were extra quiet. Geoffrey did not go on about municipal politics. My mom, always less subtle, did not take her eyes off me throughout the meal.

I tried to go about the evening as though nothing was wrong. I played drums with chicken legs. I made a dartboard of my mashed potatoes and proceeded to spit peas onto it. I sang songs. My audience was unmoved in their silence.

“Geoffrey, why’s asbestos such a big deal anyway?” I finally asked, unable to bear the silence.

“Well... let’s see.” He wiped his brow, exchanging a long glance with my mom. “Asbestos is a good insulator... I think... in that way it’s good for you... but it’s a poison too... the longer it stays behind walls.... umm... the more poisonous it gets.... but in order to get the asbestos out of a building... you kinda have to take the bricks apart... so it just sits there festering... and getting worse until people get sick.”

“How sick?”

“Pretty sick... some people die from it.”

The mere mention of death was enough to send my mom into tears. Before Geoffrey could think of any comforting words, her arms were around my neck, her hands pressing my head into her breasts. She cried and cried, as she cried she went on about how I was a poor, poor boy, the pain I must be going through, how horrible it is to lose a friend, and the shock I must be in. But I wasn't in any shock. I wasn't anything.

She pressed my head against her chest so tightly I was convinced she was trying to push me back inside her. I was rubbed and rearranged, soon I was through the loose-hanging collar of her blouse. I heard her heart racing, each beat louder than the one before it, as my ear pressed against her hot skin. I did my best to remain quiet, kept telling myself that this was all for my mom's sake. But then the rhythm of her heartbeat reminded me of Cosmos, and the path of association projected before me that fateful white horse. Only in my memory, its coat was so white it burned a void into the celluloid. I tried to pull away but she fought against me. In my struggle my ear caught the button of her shirt and pulled the fabric. I saw that she was not wearing a bra that evening. Cosmos gave way to the sight of my first breast, the nipple much larger than my own, or any I'd ever imagined from under the thin clothes of the women in fashion magazines.

Perhaps I stared at the breast too long, for immediately I sensed the Geoffrey's eyes bearing down on me. I looked his way, and his arms were crossed, he wore a stern frown. Of course, Geoffrey wore a stern frown wherever he went, even to the movies.

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I spent the rest of that evening in my room behind a closed door. Every so often my mom knocked, asking if I was all right. She had with her a plate of dessert, which she made sure to describe at length.

I was humiliated, not only for having seen her breast in front of Geoffrey, but more so for not effacing the image. Whereas I had only seen one, I now imagined the other, both side by side, now the nipple the size of my open mouth, now its tip the size of my pinky. And with this I placed my pinky in my mouth, both disgusted and exhilarated that I could think such a thing.

Even though I tried my hardest not to think of My Little Geneva, the express intent of not wanting to think about her led me to think of her obsessively. Her image constantly came to mind; no matter what I thought, it always orbited back to her. If I consciously tried to think of my favorite things -- pecan pie, chocolate bars from the convenience store, finding cigarettes -- she appeared plop from nowhere. If she had indeed been there in whatever memory popped up, then all else was cropped away and she was all I focused on. If she had not taken part in the experience, then she alone made the memory bittersweet by intruding upon it.

As I prepared for bed that night the fantasy of My Little Geneva smiling approvingly at the edge of my bed returned for the first time in a long time and I tugged at the gears while I could. Unfortunately, it deviated the more I thought about it and soon it was my mother who sat at the edge of my bed smiling approvingly in a way particular only to mothers, my mother with her breasts exposed. I tugged and tugged until I thought I bruised myself and then I tugged some more. My arm hurt, my heart raced until I was short of breath, my sheets damp with sweat.

So immersed was I in reaching my destination that I did not realize that my mother had opened the door without knocking. My racecar swerved to an abrupt stop. I lay frozen in my indecent pose. She held a plate of pecan pie in one hand. She still had the door knob in the other. Her head shook grimly as she turned off the lights. She closed the door behind her.

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The next morning I felt sick. My mom took my temperature, but I had no fever. Still, soon after I threw up all over myself. Mom dabbed at the mess with a towel as I concentrated on questions lined up like foreign delegates before my eyes, each demanding its rightful allowance in answers. She called the school and told them I would not be attending that day. Poor me. I checked and rechecked the accounts: it was true. I was bankrupt of all explanations or motives. Why had she jumped? How much did my mom know? Was she disappointed in me? One by one, questions took up chairs around my mind. When all delegates were seated they began yelling at me in unison, each in a different tongue. The verdict was clear. War could not be avoided.

I took a nap. When I woke up I felt better. I called out for my mom, then remembered she'd gone out for several hours to run errands. Slowly I made my way down the stairs to the kitchen where I searched all the cabinets for chocolate. We had none. She wouldn't be back for two more hours. I had to get the chocolate myself. Twenty minutes to put on a pair of pants and jacket. I walked to the convenience store.

At the store I bought two chocolate bars. I ate both in no time while sitting on the curb. Eating that second bar made me want to talk to My Little Geneva, to apologize as



I'd wanted to do for the last two days. And I was beginning to get the feeling that perhaps if I'd called that night as I'd intended, she would be sitting beside me now, eating chocolate and punching me in the side when I called her My Little Geneva. My head could have been buried in her lap. I went back into the store and bought another chocolate bar.

I nibbled on the third chocolate of the morning and walked through the streets aimlessly. I passed the public swimming pool and municipal hall, the high school and the basketball courts. I walked until I found myself standing in front of the apartment complex where My Little Geneva had lived. I found her balcony and began searching for the spot where she had landed. It wasn't too hard. The owners had removed the sod only last year, replacing it with Uni-Lock bricks.

The caretaker had done his best to remove the stain, but the scene was still framed by police tape. I crossed the border, got down on my hands and knees for a closer look and began crawling around in search for any clue, a line of blood residue, anything that would define her boundaries. Finally I discovered a faint trace of a line within the mortar that bordered a discoloration. I followed it as best I could with my finger and, to my dismay, saw that the trouble with finding the stain was not its dissipation but its size. The whole time I'd been looking for something that was surrounding me on all sides. I quickly stood, took a few steps back. The stain stretched not one or two but seven feet across, stopping only where the wall began. I'd been crawling around in it.

I walked up the steps leading to the front entrance and sat on the top step. In one of the potted plants beside me I found a half-finished cigarette, which I lit mechanically. From my seat I could see the whole of the stain sprawled across the path. The shape wasn't exactly a circle. It was shaped more like one of those amoebas we'd looked at

under the microscope at school. Those amoebas were funny little creatures, the tiniest creatures in existence. I remember My Little Geneva was my partner for that exercise.

We'd taken turns looking into the microscope, well, sneaking what looks we could get until one pushed the other aside. "They're so tiny," she'd said, "Look how tiny they are. And look! Look at all that stuff inside them. Circles and lines everywhere. It looks like the solar system. There's Mars and there's Jupiter and there's the Milky Way. These tiny things have a whole other universe inside them. You know what that means. You could be in an amoeba."

I recall gagging and laughing at the same time, making as if to grope my way out of my imaginary amoeba by walking in circles like a blind man. She laughed as I did this, I remember, and I did too. And that was all I could remember from that science experiment. Two kids in front of a microscope, under a microscope, obviously in love, oblivious to love, laughing, pretending to be blind inside an amoeba as they stumbled around in circles.

After my smoke, I knelt down again beside the stain and examined it. A few more rain falls and it would be gone for good. No more Geneva for me. I wanted to stay next to it until that happened, but I knew my mom would be getting home soon. Before I walked back home I put my ear to the stain, just to see if maybe I could hear her heart beating. Of course, the ground did not make a sound, but wanting so badly to hear it I deceived myself into it being there, beating still.

## A SPECIOUS PRESENCE

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When two particular types of people first fall in love they begin to look tired, as if they've been losing sleep, and in truth that's exactly what they've been doing, as together they assemble precarious excuses as to why *her* presence isn't really required or even all that encouraged at a designer's symposium on the transition from the plastic to graphic arts, as to why *he* doesn't really need to finish reading *Go Down, Moses* and all its relating contextual materials in the next twenty-four hours, so they are languid, they are still elated at the spontaneity of the fact that they actually met, almost instinctively they avoid her two roommates and lock themselves into her bedroom for the evening where they sit on her bed, each anticipating their own nervous twitches and reading into every move the other makes, and on the small portable television and VCR they have dragged in from what has been agreed upon by all three co-habitants to be a living room, on this small portable television and VCR they watch old Cronenberg films which they both prefer to new Cronenberg films, and of course after going for a brief walk at one in the

morning they decide that they should watch more films because, as they've discussed, it's rare that two people who love films this much should ever meet, and they watch something terribly obscure and terribly Russian (by Balabanov!) because he is excited to have found it at the video store at all; partly as if to prove his perceptions are unique and partly because the subtitles are too grainy to read, throughout the film he recounts the story and circumstances of the only other time he saw that terribly obscure and Russian film and she nods attentively and begins to stroke his hand as if to say, "Yes, I do find that your perceptions are unique", then later after the film has ended and it is really too late for anyone to go home, they lie together on the bed and she confides in him a select number of confessional stories about people she's dated in the past, going out of her way to stress the inherent vagueness of people, and as she confides in him he turns on his side toward her and lightly runs a finger across the bridge of her nose as if to say, "Yes, I admire that you are what is culturally and even more so theoretically deemed a modern woman" then kisses her on an eyebrow, she kisses him on the chin, his slow hand settles on her hip and squeezes gently, she says something positive about the broadness of his back, and then they're both locked into what they later, much later, glazedly and satisfyingly refer to as their first hardcore make-out session, lasting well into the burgeoning dawn so as to justify the hardcoredness yet never quite successfully achieving the heavy pet that, at the time, he seemed to skirt and hint at as directly as indirectness would allow, advances to which she, at the time, seemed morally and reputationally conflicted, a factor that they both agreed, the next afternoon over breakfast, relegated their tournament of frivolous sweat and aching groins to a mere make-out.

But for a brief, unevaluable stroke of time they had arrested adolescence again. But maybe it's the lack of sleep talking. He can't tell anymore. The first several days of

sharing a bed with her are the hardest. He is too excited at the thought of sleeping next to someone else, and this makes him all too aware of how she lies and moves in her sleep. He notices that she has a habit, too, of occasionally talking through her dreams and his curiosity of course beckons him to listen for any sound she may or may not make. He tries reading in bed to tire his eyes, to no avail. His days begin to suffer. Then part of an intangible, unseeable sort of will thing breaks, and he begins to clumsily adapt. The conditions of not sleeping develop their own strange logic that he begins to notice after having rounded the cycle several times. He gets used to his eyes hurting all the time, and the way lights in general everywhere glow brighter. His meals begin to spread further apart. Soon dinner is a meal had at eleven at night. He feels resigned to his new affectual insomnia, but also compelled to keep acting the way he normally does, to follow the rules of habit as he remembers them being before this lofty digression from his course work. But naturally he finds that he must articulate in some manner the hypothetical and as of yet untested conditions of his own inflicted fondness for her, to offer up to her (as he is fully aware that he is in a phase of projecting an idealized her) an ideal body for his disparaging benevolence and enthusiasm and concern and that other word he doesn't quite want to say, an ideal body that will fully and unquestionably absorb every single one of his affections without affectation, without reflecting or refracting, to create for her this small capsule, this blackbody for their consequent, as of yet unknown memories and desires, of their perpetuated reveries and skinless emotions, and to do this no less as directly as indirection will allow, and so as a symbol of his unbroken, undamaged acceptance of her entrance into his now sleep-deprived life he spends his private time over the next nine days compiling for her, with all meticulousness and care, a mix tape.

## THE PRESENT TOGETHER

Wednesday evenings Aidan had dinner at Nadia's place. He would have rather they dined elsewhere -- her basement apartment made him claustrophobic -- however neither could afford that sort of luxury on a weekly basis. He arrived promptly at eight, unhinged the wrought-iron gate carefully so as not to disturb the landlord's son in the main house, and made his way around the side, down the steps into the damp alcove under the back porch. The wind wandered in and out of the stairwell, bringing along with it dead leaves that piled up in the doorway. Aidan was hungrier than usual. He rang the doorbell. That afternoon he had foregone lunch to take care of a problem at the pet store. A shipment of four grisons, weasel-like creatures from South America, had been held at the border; the border patrol had claimed misfiled paperwork, and Aidan had argued otherwise. The shipment had finally been cleared after several hours of back and forth. The year before, while completing his undergraduate degree in the humanities, he had never imagined

himself in such situations. He was cranky. When Nadia answered the door, he asked right away, “What are we having?”

“It’s not ready just yet. It still needs a few minutes.”

He walked into the apartment and shed his heavy coat, in need of a cigarette, only to discover the armchair in which he normally sat to have his smoke had been moved, relegated to a corner of the room by the desk. Next to the television stood a giant, statuesque capsule.

This giant capsule was three feet shorter than Aidan and twice as wide. Its main compartment, made of a bright green plastic, gave way to a second clear, soil-filled basin beneath it. A semi-erect, rod-shaped tap shot forth proudly from its mid-section, under which rested a bucket. Four thin legs supported the whole structure. He walked around it apprehensively, not wanting to get too close, inspecting its handles on each side, contemplating its large lid, peering into its soil-filled base container. The soil held rotting fruit skins and rinds, whole fruit gone bad, bits of hair, and coffee grind. Worms slithered in and out of the soil like serpents.

“Do you like it?” Nadia asked, setting a tray of coffee and biscuits on the coffee table. She sat down and added cream and sugar, one spoon for her, two for him.

“Do I like it?” Aidan repeated mockingly. “I don’t know. Should I like it? What is it?” He paced back and forth like a child, as he often did when he was introduced to changes he did not agree with. “It’s kind of, you know, not exactly pleasing to the eye.” He walked around it again. “It looks like a giant trash can.”

“Oh, relax dummy,” Nadia said. “It’s just an indoor composter.”

“An indoor composter? That’s quite a commitment.”

“I’m committed to the environment,” she announced, handing him his coffee.

“And since when?”

“Since they were having a sale at the Canadian Tire.”

“Look, you already have soil under your nails,” he pointed out, taking hold of her hand. “I can’t believe you’re bringing that kind of trash into the apartment.”

As if to defend her new acquisition, Nadia pulled her hands away and fondled the tap. A stroke here, a pull there, and soon the tap spat out a thin brownish liquid into the bucket.

“See,” she beamed. “It’s more than a trash can! They call that liquid tea. It contains some very important minerals and nutrients. My mother can use it in her garden.”

“If your mother wants all this tea, why not have this all at her house?”

“Really, now. I didn’t think you’d be so childish.”

He protested, stamping his foot. “Dirt will start showing up everywhere. On the carpet, between the sofa cushions, in the kitchen, on the bed.” He paused. “In our bed!”

She sat down on the sofa and crossed her legs. “That’s why it’s in *my* apartment. And listen to you. Our bed. Really? I was under the impression that little Danny liked his space. And now *our* bed! That’s not what you were saying when I asked you if you wanted to move in with me when I took this place. No, you would rather stay at mommy’s.”

“Only because she’s been so lonely since Geoffrey left.”

He sat down beside her and sipped his coffee. He lit another cigarette. She stood and walked to the stove. They were having shawarma sandwiches with clementines for dessert. Throughout the meal they apologized for the tone of their remarks, and then he asked questions about her latest projects. She talked candidly about her graphic designs,



which she took a great deal of pride in doing, and he did his best to avoid looking at the composter. Still, the thought of those worms, that soil, all that food breaking down, in the end caused his appetite to fade. Moreover, he was distracted by the smell emanating from the bucket of tea. He spent more time playing with his food than eating it. When she decided he would eat no more, Nadia cleared the table. She poured two more coffees and brought them over.

“Besides,” she said, “it’s for the environment. The environment and this apartment,” Nadia corrected. “I’ll be killing two birds with one stone.” She demonstrated by pretending to throw stones at him with her free hand. Aidan laughed out of spite and Nadia could not help but laugh with him, in spite of herself. Laughing made her attractive, the way her cheeks would bunch up, how her lips would first stretch then part, how her tongue nestled into her teeth. He circled around her, relieved they could still escape to little games, and then attacked her on the sofa where they wrestled playfully, as they used to a long time ago. He pulled at her shirt, she at his hair. Soon their clothes were strewn around the room. Her skin to him felt ripe, like a good pear, and he half expected juice trailing down his chin once he dug in. He was ready for the bite but when he looked down he saw not a terrific erection but a furtive worm, dangling lazily. He lay back and took a deep breath.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“Really, Neddy, they’re disgusting. Plus, this apartment is cramped as it is. It gets so stuffy and hard to breathe in here sometimes, especially in the summer. Can you imagine the smell?”

No matter how he tried, Aidan could not rid his clothes of a smell that, to his recollection, had not been attached to him before the dinner. Throughout his subway ride, he batted the flaps of his coat and rubbed down the legs of his pants in an effort to rid himself of the scent. The smell was not one but a mixture. He was certain of the sharp scent of rotting fruit, he recognized this from his refrigerator, but never had it clung to him so insistently. And with it came dankness, like clothes that had fallen off the line and lain in the mud during a rainstorm. The air he had inhaled in that already stale basement had made him tired, and he was convinced that it, above all, had been the source of his impotence.

He had never been impotent before. Impotence seized his mind until he felt he would be absolved of the problem. How his body felt so entirely perishable, disposable. The multi-faceted circumstances he called his life seemingly drained away like the street's slush into the gutter, and all he was left with was the providence of his sole task, the single condition attached to his life, that he be a carrier for one immortal seed handed down from one generation to the next. The muscles could build, the skin could stretch, his mind could expand, but in the end it was all wasted. To hell with that composter, he thought. Things with Nadia can never be the same with it there. But in truth he knew they hadn't been the same for a long time. He imagined all those before him, right back to Adam, all throwing up their arms in disappointment.

He despised his job at the pet store, as he did Nadia's relative success as a graphic designer. He considered it beneath him, a student of philosophy and literature, and was angered by the circumstances of a world that had no value for his kind yet upheld those who had been trained rather than educated.

He wandered through these thoughts as he got off the train at College Station. It was not his usual stop, but the stench of his clothes in his nostrils had grown too powerful for him, and he thought a good walk would be just the thing to get rid of it. He made his way up the stairs and walked down Carlton Street. Stray flakes scattered along the street. He passed the Carlton cinemas, where Nadia and he had sometimes seen films. They hardly went there anymore. Aidan maintained it had slowly devolved into a second-run theatre for bigger films and a halfway house for many films that didn't deserve the screen. Instead he insisted they go to the Cinematheque where they could watch older, uncompromised foreign films.

Aidan crossed the street and went into the Honeybee convenience store. He withdrew several hundred dollars from the ATM machine at the back of the store. He spent a dollar thirty-five on an iced tea and walked out of the store.

From the vegetable stand in front of the Honeybee, Aidan could see where the prostitutes paced nervously. He drank most of the iced tea without pausing, unable to shake a persistent dryness from his throat. The plan was childish: a childish and selfish plan. Sex with Nadia was free. Once, it had even been passionate. But now it was routine, a fixture in their lives like buying groceries or paying the phone bill. Their sex had wilted with age, giving way to gravity pulling it slowly back into the earth. Granted, for a time, a time so far away now it could barely be recalled, the act had seeded the whole bed of their relationship, and he'd often imagined coital bees bursting at the highest pitch of orgasm from his hive to seed messages in the folds of her body. But seasons change, the weather turns cold, and neither of their bodies wanted to discuss it.

Aidan walked along, avoiding eye contact with the rastafarians on bicycles and the old men drinking from brown paper bags, the people oblivious to the cold who'd given up and those who were losing faith in trying. There was a sense of community in danger, a feeling that it could all be gone at any given moment, that it was all out of their hands, a feeling that drove people here out of their privacy and into the streets at night.

He passed Caribbean women much taller than himself, with chiseled jaws and masculine cheekbones; women who made it a matter of course to wear fire-red wigs after dusk. One yelled from across the street, "Aay! Big Buoy! You lookin a lady?" Aidan raised his hand modestly, in a way to avoid attracting attention, and waved his 'No, thank you'.

Up the street he saw toothless women whose smiles, he supposed, were an acquired taste for the more frequent and adventurous customers. Several men strolled about as one would at an art gallery, with hands in pockets and a keen regard for authenticity. It seemed to Aidan that he was impressed and not so impressed for all the wrong reasons. In this fashion, he came upon the discrete-looking girl standing in front of a yellow newspaper box. She had pale skin like mayonnaise gone bad, unlike Nadia, who had color in her cheeks. Her glitter dress, fishnet stockings, and brown stilettos did little to guard against the wind. Her face, unlike the others, did not bear the lines of cold nights and bad customers. She wore her hair in pigtails.

Suddenly unaware of the cold, she greeted him with a thick Quebecois accent. "What can I do for a grand garcon comme toi?" He spent several minutes attempting small talk, then feebly gave in. She quoted him a price that seemed high, nevertheless he accepted. They were off to a locale of his suggestion. They walked up the street until they came to the shabby Hotel Selby. Aidan had seen the building's better days, before

the paint had been stripped from the entrance, before the bronze sign above the door had lost its shine. He'd come with Nadia, they'd come here often. A few years ago, this was all they could afford in terms of an escape from her room-mates and his mother. In the stale rooms conged with dust and moths, surrounded by the cracks in the walls and the water-damaged bathroom, they'd made love for the first time. The hotel now played host to the overflow from a nightclub at the side of the building.

“Here we are,” he said, smiling and holding both her hands. They stood on the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

“Yes, here we are.” She smiled too, a smile that helped him forget who she was and what she did. He placed his arm around her waist and held her close, just as he remembered doing with Nadia that first time. And he felt he could soon be in love again.

He led her in and did all the talking at the reception desk. The smell of donuts from the twenty-four hour continental breakfast filled the air as it always had and he breathed in deeply. He looked around the lobby, remembering when he and Nadia had stood there, in the very same spot, waiting for the clerk to check them in, oblivious to the world and unable to keep their hands off each other. The clerk had teased them and they'd laughed into each other's shoulders, unaware of rare moments that could never be revisited.

Aidan pulled her by the arm, leading her to the stairs. As they walked through the narrow corridors he was overwhelmed by a warm familiarity, as if returning home. He unlocked the door and turned on the lights. He already knew that if they were to open the curtains they'd see into the next building over, and if they were to open the windows they'd hear beats blaring from the club directly beneath them. The sheets were still the same faded green and he recalled how nothing had mattered that first time, only that they

were together and they wanted to remain as close together as possible for as long as they could. The bed had given them an excuse to stay in each other's arms. He locked the door, sensing he could now be alone with his memories undisturbed.

"I must ask for the money now. That way we don't have to think about it later," she said to him. He gave her an annoyed glance as he reached for his wallet.

"What shall I call you?" he asked.

"I don't know. Whatever you like. You can call me Mary or Debbie or Daisy. Most guys like to call me by the names of women they know."

"Is Geneva alright?"

"Have you ever been with a woman like me?" Geneva asked.

With his hands in his pockets he walked to the window and inspected the view. Only the view was obscured by wet snow. Geneva had a mole on her neck, her only striking feature.

"I don't think I can ever be with anyone," he said with vindication, pride.

Geneva placed her foot on the bed and rolled down her stocking. From the cigarette nestled between her lips, smoke poured like milk into her eyes. An assortment of bills bulged from the cup of her bra. Her perfume did little to cover the traces of under-arm deodorant and alcohol. . Once her stockings were off, he was incensed by the smell of her feet. Chips of plaster, lacing the carpet in one corner, distracted him. The ceiling directly above was slowly giving way to water damage.

"You remind me of a girl I once knew," he said, taking off his coat and resting it on the back of a chair.

"A girl you once loved perhaps?"

"Only in my fantasies."

“You men are all alike.”

“Yes,” he found himself agreeing. “I am but one of a large pack of grisons.”

“Grisons?”

“Yes, grisons. Small animals, from South America, very much like the weasel.”

“It’s very warm down there,” she noted. “They must enjoy living in heat.”

“Actually, the grison is a very peculiar animal. Its tail makes up approximately half its length and it spends most of its time chasing it in circles.”

“Chasing his tail in circles,” she laughed, her hand to her mouth.

“Yes, chasing their tails in circles.” He grinned nervously.

She fell on the bed laughing and, after several confused gestures, he thought it best to sit down beside her. “Stop it, silly,” she exclaimed. “What kind of animal would chase its tail in a circle for most of its life? It doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re telling me it doesn’t make sense,” he said, as she took hold of his hands and pulled him down toward her. “But these things have been studied. They have documentaries about this kind of stuff on television. Very popular with female scientists. In fact, there is a debate as to why the grison chases his tail so religiously.”

“Oh yeah, Mr. Jokes? And what have they decided?” She bit his collar, pulling at it until the button came loose.

Nervous, he spoke quickly. “Well, one camp argues that the chase gives the grison hope when he finds himself ever closer to his other end.” She licked his cheek. He giggled. She kissed his neck.

“Tell me,” she moaned. “Can I help you catch your tail?”

“Maybe this little weasel will make do with a false sense of hope,” he continued. “In any case, the other camp, with whom I happen to side, reasons that this animal runs in

circles for the sheer act of running somewhere at all, the tail acting as a decoy for onlookers.”

She bit playfully at his throat. “But why then? Why would they run at all?” She purred.

“That’s a good question. Grisons also have unusually long tongues which they let dangle from their jaws.”

“Silly animals,” she whispered coyly. “Silly, just like you.”

“So when they run the tip of this long tongue beats incessantly between their hind legs. And this is the only time the grison shows any sign of pleasure.”

She laughed at the idea, they rolled together until she was on top. She began to unbutton his shirt. “So they run for kicks?” she asked.

“In the end, who doesn’t?”

Aidan had the room for the night, and he would stay till morning. The temperature had dropped, wet snow had turned to flurries, and all was blanketed in a thin white sheet. The prostitute left shortly after her obligations were fulfilled, taking with her complimentary candles and soaps. He showed her to the door, she invited him to call on her again if he was ever in need of her service, and he said that he would keep her in mind. And in mind he did keep her, their brief collusion drained, like water nourishing the soil, into the whole of his memory. He lay awake in bed for hours, light from the window pouring over his sheets, listening to the hum of the radiator sputtering on then off.

His feeling was that he had done right to his memories. He reveled in their resurgence, finding them altogether stronger, elucidated with the detail and the nuance



that the experience with Geneva had provided. And he yearned, in part, to undo what had been done to Nadia. He was of two hearts, those two culprits, like Cain and Abel opposed in their division. And so he felt divided, so divided that there may as well have been two of him sleeping in that bed, two of him walking to the pet store the next morning.

The sky failed to turn blue that day. The snow came down heavy, and the winds played with what was already on the ground. He worked uninterrupted through the morning, churning and mixing food for all the animals. He cleaned cages, inquired over the telephone about orders that had yet to be received, then again for orders that had yet to be picked up. He made a display in the window of dry foods and litterbags that he thought looked quite appealing. He had his lunch alone at the counter. At three o'clock he thought of Nadia's hair, how it defied braiding with its thick curls. He felt as though he had arranged for himself a predicament that was permanent. When she was alone with him in his mind, he thought of her endlessly. However when they were together, both she and the relationship got in the way. But these were heavy thoughts, and he reminded himself that that which had not always existed would not exist always.

The store resounded with the chirps of birds and the barks of dogs from the kennels in the back. Small rodents scratched at their plastic foliage, and still more plastic foliage swayed to the rhythm of the vents. The hum of the heating system burst to life. The telephone rang. It was Nadia. After she'd asked him about his day, she asked about his strange behavior the previous evening, and he suddenly accused her of wanting to sabotage their relationship with the composter. Quietly, she said that he was slowly devolving back into a little child. He could tell she was holding back tears. Then she said that if he had any sense of ambition, he would have found his way out of that pet

store a long time ago. Then Nadia hung up the phone. Aidan took a deep breath, then exhaled. He could not say she was wrong. He suddenly felt dizzy. That evening when he locked up, the cold was unexpected and it numbed his face. He stared indiscriminately into space. His temples ached. His eyes were tired. He hailed a cab and, when the driver asked him where to, he requested that corner of the night before at which his memories intersected with reality.

His mother had gone to visit relatives in Maryland for the week, and Aidan spent the majority of his day off in bed, reading between naps and hiding from the cold. The leaves that had rustled and rolled through the streets and in the gutters only last week were all under a thin layer of snow. During his five years as an undergraduate student he had accumulated a sizeable library in his room, culled mainly from clearance sales and used bookstores, and this collection proved valuable in times of refuge. He found that he had at his fingertips a number of books in which to escape without ever having to leave his room. And that was how he liked to spend his time when he wasn't being distracted by his everyday affairs.

He had been born in a bed, and he assumed he would one day die in a bed. His teenage years had been spent trying to lure girls into his bed, and his university years spent reading in bed. He did most of his thinking in bed and aspired to dream in bed. He had experienced sex in bed, and love in bed, and furthermore had dwelled over the virtues of both in bed. Yet he could not bring himself to share his bed. How was it to be expected that something so integral, something so personal, could be shared?

He read until his eyes had tired and then he turned out the light. In the middle of the night, he awoke from a short but vivid dream in which he played badminton against a faceless opponent who relentlessly returned his every strike. The telephone was ringing. At first, he buried his head under the pillow in order to drown out the ringing, then he gave in and answered.

“Hello?”

“Danny?” Nadia was barely coherent. It sounded as if she had been crying. “Oh, Danny...”

“What? What’s the matter? What is it?” Aidan sat up quickly.

“Oh Danny... it’s just so horrible.”

“What’s so horrible? Are you all right?”

“It’s... it’s the worms, Danny.”

“The worms,” he replied. “You’re calling me about the worms at this hour?”

“It was dark... I was fumbling around for my contact lens container... I thought... I thought it might be on top of the television... I didn’t know the lid wasn’t on properly... I knocked it over by mistake... everything spilled out... by the time I found the light switch they were everywhere.... I have worms all over my apartment.... I can’t do it alone.”

Aidan lay back and was silent for a moment. Then he whispered feebly into the receiver. “I have to be at work in a few hours.”

“Oh Danny,” Nadia confessed, “I feel horrible. What’s happened to us?”

Aidan held the phone to his ear and listened to Nadia cry. And for a fleeting moment, an irresponsible digression, Aidan warmed to the attractive long legs of nostalgia climbing into his bed, her effervescent smile and manipulative hands, wanting only one small favor, a disposable, irrelevant request. Not to remember this occasion on

the telephone in the middle of the night, but to forget, to forget. Ah nostalgia, if only everything were so properly lit, so well excavated, so that answers could soak through the many fragmented parts and hold this decomposing present together.

## DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

On May 13<sup>th</sup> (a Saturday) I received a long distance telephone call at 4:34AM, and after several rings I answered and found out that my father had finally passed away. After the call, I quickly fell back asleep and had a fitful dream involving seven cassettes, a white horse, and electricity -- bright shots of white electricity.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> (a Monday) at around 2PM, I went to buy my weekly groceries and, apart from all the usual items, I bought a watermelon. They had just come into season. I took my watermelon home and, after unpacking all my other food, sat down at the kitchen table, set the watermelon on a cutting board, and sawed it in two. Over the course of an afternoon I ate an entire half while editing my manuscript, in intermittent flashes remembering how, when I was a young boy, my father and I would drive along the outskirts of Athens in the evening haze, in search of the fruit trucks selling watermelons.

On May 16<sup>th</sup> (a Tuesday) at around 10:30AM, on a drizzly day, I had a curious experience while standing by one of the four large windows in my apartment. The curious

experience lasted approximately three minutes, and I'd been listening to music and watering my plants when it happened. Right before the curious experience, while watering plants and listening to music, the room grew dark, almost faded away. Then I remember a stream of white light blanketing me almost as quickly as it appeared. For a few minutes I felt as though I simply disappeared from the spot where I was standing in my living room.

When I came to again I was lying face down on the floor, and I had a cut above my eyebrow from where my head had hit the bookshelf. Water from the jug I'd been using to water my plants had collected in a puddle around my face. I was in a daze. I felt very tired. And somewhere from -- or around -- my mouth I was bleeding. I could taste it. Turning myself over, still too disoriented to stand, I wondered how to recollect and assemble what had just happened, how to piece it together with facts and logic, as if it was a small, workable, rudimentary machine. But so strong that recurring singular vision of white light, and how it had struck through me so easily and then refracted just as I'd slipped out of consciousness.

Eventually I got to my feet, stumbled into the bathroom, and rinsed out my bloody mouth. I had a tear in my tongue and a fairly deep gash on my lip that wouldn't stop bleeding, and after having my blood soak through several Kleenexes I decided that I probably needed stitches. I don't live too far from a hospital, and I could have walked there, but the thought of walking made me dizzy and so I called a taxi. My apartment is on the third floor of a seven-story building, with windows overlooking the street and a park. I waited for the taxi to arrive in an armchair by one of the windows, several ice cubes in a paper towel pressed against my lip, rubbing my eyes to stave off sleep.

When the taxi arrived I went downstairs and told the driver that I wanted to go to the emergency room. The air in the taxi seemed stale, humid. The taxi made a sharp turn and then another. I was sweating. I asked, Can you drive a bit slower, and the driver replied, Bein, on est ici. So I sat up, paid, pushed the car door open; as soon as I was outside I took a deep breath and was glad to be in cool air, on stable ground. Then the emergency ward doors slid open. Beside an unused stretcher, two ambulance drivers were talking to a security guard. A nurse rushed past, disappearing down a hall. At the admissions desk I was registered by a West Indian clerk, put through a series of questions concerning documentation and forms, then asked about the circumstances of my lip and the cut above my eye. I explained what had happened. Listening to music. Watering plants. Looking out window. Falling down. Coming to. Torn tongue. Gashed lip. Although there were several people before me waiting to see a doctor, I was shown to an examination room almost immediately.

The doctor who saw me was cordial but distracted. As I explained to him again what had happened, he took notes and asked questions, and in general seemed to be listening to me very patiently after his initial distance. He took some of my blood and arranged for my lip to be stitched up, and when I asked him when I could leave he sat down beside me and said quite frankly that it would be in my best interest to stay overnight for observational reasons, and I said all this just for fainting, and he said oh no I don't think you fainted, it looks like you've had a seizure. And I said, but I don't remember having a seizure. And he said, no one ever does. Look at these bruises and look at your tongue. You were convulsing. And then he said that someone would be in shortly to stitch my lip, and that if I wanted he had a small book of crossword puzzles I



could use to pass the time, which he promptly handed me from somewhere inside his lab coat. He then handed me a pencil, smiled, and left.

I sat in the examination room alone with this book of crossword puzzles splayed open on my lap, gnawing nervously at the end of the pencil. My heart was beating noticeably faster and I felt lightheaded again. I kept myself busy with puzzles, wondering when someone was going to walk through the door and remove this badly taped gauze from my lip.

\*

## **MONTREAL GENERAL HOSPITAL**

\_\_\_\_ Avenue Des Pins W.

Montreal, QC H5T 7D9

### **DISCHARGE SUMMARY**

Client ID: **63098**

Patient Name: **DIMITRI NASRALLAH**

Site:

Address: **935 Doctor Penfield**

**APT 303**

Admission Date: **16 May 2002**

**MONTREAL**

Discharge Date: **17 May 2002**

**QC H4C 3F4**

Date of Birth: **NOVEMBER 4, 1977**

Registration #: **374856**

PHN#: **QC 9056 875 867 CX**

**FINAL DIAGNOSIS:** Query generalized seizure. Laceration tongue right side lip.

This 28 year old man living in Montreal arrived at the Emergency Department after experiencing an episode in which he fell to the ground and presumably had a generalized seizure. According to the patient he was performing housework when the episode occurred and experienced some tremulousness of the upper limbs and upper body before losing consciousness for approximately 3 minutes. Evidently he had bit his tongue and was bleeding from the right side of the mouth where he had lacerated his lip. There was a period of confusion following the seizure however the patient did not experience incontinence of urine and feces.

The patient was brought to the Emergency Department and aside from an abrasion to his cheek and laceration, he felt generally well. There had been no past history of seizure disorder and there is no family history of the same. He had 3 beers the evening before which is not unusual for him and denied any use of illicit drugs or over the counter medicines. There had not been a head injury recently.

Of note is the fact that 3 days prior he received news of his father's death. The patient also claimed that he is under a lot of pressure to finish a manuscript.

On examination the patient was alert and not distressed. There was a deep laceration involving the right corner of the mouth, which was later repaired by Dr. Hunt in the Operating Room. There was a small laceration to the left side of the tongue and an abrasion involving his right temple. There was no bony tenderness to the skull and cervical spine and the remainder of the examination was essentially normal. Neurological examination was completely normal. Blood work revealed an elevated CPK at 303 and a pH of 7.463 on blood gases. His Beta HCG was negative and the remainder of the blood work was unremarkable.

As such the patient was deemed to have experienced his first generalized seizure and was admitted to hospital for observation. He was seen by Dr. Hunt who repaired his lip and Dr. Ankubowski who recommended the patient to have a CT Scan and EEG on an Outpatient basis.

The patient was seen the following morning and felt well and again neurologically intact. He was advised not to drive and not to place himself in any compromised situation such as in a bath. He was also told to see his regular physician and a letter would be sent with him to be given to his doctor.

M. Prune M.D.

(dictated but not read)

Dictation Dr: PRUNE, M.

Dictated: May 17 2002

Transcribed: May 17 2002 9:00AM

Transcriptionist: OH

cc: NLD

cc with patient

\*

I arrived back at my apartment early the next morning, puzzles still in hand, having walked home from the hospital in mild summer drizzle. My hair and clothes were damp. I undressed, took a shower, found my robe, and then settled into my armchair, still unaware of precisely what had happened to me.

Outside, the morning drizzle gave way to thunder. Rain pelted the fire escape. In front of me, scattered on my desk, were the pages of my first book, a novella, three years in the making, *A Canadian Fiction*, which I had been drafting. I sat back and thought of

Alan Pearson, the middle-aged patient in the long-term ward of the hospital that had employed me, as a translator, at the time. His paralysis, a rare condition known as locked-in syndrome, had inspired my work's protagonist, Sameer Gerdak.

In training my mind to remember in a certain way, I thought my fiction, or rather my aesthetics, had changed me. As I sorted through the pages, I looked again for that recurring pattern that I suspected kept emerging in my writing, that pattern of events that I could detect as irrefutably artificial, as creations separate from me. I thought, I'm a very rigid writer who is more attracted to the experiment of creation than to creation itself. All my imaginings had invariably led back to this central aesthetic I upheld in my work, experimenting with facades of modesty, humility, grace, and a host of other reactions I had devised in order to create this desired affluence and composure on the page. But underneath the words I felt that I was null and void, cancelled.

It's only the order and combination of variables that changes. It's all rubbish anyhow. I turned back to the first page and read from the start. As I read, I was taken back to the sixteen days in which I had originally written the rough draft. I spent the rest of the morning reading my book.

\*

As I lay in bed that night, unable to sleep, I began thinking (as I am inevitably prone to do) about those three years in the suburbs of Athens, the last few years I knew him. Now that my father's death had in a way been absorbed into the void I had made of him, I began to think that I could no longer ignore his presence. Previously, believing that he was still alive had given me reason to erase him. Yet his natural erasure had led me back

full circle to wanting to build a body for him. But what would that body look like? Would it have a spine? Would it have pages?

Had it been necessary for us to leave my father? I began spending nights in the armchair at my desk, by the window overlooking the park. Every night at 11:30PM, the park lights extinguished, my picture of window-framed trees and trails disappeared, and I sat and watched and waited for the next morning when my picture slowly faded back into focus. The desk was littered with scraps of paper, papers scribbled upon, lines crossed out, as I tried to transcribe and make sense of these memories that kept flooding back, in search of something new, something verifiable, about my father.

There was the time shortly after having first arrived in Athens in 1981, after having moved hastily from Lebanon because of civil war, when my father had taken me to the grocery store. No older than four at the time, I remember we had walked the aisles of the store for a long time, in search of eggs, without luck and unable to ask for help because my father spoke no Greek. Eventually, he had swallowed his pride and, in a feeble effort, caught the attention of a clerk and began clucking like a chicken while making the shape of an egg with his fingers.

I also remembered sitting in a taxi as it wove through the streets of downtown Athens, my over-large head wrapped tightly in a towel, and two fingers in my mouth. I used to suck on not one but two whenever I had a lot to think about. I could see that blood was seeping past the collar of my small t-shirt and into the cuff of my father's sleeve. To me, at that age, the situation had seemed grim. To me, at that age, my life had taken intervals of elation, spontaneity, of meticulous sadness. I had hit my head, run into a cast-iron heater while chasing a tennis ball and wedged the sharp edge of a cast-iron pipe into my forehead. My father had taken me to the hospital in a taxi (this I now

imagined as the taxi that had driven me to the hospital the week previous). And during the drive he had pressed his palm against the wound to keep it from bleeding.

\*

Ten days after the hospital, my own doctor asked me what I had done the day of the seizure, and I told her that I had eaten some bread, sat in my armchair, the doorbell had rung. I had signed for and received a package that I'd opened, watered my plants, and then the next thing I remembered was coming to on the hardwood floor with a cut right above my eyebrow, where I had hit my head on the shelving unit.

"What was in the package," she asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing of value."

"You look tired," she said. "Have you been sleeping?"

I said I hadn't, and then quietly asked if she could prescribe some sleeping pills, which she could not do, due to the fact that no one could say yet why I'd had my seizure.

That package that had arrived at my door bore no return address, but from the number of stamps on it, I assumed it had traveled a long way. How it had finally found me, I still don't know. It contained seven cassettes, numbered one through seven in black stencil. Curious, I'd put on the first tape and decided to water my plants.

Because of the seizure my driver's license was automatically suspended (not that I owned a car), and I was scheduled for a CT scan, an EEG, blood tests, and possibly an MRI. I felt like a failure. Using my memories to push my writing had always been a good

way to keep them in line, contained and recognizable. I'd always tried to keep a distance from my past, to keep perspective. By the day of my seizure, by the time I was watering the plants, I must have stepped back so far and so carelessly that for approximately three minutes I mistakenly stepped out of reality.

\*

I wondered if I could afford to step closer, to approach and consequently touch this distant body of memory. I thought of our old apartment in the suburbs of Athens, how it had taken up the entire fifth floor, the spaciousness of its rooms, the many balconies, how if I were to first lay out the bedrooms, the living room, the kitchen, the bathrooms, the halls, as I remembered them, if I were to see them first without obstruction, I would then be able to remember myself, how and who I was, more fully and consistently. Regardless of whether the finished work I created made me feel unnecessary, the art of memory as far as I was concerned still belonged to my words, still belonged to me.

\*

I began seeing shots of light at the periphery of my vision. Amidst the shadows of my apartment, as I sat back in my armchair day after day, my weakening eyes wandering across the brittle grooves that marked the hardwood floors, my plants beginning to wilt from neglect, I pondered increasingly the matter of whether or not I should stay or leave. My heart palpitated, and I constantly felt dizzy. With my work almost complete, I felt the need to be around people again, to get in touch with those whom I'd left in order to get my novella written in the first place. It had come to seem to me, over the course of three

weeks and little to eat, that the answer to this decision would serve as the central whatness of my intentions, writerly and otherwise.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> (a Sunday) at approximately 5:15PM, I stood up from my armchair, walked over the phone, and finally called my mother to tell her about my seizure. My mother and I had always kept a distance between us; and in the past three years, ever since I'd moved, our conversations had diminished to occasional brief but amicable check-ins in which neither end divulged any detail of their daily lives. When I told her about my seizure, she asked, "Why didn't you call sooner?"

"There was really nothing to say. The doctor said I'd be all right, and I've been all right. And I've been working on the book. It's hard to do even simple things like pick up the phone when I'm working."

Then she asked if I'd heard from my uncle about my father. And I said that I had, but that I hadn't given it much thought. She wanted to know if I had some time off, if I wanted to come home for a little while and rest, on account of the impending medical tests.

## II

What happens to the writer after the writing is done? He emerges from his pages only to find that the world still exists as it always has and, having just completed the project of creating and honing an alternate reality, he feels useless, despondent. He goes about his daily tasks aware that something is missing, but not quite sure where to begin looking for it. He wonders if his history has shaped his work, or if his work has shaped his history.



And if he thinks about it long enough, he begins to see that perhaps the best thing to do is go away, to return to places that formed him before he began writing, before his confusion, as if shamed by the fact of having spent so much time neglecting his surroundings.

At my mother's request, I moved back home for a time after my seizure. I'd been having hallucinations and seeing spasms of different colors at different times, and she thought it best that I not lead a life so isolated until I got better or was diagnosed. I had to agree. The doctors refused to speculate, and the waiting list for the EEG's and MRI's was at least three months. So I came back to Richmond Hill, one of several industrious suburbs north of Toronto, on a Thursday afternoon, my mother having picked me up from the last stop on the subway line. The drive north on Yonge St. took half an hour. When we pulled into the old driveway, I had the premonition that we were simultaneously pulling into the other half of my youth, the drug-addled and theft-infested ennui of my adolescence. I sat back in the car for a moment before opening the door, and thought back fondly on those years. When I stepped out, memories were everywhere.

Once we were inside the house and I had set down my bag, she asked me if I would like a cup of tea. Although I hadn't been home in three years, her sense of formality had me feeling awkward. On the train ride back, I had half-expected to walk into the house as I used to when I had lived there, with as little talk as possible between us. Still, I joined her in the kitchen and sat at the table while she went about preparing the tea. As she stood at the sink filling the kettle I noticed that her movements were slower. Also, her hair had gone gray at the roots. Wrinkles had formed under her eyes.

"How's school?" I asked.

"Oh fine. It's difficult work being a vice-principal. I think I preferred being a teacher. I miss the kids. And I don't like having to hear about money all the time."

"But you must like something about it."

"No, I do," she confessed as she joined me at the table. She smiled. "I like walking around the halls when everyone's in class, listening to lessons being taught behind closed doors. I like to think that my presence makes that possible."

"I'm sure it does."

The kettle whistled. She walked over and unplugged it. "Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?"

"Don't worry about me. I still remember where you keep the food."

"Still as sarcastic as ever, I see."

"It serves me well."

"I'm sure it does. You were always a smart one."

She returned to the table with the tea, and for a while we sat without speaking, content to stare out into the backyard between the slow sips.

"How's the book coming?" she asked.

"It's almost done. I brought it with me. I thought I could finish it while I was here. You know, it's hard to be a writer and a reader in the same place. It's almost as though you have to become someone else just to figure out what you wrote."

"Well, I for one look forward to reading it when it's done."

I laughed. "I don't know if you'll like it. It's filled with little literary tricks and the content can get rather explicit in places."

"I'm sure I'll manage. I'm not as sheltered as it may seem in this house."

"This house is so big for one person. Don't you get lonely?"

"Sometimes. But I have the TV. And I go to sleep early. I have to be at the school by seven every morning."

"Still, wouldn't an apartment be more your size. Who needs this many rooms?"

"Loneliness is loneliness," she said. "It doesn't matter how many rooms you have. It has nothing to do with that."

We sat there until we'd finished our tea, and then I took my bag upstairs. My old room hadn't changed much from what I remembered, only it was tidier. I lay down on my old bed and stared up at the ceiling. On the shelf there was a small collection of tapes I had left behind when I moved. On the walls, juvenile paintings from my high school art classes. I got up and went back downstairs.

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Over the next few days, my condition seemed to improve. Perhaps it was the change of environment or the relief from daily routines or simply the less claustrophobic surroundings, but my palpitations came less frequently and, except for one brief spell in the middle of the second night the dizziness and nausea disappeared almost altogether. I felt better and, slowly, curiously, I began to make my way out of the house during the day.

The neighborhood hadn't changed. Only the people who lived there and, with them, minor evolutions in front yard landscaping -- new shrubs, new Uni-Lock walkways, new colors on garage doors. As I walked down the street to the bend in the crescent, the same meandering black boys still occupied their spots on the forest-green electrical boxes, the same lolling girls still hung around with them. Only now I didn't recognize

any of them, only their stations. Behind them, the placid brick-orange walls, the white aluminum siding of the subsidized housing community. Younger children still played hockey in the parking lots and, at night, there were conspicuously parked cars lining the street for hours on end. At times, I missed this underbelly of an otherwise affluent suburb that bordered right on our part of the neighborhood and lowered the resale value of our homes. It reminded me that things could be more than one way at one time.

I walked on still further behind the subdivision to the trails that led under the bridge to the train tracks. The path was overgrown with weeds, waist-high. Discarded bags from fast food chains, candy wrappers, and broken beer bottles, from people passing through or from people passing overhead, littered the whole of the area. I used to walk here in the winter to avoid the harsh winds that blew along the bridge, but also in the summer to laze away long afternoons through the unkempt greenery of this vacant and neglected strip of land. Underneath the bridge, there is a dirt clearing and the walls are lined with graffiti. I used to be able to find the strangest objects here. Rusted track repair debris, the odd dead raccoon or cat, once a complete deck of playing cards. Neighborhood kids used to hang out under the bridge and, by the looks of the withered armchair resting along one of the upper ledges, many still did. Every so often I used to find a knife or a whistle. Eight years ago, unfurled spools of tape from broken cassettes would always be caught in the shrubbery. But these days, no one listens to cassettes anymore. The sun felt warm against my skin. Overhead I could hear the traffic milling past. I walked along the train tracks, and my shadow trailed along. On the way I looked around in the brush and underneath loose rocks, as I had back then, if only to recapture that lost sense of playful discovery. I walked about bent over, inspecting everything I passed. Underneath an old tire, in a bed of dandelions, I found a waterlogged porno. Along the train tracks I found

some change. And then I came across something utterly unexpected. At a bend in the track, beside a generator, caught gleaming from under the edge of a wooden plank, I found an aluminum cigarette lighter I had lost in high school. Although scratched, it still had my initials engraved in it.

Two days later, I found another curiosity. My mother and I had just finished a quiet but not altogether unpleasant supper and, leaving the dishes to soak, we retired to the sitting room. We had the television on, and she was reading the newspaper. I noticed she had a box of old photographs out, and when I asked why, she said that she had received a new photo album as a gift from one of the ladies at the school where she taught, and that she was sorting through old pictures for this new album. All the pictures in this particular box were at least twenty years old. They were of our years in Athens and, previously, Beirut. Many of them were faded. As I sorted through these pictures, I was taken back to places I perceived as languid and perpetually blessed by good hot weather. I saw pictures of relatives I knew only by name and photograph, and I saw places that I recognized only from the stories I'd heard built around them. Vacations in France and Italy. Short ambiguous stays in Kuwait and Dubai. My past, beyond a certain point, loses its narrative stream and refracts into mystery. It allowed me a freedom I otherwise would not have had access to. I thought it allowed me transiency. I rediscovered a good many things in those photographs, and for a while I thought that it was quite beneficial to have such things around, to be able to conjure a spontaneous past. But then, quite by accident, I uncovered something that caught me off guard.

The photograph I discovered in that box was dated July 23, 1982. There were six people in the picture, a portrait taken in a living room in Glifada. A five-year-old me was seated on the sofa. To my right there was my mother, and to my left was our hostess,

Mme. Muna. Three men were standing behind the sofa. One of them was my father; the second was our host, Mssr. Alfonse; and the third, standing squarely behind me, his hands resting on my shoulders as if he were my guardian, was a man I didn't recognize.

Curiously, I looked at the picture for a while, and then during the commercial break I asked my mother, "Do you remember who that is?"

She leaned in, took a look. She seemed to think about it for a time, as if she wasn't able to remember, yet when she replied the tone of her certainty made me think otherwise. "That's Alfonse's brother-in-law, Sameer Gerdak. He's the one who told us that your cousin Eid had been killed by a car bomb."

I looked at the picture again. All were smiling.

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I ventured further still to the places where I remembered spending most of my time when I was younger: the field behind my old high school, the parking lots of industrial strip malls, the sides of gas stations, the numerous parks. I wanted to see if I could find my initials imprinted elsewhere, if I could still belong to these places as they had once belonged to me.

One afternoon, lying in the grass of Polish Park, remembering how I used to go there often when I was younger to suck hash with friends from discarded two-litre Coke bottles, I saw, walking along the trail that led out of the woods, a disheveled man I thought I recognized. At first he struck me as conspicuous because of the 16-mm camera he carried with him, and then because he seemed to be most interested in filming the shafts of sunlight as they pierced through the underbellies of the trees. I watched him for

a time from where I lay amongst the crabapples in the grass, the way he measured light apertures, the way it looked as though he was trying to organize shadows in his shots like characters. Then I remembered who he was. It was Arthur Tallia.

I got to my feet and walked over to where he stood. Under the influence of his creation, he ignored me until he had finished filming what he wanted to capture, then turned his camera off.

"It's for an experimental film," he said absent-mindedly.

"I thought as much. Do you remember me?" I asked.

He looked at me, inspecting my features for the semblance of someone he might know, scratched his chin, and then shook his head.

"You're Mr. Tallia. I was a friend of your daughter's. As a kid, I used to come by your apartment sometimes."

"Oh yes. The awkward one."

"Yes," I smiled. "The awkward one."

"Help an old man," he said, "and take this heavy bag. I have a bad back."

I took his bag from him, and we began walking toward his car, stopping intermittently along the way when a decomposing crabapple or the scarred trunk of a tree caught his cinematic interests. Throughout, he explained what he had been doing over the past fifteen years. After Genevieve's suicide, he had decided to travel; he didn't feel comfortable being in that apartment. After settling in Sweden for a year, he had struck up the beginnings of a decade-long friendship with documentary filmmaker Johann Van Der Keuken. They had kept in touch regularly and, in 1998, Tallia had decided to travel with the Swedish film-maker around the world on what would comprise his, Van Der

Keuken's, final achievement, a meandering two-and-a-half hour filmic meditation of his futile attempts to find a cure for his cancer.

"I was at his bedside when he died," Arthur confessed. "I was holding his hand."

Upon his return to Canada, feeling dejected with the transiency of life and his inability to produce a permanent art, he gave up film making altogether for several years and dedicated his efforts to his part-time teaching position at York University's film department, where he taught courses in film production and film theory to, as he put it, a vast array of untalented try-hards and the occasional gifted malcontent.

"After spending the better part of my life pursuing this," he said, "the only thing I've learned is that artistic talent breeds melancholy, it creates a blackbody in you and in effect makes you self-absorbed. You become solipsistic, and everything and everyone around you becomes an object. I don't trust the work of those who say they're happy. It only means that they can't see properly. Pay attention to your eyes. Look long enough and they begin to reorder the things they see on their own, as if they have the capacity to get bored. Boredom, you know, is a wonderful thing. An idle life can be full of surprises."

He invited me back to his apartment, on the basis that he needed me to carry his equipment. I placed his bag in the trunk, and when I went to get in the passenger side, he said, "You drive. I don't like driving if I don't have to."

"But I don't have my license right now," I explained.

"No one will know. We're not going far."

He passed me the keys as if the decision had already been made, and then took the passenger seat himself. I hadn't driven a car in over three years. Because of the sheer attention required by the act I began seeing flashes of light again, and for a short while I



thought I was going to have another seizure and crash into a house. Nevertheless, I did my best to concentrate on the road. At a stoplight, to distract my thoughts, I asked, "Do you think Genevieve was a melancholic girl?"

"Her?" he said abruptly, having dozed off. "She was more talented than most. You remember her show? Critics on occasion still refer back to her acting abilities whenever they praise a new child actor. Turn here."

"Do you still think of her often?"

"Here and there. You know, her mother made politics out of her. She blames me for her suicide. I can't be blamed. She knew I was more interested in making films than I was in raising a child, and still she had her live with me to appease her new husband. And I made sacrifices too. I moved out of the city thinking it would do her good to see trees and other children. Pull over here."

I parked the car, and we unloaded the equipment and then took it upstairs. I set his bag in the foyer and looked into his apartment, curious to see how his habits had changed in the past fifteen years. The shelves were still teeming with books and film canisters. A DVD player had taken its place on top of the VCR. The only bare wall had a film projector mounted across from it. He invited me in for a drink, and I accepted. We discussed briefly an edition of an obscure little novel on his coffee table, which apart from myself I had never known anyone to read. Then he asked me, quite by surprise, if I would like to watch a film of Genevieve, stating that he hadn't watched one in years and that these things were more fun to watch with someone who was steeped in similar memories. I agreed and, excitedly, he fingered through his shelves of canisters.

"I'll choose something short," he said. "After that, you'll have to leave and I'll have to take a nap."

Then he chose a small canister he claimed among his favorites. Curious, I sat back in an armchair facing the bare wall and awaited the onslaught of images of the girl I'd once known. The lights were dimmed, the projector switched on; the white glare on the bare wall soon filled with cinematic numbers counting down, and then the title appeared: Juvenescence.

What followed for the three to four minutes was chaotic, barely discernable, yet somehow left an impression that was ultimately intangible and life affirming. I remember thinking, regardless of the film, Arthur Tallia is a gifted artist. The footage was grainy, and the camera work intentionally shaky and haphazard. Voices could be heard everywhere, but they had been processed or obfuscated so that no words could be readily understood. The montage opened with a slow pan from left to right that passed over a scalpel in an aluminum basin; it gave the impression that film was about to fall apart from the beginning. Then a quick shot of overhead panel lighting, a turquoise wall, a nurse passing through, a doctor's back. The camera deliberated over the slow bubbles floating up in a bag of blood as it transfused into the patient. Off-screen, the moans of a woman in pain. The camera seemingly sought out the source of her agony, passing from the blood to the upper frame of the metallic bed, to a crease in a pillow, and finally a head crashing back into the fold. It was the head of a teenaged girl.

"Who's that?" I asked quietly.

"My ex-wife," he whispered.

The girl had tears in her eyes. His hand emerged from behind the camera and wiped the sweat-laden hairs from her forehead. She winced. As she lay back, breathing rhythmically and with great concentration, the camera panned across her body to her legs, each in a stirrup, the top of the doctor's head bobbing up periodically as if for air. The

camera then focussed for a time on the pulse monitor, with its schizophrenic green light shooting violently but steadily. As this happened, a new sound pierced through off-screen, what I knew to be Genevieve's first sounds. At length the camera followed the course of the umbilical to her belly, her body held up by the doctor for all to see, covered in blood chunks and amniotic fluid, this kino-eye followed the umbilical to the doctor's gloved hand, past the doctor's hand, into the fold of Genevieve's face, how she squinted and screamed, how she wanted to go back, the camera focussed in further still on her tiny eyelids pressed tight, her spasms with first oxygen, and then all of a sudden her eyes opened for the first time and she seemed to take a frightened look around.

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"Only if the camera keeps moving. Otherwise, television doesn't give me a problem."

"Because we can turn it off if you like."

"No, really. My eyes are fine. I'm not dizzy or anything."

"Can you see clearly?"

"For the most part. Sometimes I get flashes or spots."

The commercials ended, an uproarious applause filled the room, and there returned to the screen the oversized man hustling up an aisle with a microphone, in search of an audience member. I spent many of those afternoons back home watching television with my mother. She would come home from school, tired from a day of standing, and claim that she did not want to think for the next hour. After she had changed into jogging pants and a t-shirt, and settled on the sofa with a coffee, she would eventually come back round and our conversations would begin. I'd never been in the habit of looking my

mother directly in the eye, so what glimpses I had of her either occurred on the periphery of my vision or, more often, across the line in reinvention. Still, I thought we both appreciated these conversations in front of the television because they gave us something to focus on, a mutual point of intersection, and so we talked in flashes during commercial breaks or while flipping through the channels. Two years ago, my mother had allowed herself the luxury of a fifty-two inch screen, and ever since I'd noticed that our talks, even brief telephone conversations, had become more amicable, more personal, as if having more to see at our point of intersection created a stronger bond. A panel of four women and two men faced the audience, all of whom were described as mortally obese. Two of the women had been wheeled onto the stage and, presently, one of the men was crying. The caption underneath informed us that he weighed six hundred and forty-two pounds. Any effort to lose weight would have been too much for his heart.

The camera zoomed in until we could see the tears glistening and staining his cheeks, and he managed to control his emotions for a time, long enough to speak into the microphone being held to his face by an aide. He said, "I haven't been one-fifty since I was a kid. And now that I can't ever go back, that's all I think about. How I can never go back. I don't know what's worse. Not being able to lose the weight, or not being able to forget that I was once smaller." An audience member asked if he'd ever considered liposuction. The obese man tried to wave a finger at the audience member, but his arm was too heavy to lift. "I had liposuction performed twice in the past fifteen years. The feeling of being this fat never leaves you. It's not a body thing, it's in my head. Both times, I was gaining weight again within six months. You may not believe me when I say that I feel at home in this body, but I do. I don't like it, but it's not in me to change." The audience applauded once again, and the host informed us that after the break, we'd meet a rare pair

of obese Siamese twins who disagreed on what to do about their weight problem. And then we were back in commercials.

"Do you ever still think about him?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she replies matter-of-factly. "More so now that he's gone."

"Are you angry at him?"

"I used to be. For a long time. But I don't think that way anymore."

"But you haven't talked to him since?"

"In the year after we left, I used to sometimes call in the middle of the night. You know, a weakness. Like the man just said, it's where I felt at home. But after that, we lost track."

"Did he ever ask about me?"

"Oh, you were all we ever had to talk about."

"What did he want to know?"

"Little things. How you were doing in school. If you'd gotten taller. Were you happy. Were you? I was always afraid that I'd ruined your life or something."

"Was I happy then? I don't know. Ruined my life? Not at all. I'm doing everything I want to do."

"I know. I see it. I'm proud of you. We both are."

"Do you still love him?"

"Do you?"

The commercial break ended, again applause filled the room, and we were introduced to the Siamese twins of two minds.

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Already by twenty-eight years of age my hair had thinned and grayed. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, leaning in, my fingers passing along the parts, inspecting the demarcations of growth.

How long would it take for all of it to fade, I wondered. My stay in Richmond Hill was approaching two weeks, and already I had noticed new hairs around my ears letting their color slip away during my sleep. Earlier that evening I had shared a quiet dinner with my mother; we had gone to a new Portuguese restaurant on the town's main street. Afterwards, I had met some old acquaintances from high school at a local bar for a few drinks. The reunion was pleasant but short-lived – we didn't have much to say to each other – and by the end of the evening I had decided that regardless how inviting it may be to revisit old stations, I was perhaps better off not looking back.

It was late. I walked downstairs to the living room to read before going to bed. The newspaper, a Sunday edition of the *Toronto Star*, awaited me on the sofa. Opening the first section of the newspaper, I began reading an article about a young entrepreneur who had started a business by designing innovative-looking order forms for mid-sized companies. The article did not hold my interest past the second paragraph, and I moved along to one on the opposite page, about an urban day-care center for the children of wayward kids still pursuing their high school diplomas. This article, too, didn't appeal to me. As I searched for a reasonably provocative piece of information, I was dismayed to see that almost all the content was concerned with the trials and dilemmas, the achievements and the celebrations, of a youth now more youthful than mine.

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While helping my mother unpack the groceries one Saturday afternoon, I noticed that she had purchased a small tub of *MacLaren's Imperial* brand sharp cheddar cheese, that red and black container which I had always associated with my ex-girlfriend Nadia, she being the only person I knew who actually ate it, without whom that cheese would have never existed in my mind.

"When did you start buying this?" I asked.

"Oh not too long ago. I had it at a staff party one evening and it's been part of the grocery list ever since."

I was immediately reminded not only of the occasions on which we had eaten this particular cheese, but also the manner in which we had spread it, the crackers we had chosen, the tea we usually drank alongside, even the look of the cutting board we had used. I thought, when was the last time I talked to her? And as I counted back the months, I realized it had been well over a year. Then I thought, maybe it would be nice to spend an afternoon with her and perhaps even have some cheese, like we used to.

I called Nadia on a Tuesday and left a message, and she returned my call on a Thursday. In the three years since our relationship had dissolved, we had kept in touch to varying degrees. At times she'd been a much-needed friend, and at others we'd simply gone our separate ways. She had gone on to start her own graphic arts business, designing brochures, flyers, and posters for the local theatre community, and through a series of connections had secured a freelance contract with the Canada Arts Council, a venture successful enough to have afforded her a down-payment on her first house, or so I had heard from the few people who still knew us both.

"It's good to hear your voice," I said. "How've you been?"

"Things have been going well. Really well. I just got engaged."

"Engaged, really? Wow, that's wonderful. Congratulations. Who is he?"

"Oh, his name's Julian. We got together about nine months ago. He's a real estate agent. We met while I was closing the deal on my house."

"You sound happy. I'm happy for you."

Our conversation went on for twenty minutes. Eventually I told her about my seizures. Her concern was effusive. She wanted to know every detail, from my eating habits to my stay at the hospital. I felt that, despite our long history together, we could still rely on each other in times of need. And then she said she had to get back to work, and so we hung up. No plans for cheese had been made after all.

I walked out onto the deck of our backyard to have a cigarette, at once elated and disappointed over her good fortune. Although the morning had promised an overcast day, the sun had pierced through and now there was barely a cloud to be seen in the sky. The grass in the yard was lush and overgrown, and I thought that after my cigarette I would mow the lawn to pass the time.

After my cigarette I walked around the house to the garage, where I oiled and gassed the lawnmower. Tinkering with that machine in the dampness of the garage, I wondered if she still thought of me at all, if I was still a point of reference, if she still had involuntary glimpses, as I sometimes did, or our waking up on cold mornings or our aimless walks. How could she not? We had grown up together, we had experienced too many of the same realities for our lives to ever truly break and separate. I mulled this over as I trudged the lawnmower through the thick grass, leaving a thin trail of sheared blades at my side. I still considered her a dear friend. The glare of the sun had me seeing spots when I blinked. I stopped for a while and distractedly considered the shabbiness of



the untended shrubs that ran along the side of the fence. She deserved to get married, to have that kind of life. Regardless how tempting it seemed, I don't think I could have provided that. What a bright day it was. I looked up at the sky and saw only white, and then I think I fell back, but I don't remember hitting the ground.

When I came to, I was on my back and the lawnmower engine was sputtering. Slowly I got to my feet, staggered inside for a glass of water. Then I sat down at the kitchen table. I was shivering. I wanted to take a nap, but was afraid to close my eyes again. What a quiet day. I could hear birds outside chirping. I never got to hear that at my apartment in Montreal. I thought it best not to tell my mother what had happened when she came home from work.

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I closed my eyes once more and listened to the rhythm of my breathing. The lamp's harsh light worsened my headache. I raised both hands and carefully felt around the sides of my head, searching for the shape of the veins. My writerly impulses were beginning to take their toll. All this seeing, all this placing, all this trying to catch and keep what naturally just moves through, it was hurting my eyes and making my hair go gray.

I turned off the lamp and clumsily attempted a walk up the circular staircase with my eyes closed. In the morning, I told myself, I would get back to work and finish my book once and for all. At the top of the stairs, I noticed that the light was still on in my mother's room. Once in my room, I wondered what she was doing up at that hour. Had she fallen asleep with the light on? What did she do at all hours of the night? Did she sleepwalk? Earlier that week I had caught her, by chance, walking aimlessly throughout

the house at what must have been at least four in the morning. She had something on her mind. I could tell. I wanted to know what it was; I was curious. I was worried for her well-being, what with her being here all alone like this, but I didn't see it as my place to ask.

I lay down on my bed and promptly fell asleep. Several hours passed within a space that felt no longer than ten minutes. A number of random images flashed before my eyes, continuous only as randomly organized discontinuous images can be. Lucid images of strangers engaged in strange activities, people I'd once known for brief periods of time, and a number of other vivid inexplicables with no bearing on one another. And when my dreams finally settled, I reawakened in a different body. My skin was smoother, and when I ran my fingers through my hair I could tell, through the self-conscious logic of dreams, that the grays had thickened and nourished back to their original black.

For a moment, it seemed as though I was suspended in air, a body outside space and time. And I remember feeling elated to be there, without context, without the ability to see anything other than myself. Then, without warning, the hollow space around me began bleeding colors and soon I was in a place that had come together like a Polaroid, as if some outside hand had agency over my dreams and was busily waving the celluloid in an effort to make the picture appear quicker. I was on a barren outstretch of terrain, somewhat desert-like, and immediately I had to shield my eyes with both hands, taken by a severity of the light that nearly caused me to fall over. This land of all-encompassing sun made even cracking my eyelids unbearable. I staggered around in search of a shelter that would shade me, but this light seemed so strong it penetrated right through me and burned my shadow. And so I staggered about some more without dedicating my efforts to any particular direction, my arms for the most part protecting my face, my head buried

into my armpit. Then as it all began fading again, I thought I heard my father's voice. He was saying something, but I couldn't make out what, and once I began trying to control the dream, the dream ended.

Once again I awakened to the reality I had grown to accept. What a strange dream, I thought. My eyes still hurt from that light. What had he said? What could it mean? Like most people I knew, I was awkwardly suspicious about the protrusions of my subconscious. I felt my face and it was rough with bristles that scratched my palm. This fading body of the writer was reclaimed and with it, almost simultaneously, returned the dull throb of my temples and a new stabbing pain in my belly. When I sat up, my stomach suddenly turned irregularly. My forehead and cheeks felt abnormally cold. When I tilted my head forward, the pain sifted from my temples to my eyes.

It was early. Although I still felt the fatigue of the night before, I had slept for a long time. The sun was still behind the horizon, but a deep orange light was already creeping toward my bed. What had that dream meant? Anticipating dawn, believing it might somehow cure this abnormal and sudden pain, I turned on the light beside my bed, only to find that my nose was bleeding. Slowly, with my fingers plugging my nostrils, I rose from the bed. The clock read twenty after six. I fumbled in the near dark for my robe, which lay on the armchair in the corner.

My throat was dry. I decided that I'd take another stab at sleep after a drink of water from the bathroom sink, once I'd cleaned up this mess. In the bathroom, I struggled to the mirror and saw that my brown skin had turned a sickly olive green. My face appeared alien, eyes hollow and lips chapped. Sweat beaded on my shivering frame. The trembling worked its way up both arms until I could feel my jaw shaking. Perhaps I'd

better sit down, I thought, leaning against the counter before making my way down to the tiled floor, first on my knees then resting against the wall beside the toilet.

My mother was still awake. From where I lay against the wall, I could see that her door was open. Had she even slept? I wondered. What does she think about? If I listened closely, I could hear footsteps walking along the stairs. She walked past the open bathroom door and saw me splayed out along the tiles. Blood from my nose trailed down my chin and chest. And then I lurched toward the toilet and began vomiting.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “What’s happened?” She came into the bathroom and fearfully knelt down beside me, placing her hand on my forehead.

It might make me feel better, I thought. After several minutes with the toilet I’ll be able to stagger back to bed and sleep it off. But the vomiting wouldn’t stop. In fact, I couldn’t go without vomiting for more than several minutes at a time. And it was slightly disconcerting being this close to my mother. She wore a blue flannel nightgown and slippers. Her long hair, also going gray, hung about her frail shoulders, shining under the weight of oil. We were all slowly fading. I couldn’t help but look up at her fearfully in the brief intervals my stomach would allow me. Standing there like that, she made me feel like I was a teenager again. Lines defined her face, some of age, others of fatigue. Since the last time I’d taken a direct look at my mother, taken a real look, her cheeks had sunk down and her eyes had grown narrow.

“Is this part of your sickness?” she cried, to which by then I was too weak to reply and had no viable answer to give. “What am I supposed to do?” The question reverberated in my mind, not as a whole but in fragments that would not fit together. What were we supposed to do with what passed right through us? To try to absorb it, to blackbody it, was seemingly futile, yet we tried. She put a glass of water to my mouth but

I was too weak to drink, having barely enough energy to turn and throw up again. She flushed the toilet, but was unable to flush the lingering smell. With a wet towel, she tried to cool my greenish-white skin. My stomach felt like a fist clenching repeatedly. There was a slight comfort in thinking that this was happening to my body and not me. I muttered incoherencies, which eventually gave way to “help me” and “please”, repeated between each deepening breath, both indecipherable to her.

Of all the memories that could have passed through my mind, I recalled a particular day when, as a young boy of eight, I had run home from school in the rain. My clothes had been soaked through and I remembered the cold feeling in my bones, the way my teeth chattered. My mother, then a handsome young woman, had helped me out of my wet clothes. That afternoon we had watched cartoons on television and eaten popcorn on the living room couch. My body, then so small, had fit perfectly around the contours of hers. But we had grown into different people. I didn't know why I recalled this memory now of all times, but it gave me great comfort to remember little things that weren't worth remembering otherwise.

My mother rushed out of the bathroom to phone an ambulance and when she returned, she knelt down on the tiled floor beside me and took hold of my cold, shaking hands. She held them to her lips, pressed my palm into her warm neck. I felt her pulse travel; it was in sync with mine. I thought, we are keeping time together after all, and I tried to smile. But my stomach heaved once more. Nothing came, save a few rough coughs and the blood that sprayed the white porcelain.

Trapped between the bathroom walls and her, I felt cheated by all the other maladjusted clocks in my life. My robe lay open, my frail body exposed. I saw my mother grimace at how thin I'd become. As for me, I no longer wanted to see. I raised my

hands to cover my eyes. She held them back down, intent on reading my face. I thought, look at how fragile she looks in her old age. Look at how worried she is. She was even beginning to babble. She recalled a time when I was eleven, I'd had the stomach flu and she'd been with me then too. She'd made me soup. She'd read me stories. I was too old for that now.

I wanted to talk out loud just to hear the sound of my voice, of anybody's voice, of anything falling or breaking, anything that would connect this moment, round it out, so that she wouldn't have to babble on her own. I felt the urge to tell my mother the dream, to take comfort in having passed it on to at least one other person, to validate it. She knelt in closer to me. And I pulled her closer still, wanting to apologize for the trouble I had caused her when I was younger. I'd stolen money from her purse. On more than one occasion she'd had to come down to the police station to retrieve me. For a time, our arguments had been inevitable every time I came home. The things I'd said, I would never say again to another human being. She held a finger to my lips as I tried to talk, shaking her head, working to keep her composure so as not to worry me. My body, seeping sweat, lay limp in her arms as she rocked me back and forth. We were immersed in the pale light of day coming through the bathroom window. Car engines idled as people prepared for the drive to work.

# A CANADIAN FICTION

# 10

## THE DEVICE

The device in question was a Netset 100-channel direct-entry programmable scanner lent to me by André Basheukov, my first airwave scanner, a hobbyist's recreation, truly a beginner's affair. Here, I'll tell you the story just as it happened.

We worked together, André and I, at the same taxi company. He'd been working there three years, and when I arrived the year before last he was promoted from mere driver to shift manager. André was a fat, hairy man. His sweat and its smell had always bothered customers. He was punctual and took orders well, too well, and because of it rumor around the garage had it that he had no sense of pride. If the boss said, "André, I need someone out at the airport in twenty flat," André would simply wipe his brow with his handkerchief (for the thought of driving, too, had him sweating), inquire about the details, and without further prompting wedge himself behind the steering wheel.



One day I happened to walk into André's office, and as soon as I opened the door he hushed me with his finger. At first I didn't know what he meant by this -- the man was sitting all alone. Slowly then, static-riddled voices began distinguishing themselves through the mess of mechanic sounds. André waved me into a chair. Together we huddled over the voice machine, listening intently as though it were giving us instructions. The device was small: six inches for the box and then another six for the antenna. Two men were speaking, but one man's voice came through clearer than the other. When the other's voice came through, his words were muddled and indecipherable. Strange frequencies and random signals addled their conversation. Here's what one said to the other.

Twenty-four of 'em... no... no... they're brand new... brand-spankin' new... yup, took it out for a spin... yup, yup... yesterday... stick-shift... fuck the automatic, man... fuck it... hey, what're you doin' this weekend... I dunno, that's why I'm askin'... fuck off... really... two different flavors from the same brick of cheese.... that's amazing...

And he went on like this for fifteen minutes, amidst temperamental reception framing all we were to hear, covering such topics as corporate mergers, the breweries, and two women they didn't think very highly of at all.

"926.375," André finally announced. "These two, every day."

"926?" I asked.

"The frequency," he replied, smacking his lips as he blew his nose. "The one we hear, he works in the neighbourhood. The other one is maybe too far away. Listen, you

hear other people talking too. Cellphones. Blah blah blah all the time. Very funny. Also, good for learning English. Here,” he handed it to me, “give it a try.”

And as I fiddled with the scanner he began running through a list of expressions he’d picked up from his listening sessions.

“I have work all week and, boy, I very tired... the premier he no like the unions... my umbrella it's broke again. See? Good, no? Of course, your English it's better than mine but, but you can use for practicing accent.”

“Accent, you say? Hmmm. But isn't this illegal?”

“Fuck you illegal. Look,” he gestured around his desk, “you see tape recorder? Microphone?”

Perhaps I'd complained about my Lebanese accent one too many times, for it seemed everyone in the garage had a working knowledge of my predicament. I still felt my accent had drawn divisions between myself and other candidates at job interviews. On paper I was an exemplary employee but the interview was an altogether different matter. I'd catch interviewers staring at my lips when I spoke. Invariably my *h*'s were very sharp, almost a hiss, my *a*'s were irreversibly extended. You see, proper English vowels did not involve the back of the mouth or the throat at all, just as Arabic vowels had little interest in the front of the mouth. And then there was the matter of the tongue. In my room at the rooming house, I practiced in front of the mirror.

André pushed the scanner into my hands and began instructing me on how it worked. Apparently this device had several wavebands of which the 900 series, as he referred to it, was one. The 900 series was average chit chat, as he put it, but you could also listen in on the police if you so chose, or chat lines. The frequency was clearest at

900, and you could conceivably register a decipherable half-conversation anywhere in the orbit of 750 to 1020 megahertz.

I played with the scanner for a few minutes, unable to find anything of interest, until a flustered André took it from my hands, like a little child wanting his toy back, and played with it himself. Almost immediately the voice of a woman crackled into the office. My initial inclination, however irrational, was to look around as if we were going to be reprimanded for using this device. I felt absurd whispering to André, still it did not seem right to talk aloud. But this was all quite unnecessary. The woman, I quickly realized, couldn't hear us like we heard her. Thereafter, I grew immensely interested in the way we received what was being said. In a way, she seemed to be invading our privacy. What's more, her words seemed deliberately one-sided, as if she intended them to be a whole conversation on their own, and therefore what she said was made more senseless because of its confidence. And I wondered, who's on her other end? What does that person have to say?

“Great fun, no?” André said as he turned off the scanner.

I sat back in bewilderment. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Here,” he offered it to me, “take it for route. You gotta go to airport anyway. It keep you company.”

“I'm not so sure.”

“Don't worry. I have many machines. This one is weakest model. And you should listen at night. Ogh, the thing people say in the dark, you won't believe.”

Now, my cab that day was a Crown Victoria, a spacious car by any standard. It seats five comfortably but I've had as many as eight some nights. However, that capacity of eight was no match for the number of people the scanner let in during my drive to the

airport. Soon I was caught in the highway traffic, the radio came up empty-handed, and I couldn't pick up any other passengers on account of the airport run. Sometimes a good-natured or drunk passenger doesn't mind a chat or, more often, doesn't mind listening to me chatter on. The gas and brake of the traffic had me anxious and fidgeting when it occurred to me that I had no idea what the twenty-four from that first phone conversation meant. That first man from the office had mentioned explicitly, with some semblance of importance, a twenty-four. Could it be a quantity, a house number, a date? What was it? Regardless, his new car had sounded nice and fast. And he'd taken it for a spin too. What fun that must've been. A car like that needs a good road, something with challenging turns, without traffic lights. He must have gone out to the country. Imagine that. Driving with the roof down, going as fast as you like.

Ah! To live vicariously. The only way to complete yourself in this country. To think that an Arab foreigner without North American credentials can penetrate this prosperous Canadian reality is a well-worn Canadian fiction. Despite what we once were overseas, here we form a loose network of taxi drivers, pizza deliverers, convenience store owners, gas station attendants, and ethnic food store operators.

I switched on the scanner. The reception was poor, but it was because I had the device lying down on the passenger seat. Once I fit it in the cup holder, the static died down. Now let's see. How had André explained it? Top left corner button for manual programming, then nine then double zero, and there we go: the 900 series. Let's press the arrow and see what we have.

# 9

## A CANADIAN FICTION

...do you think it will rain tonight... uh huh, it has been pretty dry lately... well I don't think so... don't know... can't say... no one can say for sure... only when you're not around... we'll talk later. I'm very angry at you right now... go fuck yourself... I'll take the bus there... no... no... I don't mind waiting... has anything happened yet... he put his hand where... no... no... you let him do that... how was it... please tell me you didn't do that... you did... I've done that before... yeah... only twice... yeah... yeah yeah... you have to promise not to tell anyone... promise... you promise... yeah but if you have to go more than five minutes you're doing something wrong... yeah.... uh huh... oops I have to go my mom's home... how much is you monthly phone bill sir... tell me, how much of that is long distance... are you aware that you could be paying as much as a third less than that if you... yeah, sorry.... no I can't.... I have this dance class... yes I dance... it's hip hop dancing... shut up, it's fun... gets the tension out... I'll pick some up on my way home... no... no... the drug store... I have to go... we leave on Thursday evening right after work... three hours, we'll be there by nine thirty, ten latest... no, I don't think it'll be awkward... we get along fine... just friends... of course it's a problem when the oil light comes on... how long has it been on for... how long... what do you mean you don't know... they call it fusion... it's a mix of rock and jazz... I don't know... it's this guy from work... he plays the saxophone... I kinda said I'd be there... you have to come, don't make me go alone... I'll be so bored... they want to send me to Hamilton for three days... it's a CGA workshop... it's part of my contract... a raise... the next bracket... the Howard

Johnsons... I hope it has a pool... I saw her hit the baby the other day... you wouldn't believe it... yes, oh yes, right there in the grocery store... six or seven people... no, they all noticed, you could see they were uncomfortable... hello, hi, I don't know how to go about this so I'll just come out and say it. Shit, this is so wrong. Why am I doing this. My name is Katrina Michowski and you don't know me but I know your husband through the accounting firm. Oh God, I can't believe I'm actually doing this. I'm so sorry. Warner and I, we've been sleeping together for the past three months. At conventions, at workshops, during tax season. I don't know what else to do. I love him. I'm so sorry. God, I can't stop crying. I'm sorry. I've been trying to deny it but I can't do it any longer. I love him and I can't end it so maybe this will... five languages, that's quite impressive... what else can you do... acting, no... I'b got a cold... doe, doe, I ga't breed... I ga't do adythig... sir, let me ask you, do you presently have a paper being delivered to your door every morning... are you paying more than ten dollars a month... \$6.95 sir, are you aware that that price includes our Saturday edition, with over thirteen different sections... listen up boyo, this is a problem... no no, we can't have that... it's a matter of finances and we can't have you walking around with our finances... I don't think so boyo, see if we don't have our finances that automatically means that you do... shut the fuck up... just shut up already... the girl, boyo... the girl... don't let them fuck with you... you're digging your own grave... a bike daddy, I want a red bike... please... please... she said I was a boring person, can you believe that. Me, boring... like I should be responsible for her getting bored... she said all I talked about was my job and that my job wasn't all that interesting to her... you know, I

think you're right... yeah, she is pretentious... twelve hundred dollars... that's a lot of money... ok... ok... listen just give me the important parts... ok... and can we afford that on a monthly basis... how much of that is principle... are you sure you're getting the best lending rate you can find... that's amortized over twenty-five years... I still think we should meet with a few more banks this week, just to keep our options open... no it's not that I don't trust you... of course I trust you... it has nothing to do with trust... trust has nothing to do with it... we're talking about a life here... we're talking about us... I want us to be happy... I want us to be happy for a long time... I love you too... no I love you more... talk to you when I get home... yeah... ok... yeah... I'll be home soon... uh huh... bye... bye... bye...

## 8

### CONFESSIONS OF A DEVICE USER

By four in the morning this scanner business was beginning to lose its charm. The device had its obvious limitations. Also, no matter where on the dial, no matter the strength of the frequency, the consensus was becoming powerfully obvious. If I was going to fix my accent, then I would have to find another way to do it. For the most part, the delivery was too static-riddled to pick up any tips on speech, and often I found myself preoccupied by what was being said on the side of the conversation I couldn't hear. When you're in a taxi, you most likely would rather be elsewhere. So if at one moment I was trying to maneuver my tongue into the shape of an 'l' or an 'r', the next I was invariably building my imagination into what was being said. On their own, I found most of these people

boring. Not to slight them, but in their conversations very little appealed to me. It's a culture I have certain ideas about, and it has certain ideas about me, but for the most part we don't share. So for all their complexities and richness, it was more intriguing to make up their lives than assume they had ready-built ones already underway. It's a bad habit that I'd picked up long ago, when I first started driving taxis. And I had scanned by this point over ten hours worth of calls, listened to over one hundred and fifty half-conversations, and consistently came up against the same wall of nullified, blunted talk. Still, as I sat in my taxi, parked outside a coffee shop, I couldn't resist the urge to tune in yet again if only to confirm once more that I was right.

The trouble with many of these half-conversations was, of course, that they didn't make much sense. This bothered me to no end. People had a habit of talking around a subject without ever mentioning what it was they were talking about. I heard a lot of talk about 'thats' and 'its' and 'those' and 'them' without ever uncovering the 'who's' or 'what's.' Strange how privacy lends itself to informalities. I'd always thought -- well that's not important. But really. I mean perhaps people aren't more open in private. Maybe they naturally succumb to being more closed.

...did you tell him... no... no... I don't believe it... he said that... no... what an idiot... oh oh I forgot to say... yeah yeah... yeah we did... well I don't know.. what are you doing tomorrow... lets go look at those shirts... yeah those ones... no... at the other store..

The mind, I tell you, really wanders when you're lying in the back seat of your taxi in the middle of the night.



The scanner was still on but I had it set to automatic drift, which I had discovered by this point was the third button to the left of the antenna. Once a call ended, it searched for the next frequency. In any case, I was no longer interested in paying attention. I was happy to make do with hisses and crackles.

I'm married, you know. Of course I don't live with my wife or see my kids. It doesn't do me any good to think about them all the time, but when it's this quiet I can't help it. I haven't seen them in two years. You see, the plan was for me to come over here and settle into some work, buy a house, and then send for them. A few months. No more. And not this taxi work, no. I'm an educated man. I have two university degrees. I was taught English privately by a British tutor. In Beirut, I was an architect. Can you believe that? Your husky taxi man an architect? Sounds hilarious to even think it! Well, as you can imagine they aren't looking for architects in Lebanon for the moment, and they won't be for a long time. I come over and expect to have a good job within four or five days. But those days turned into weeks and weeks into -- I shouldn't even get into that right now. But it makes me mad! Why, I'm better than all those young people they hire, and I'll even do the work for less. But no one wants an older man without a North American education around the office. What if he doesn't understand our jokes? Money ran short and, in the end, I took what was left. Simple as that. Many times, I've written to my wife explaining my situation, but I've yet to hear back from her. Now if you want private talk, good articulate, carefully structured, expressions, just take a look at those letters. You'll know exactly what I mean to say. Ironic then, isn't it, that I've yet to receive a letter back. In any case, I don't think she's even received them.

...it's late... I love you... yeah I do... good night... it's in the closet... I love you... what's that again... I'll take care of it tomorrow... don't worry honey... I've got it taken care of... I love you you know that.. I do yes I do... good night... good night...

As I said, I don't like to think about my family when I'm in the taxi.

In need of fresh air, I stepped outside for a cigarette. Lying back in the car, thinking like that, had made my face all hot. The cold air was a welcome change. I had the window down just in case I got a call. I remember that moment like I'm still leaning against the side of the car right now. As though I'm still enjoying that cigarette. That was the first time I heard that name. Heidi. Heidi. I remember the man who repeated it over and over had a peculiar way of pronouncing it. I remember he did not pronounce it with the 'i' up high, but with the 'ei' stretching away. Not with the 'di' as afterthought, but 'deh' as a stutter. Hay-deh. Hay. Deh. And the man's voice spoke it many times, seven, nine, fifteen, until I could think of no other.

...so now ok so now what... ok so that doesn't give you the right... it doesn't... no it doesn't... Heidi let me tell you all I want from you... let me tell you all I want... Heidi... I just want one thing Heidi.... just one is all I've asked for... Heidi... just don't lie to me.... don't... Heidi don't lie to me.... that's all I ask from you.... don't lie to me.... you've hurt me... Heidi... I know I know.... I've hurt you too but.... that's all in the past... Heidi.... tell me everything... I want you to tell me every little thing but don't lie to me.... you can't lie to me... I want to find out but I want to hear it from you.... I

always find out and it hurts me when I find out because I find out you've lied to me... that hurts me... I agree... I know I've hurt you... I'm sorry.... I'm sorry... I know I've hurt you.... but don't lie to me Heidi... because you hurt me.... I'm sorry Heidi I'm so sorry... I won't hurt you anymore just don't lie to me... I have to know everything... just don't lie Heidi... I love you Heidi

Such conviction in his voice. Such abuse. Heidi. To my ears, it sounded like the Arabic word for 'her', and I wondered, who was she? And the more he said it, the more it sounded as though a small part of my culture had found its way onto the airwaves and into the cup holder of my taxi, and was now calling me to it. I sat in the car to listen, and I rolled up the windows. What I caught must have been the last few minutes of their conversation but it is etched on my mind, as André might say, 'like written with scalpel.'

## 7 THE ART OF LETTERS

September 24, 1992

Najwa,

*I have been in the country for ten days. In the airport they give me problems with my passport. They say I don't have proper documents so I had to stay at airport overnight. Toronto is very big, not as I expected. I am staying in a hotel called Hotel Selby. When I find an apartment I will send you my address. No work yet, but there is still hope. I have only been looking a short time. I telephoned yesterday, but the*

operator say the lines are not working again. I telephoned Muna and Alfonse in Glifada. Maybe they can give you my message?

I am writing my resumé tomorrow in the afternoon so, in one week I maybe have an interview. In the morning, I went to look at apartments. Toronto is expensive. I will write you again when I have an address. Kiss Eid and Raja for me. I will see you soon.

Love,

Sameer

\*

November 2, 1992

Najwa,

I miss you and the children. Toronto is a lonely city. The apartments that I saw are all too expensive and I am quickly losing my savings. No work yet, I have sent out my resumé to many companies, I go to some interviews but no one has called back with work. I am still staying at the hotel but soon I will move to a smaller room. They have a nightclub in the building and the music is very loud at night and I am very tired during the day, I don't sleep very well because of the music. Everyone says, I need to practice my English better so I will write you in English. If you have trouble reading in some areas ask, Roland. I think his English is good.

What else? I went to the cinema to see the new Batman film. Very exciting. It has lots of adventure. I call you, but the operator says now that there is no connection. Alfonse, he say he try to call you but there is again no answer. I hope you are all right. I think that maybe to get a job I should take off my moustache as it is too white.

Soon I will color my hair too. I look too old and everyone who works here looks young.

When I have an apartment I will send you my address and telephone so you can call when the lines are working. Write me a letter, we can practice English together, you will need it too when you are here.

Love,

Sameer

\*

December 3, 1992

Najwa,

You never write to me. Where are you? I am worried. I get no news from you or anyone in the family. How are Eid and Raja? Have they started school? I have been here for three months, and still no work. I have very little money left. Even the hotel I can not afford anymore, I have moved into a small room in a house. It has bathroom I have to share with three other men but I have my own microwave. The weather is very cold. It snows already.

As you know tomorrow is my birthday, I will call to see if the lines are working. I have tried every week. When they are working, no one is home to pick up the telephone. The search for work is frustrating. I have been to many interviews, my interviews go well, but then no one ever calls back. They say that with no North American credentials that I can not work here without North American experience. But how can I have North American experience if no one gives me work? They say go

*to school but I do not have money to go to school. I need to buy a coat for the winter, but again I have no money. I cannot pay my telephone bill. I need work.*

*I know I said I would send back money but I have no money to send. How are you affording to live? Maybe you have gone to live with your parents? Is anyone in the building sending you my letters? How is the situation there? I have no television to see what is happening. The newspapers don't say very much about Beirut.*

*I hope you are well and the children are well. I miss all of you. I want to come visit but it is expensive. In Canada everyone thinks about money. I am sending you four photographs that you can see what I look like without my moustache. My hair is black again! Do I look younger? Send me pictures of you and Eid and Raja so I can put them in my room. I am so sad without all of you. But when all of you come here, it will be worth it to be sad like this. I love all of you.*

*Love,*

*Sameer*

## **6** THE DEVICE AND THE MATTER OF NARRATION

Sometimes people speak with such regularity that if you happen to be, say, someone listening in, you can determine when they will be talking and, after a while, what they might be talking about. I began to realize this after the second night in my taxi with the scanner when, at around three in the morning, I heard Heidi's name again. The third night, I thought I'd try and anticipate their timing. To my surprise, I found them right where I thought they would be. The consistency of their talk turned my listening into an early morning habit. There was never anything of interest to me on the radio. My taxi

was equipped with a cassette deck, but customers were bothered by the Arabic music I played so I had long ago given up on bringing cassettes with me for the drive. For the first two weeks I listened to them whenever I got the chance, which was maybe once every other night or so. Then the tone of their conversations changed, and he began to threaten her more openly. That was when I began to worry.

After that, I listened to Heidi and the man argue every night. At 908.726, their frequency meant that if I drove my taxi around that neighborhood in which he must have lived, then I could often receive a clear line to his end. From those conversations, I learned a great deal about Heidi yet I could never hear her end of the talk. Everything I learned of her was through him. Yet he, this ever-present he I hadn't even a name for, remained shrouded in mystery. Who was he? What about his life? The only way I ever learned anything about him was through his talk of her. Not exactly what he said, but how he said it. How he described certain events. The inflections in his booming voice. His general mood. Yet the more I began to piece together about him in this manner, the more unsure I became of his credibility in what he was telling me about Heidi. Our mystery man, first of all, had a temper. Rarely did he speak calmly or rationally. His end was filled with yells and accusations, even the occasional belch. It became painfully clear his mode of conversation had its underlying strategies, all of which were fallacious. He set up red herrings, he argued straw persons, he bent logic in order to derive desired conclusions. If I listened closely, I could hear him sip and gulp mid-sentence. Our mystery man was a drunk! And what a paranoid imagination he had. If I was to believe everything he accused Heidi of doing, then she must have been the most uncaring, unloving, selfish, conniving woman known to man. His moods were erratic, and this too I sensed was preconceived. Usually after repeatedly yelling the same accusation he began

throwing in phrases like, “It’s only because I care. No one else does.” or “I’m only looking out for you.” He especially liked to end every conversation with an “I love you.” I did not know whom to believe. This mystery man was my only source on this Heidi character, with whom I slowly began to sympathize as the nights passed, yet his antics only seemed to underline his unreliability and so I was forced to confront the fact that the Heidi he described was perhaps not the real Heidi at all.

Her silence spoke volumes to me. I had to wonder if her muted voice was a result of the scanner’s deficiencies, or if she was actually keeping quiet on her own. Who knows, perhaps she whimpered or even wept as this mystery man rained down his abuse on her. As time passed I grew more involved in their debacles. Every night as the hour of three approached, after I’d driven the last of my drunk patrons home, I’d sit with my taxi parked in the lot of an all-night variety store, anticipating their timing. They became my Canada. Under my breath, I would curse my mystery man as I set the frequency, then quiet down to see if they were arguing. Sometimes I would tune in too early and, consequently, have to spend several minutes aimlessly searching for phone sex lines which, incidentally, I never found because of my lack of expertise in handling the machinery. Other times I would wait anxiously in my seat with the static burning my ears, awaiting the ring like a moviegoer awaiting the opening credits of his film. A part of me secretly wished the phone would ring endlessly and my Heidi would not answer; of course, I was elated when, each time, she picked up. But, as you must understand, her answer to his call was my only way to ensure she hadn’t been harmed. I was in constant fear he might do something to her. And then I’d hush up and listen.



You lie Heidi... lie... you're lying... stop it... I know Heidi... Heidi stop it... where'd you get it... where... you're a liar Heidi... no one loves a whore Heidi... no one... not like me... stop lying... you hurt me Heidi... you hurt when you lie... can't you see how much it hurts me... you're a whore... a whore... a whore... I'll show you Heidi... I'll show you what happens to whores who lie... you lying whore... I know... I know all about it... I know everything there is to know... but I want to hear it from you... tell me everything Heidi... you're a cunt Heidi... a cunt... stop lying you dirty cunt...

I'll find him... Heidi I'll find him... I'll take care of him... believe me Heidi I will... take care of him good... good like I'll take care of you... that's not good enough... I want to hear you tell me everything... you don't understand Heidi how this hurts me... it hurts... hurts... you don't care how much I love you... the only one... the only one who can love a whore like you... you're nothing... the money Heidi... the money... where is the money... they'll take care of both of us if you don't tell me about the money... what's his name... fuck off you lie... you... it has to come from you...

Poor Heidi! You could tell by the speed of his talk alone that she wasn't allowed to get many words in. He belittled. An ogre, that's how I imagined him. A daunting man by stature who used his size to intimidate others. And Heidi, she must have been a frail, sensitive woman, a butterfly caught in this spider's web. I began to consider seriously

what he might do to her if she didn't give in to his paranoid delusions. This man was obviously very troubled. He had a sick imagination. There was no telling how or when he'd react.

The fear I nurtured for Heidi's well-being at those small hours over the next several weeks eventually got me thinking. What if someone had harmed my wife and children? What if they were dead? I had no way of knowing, and such questions kept me up during the days as I tossed around in my bed. The little sleep I did find was racked with nightmares of the cruelest acts against the people I loved. If only I had a way of finding out. Anything, just one shred of information that would let me know they were still alive. An envelope in the mail, a postcard, any word of their existence. I wanted so badly to call them and hear their voices. And I had often tried calling, only to find the line could not be connected. I pleaded with the operator but there was nothing she could do. Many phone lines have been disconnected for years in that area, she said. Many have been downed by bombs. The government isn't planning on installing new ones until the situation over there settles. The only way to get a hold of someone is if they call you. But they hadn't received my letters! They don't have my number!

My performance at work was beginning to suffer. Customers kept complaining that I'd doze off while driving or drive to the wrong street corners or buildings. I smoked too much in the taxi. I was irate. I was late in picking up passengers and, in general, my driving habits were careless.

# 5 THE ART OF LETTERS

March 7, 1993

Najwa,

*I am without hope. The last of my money is gone, I took work as a taxi driver to pay for my room and food. To get the Canadian driver's license I had to take the driving test three times. Each time I spend fifty dollars to do it. Do you receive my letters? I think you do not. The winter here is very cold. My room has bad windows, I bought a chauffage to make it warm. Everywhere I spend money.*

*With no work in my field and since I have no friendships or family with me, Toronto is not like a real city. I am walking through a dream, where I am inside the city always, but I am always looking at it from the outside. For days I say nothing, only when I am working will people speak with me and only to give me instructions. My taxi is more warm than my room so I work in the night instead. The picture I send you is of me with my taxi. The man next to me his name is André. He is from Russia but he is an honest man. One of the taxi drivers brought in a Polaroid and he takes the picture. Everyone that works there is an immigrant. They tell me that I cannot get work in my field because I have no landed immigrant status because I am a refugee. My boss he pays me in cash. He say if I get my papers then he can pay me as much as everyone else. Before that, I have to work for less. The situation is not good, but there is nothing to do about it.*

*I work every day from five in the night to five at morning. So I can not call when you have day because I am in the taxi. The telephone is too expensive in any case. I have no money for long distance. How are Eid and Raja? How is the schooling? Have you talked to Raymond? What does he do now? I miss everyone.*

*Because I can not get inside of Toronto I keep a little Beirut in my head. Toronto for me it's still like the map I showed you before I left there.*

*Love,*

*Sameer*

*\**

*June 12, 1993*

*Najwa,*

*I have almost been here one year and I still feel like a stranger. There is a book store close to the taxi company where I found a book called A House Not Her Own from Emily Nasrallah for two dollars. It is stories. Do you remember her? She is Philip's wife I think. Raymond's friend from AUB. It is very nice to read about Lebanon from her. Did we meet her son, I think his name is Khalil, one time? I do not remember. Do you remember the weekend we spend in Zahle? I think about that sometimes.*

*I am applying for landed immigrant status and also citizenship. You have to live here for three years before citizenship. I do not want to live in Toronto forever. I will get the citizenship and the passport and then come back to Beirut. Then we can go anywhere without the trouble of the Lebanese passport. But Toronto does not want me to live here neither.*

*I like Emily's stories. Her language is very poetical. She writes in one part: As a writer who has lived through the tragedies of her people and her country, and who sees similar tragedies unfolding with similar people around the world, I have to ask*

*what effect this writing has. I must ask if the word still possesses the power to champion right – does it still possess the strength to carry the cries of the destitute and oppressed? And I must ask if there are still, in a world filled with the clamour of war machinery, ears that can hear the moans of the weak and the cries of the desperate.*

*Beautiful, no? She makes me think that I am doing a good thing to try to move my family away from war. When I read that, I feel like my life is not for me but more for Eid and Raja and I begin to feel proud. It is not so horrible to be Lebanese. Not like others think it is. If you see Philip or Raymond or anyone from the Nasrallah house, tell them Sameer would like to thank Emily for her stories.*

*As always, I miss you.*

Love,

Sameer

## **4** THE DEVICE AND THE MATTER OF STRUCTURE

When André called me into his office two weeks later I was ready for the worst. He trudged across the garage, over to where four of us were gambling on dice, his belly seemingly held up with both hands, tapped my shoulder and pointed to his office. I paid what I owed and slackened my pace so as not to pass him. When he sat down, he took out his rag and wiped his brow. We sat quietly until he had caught his breath again.

“I can explain,” I began. “André, André, I’ve been going through a bit of a rough time but, not to worry, I will get better.”

“Whah?” He looked confused. “Oh, the complaints. Yes, well...”

“As I said, personal troubles. Tomorrow, back to normal.”

“Good. Glad to hear it,” he said, and immediately he gave in to a sheepish grin. He seemed satisfied to have made use of the expression and, I, having overheard it emanating from his office as part of a conversation he had been following that afternoon, nodded knowingly in compliment. “But I call you in for other reason too.”

“Yes, of course,” I allowed, breathing a sigh of relief, contented that I still had my job.

“Do you have it?”

“Have what?”

“My scanner. You have it for a long time. Do you think, maybe, you will be done with it soon?”

“Pffggh. Well, I thought you said you had several. All better models too --”

“If you’re not done with it,” he interrupted, waving his hands in the air, “then that is different story.”

“Listen, if you want it back you want it back. Simple as that. I’ll have it back tomorrow. I’ve been saving, maybe I’ll go buy my own.”

Sensing that perhaps he’d offended my pride, André took great pains to make sure we were back on good terms. “You do nothing like that,” he insisted, smacking the desk surface. “Keep it for as long as you like. I don’t need it. Like you say, I have other ones. They are better. Why you not try out better ones, eh? Eh? And they’re fun toys, no?”

“Tell me, André,” I said frankly as I crossed my legs. “Do you ever listen to the same people more than once?”

“I don’t know,” he wiped his brow as he gave it some thought. “Every now and then, I hear someone I recognize from before. Why, does anyone say anything?”

“No.”

“Well then, who wants to know?”

“No one.”

“Good. We keep it that way too.”

“Right. But you never find yourself, I don’t know, more interested in some people’s talk than others?”

“Don’t get, how do you say, too busy. It’s a toy, a way to pass time. You keep a good distance between you and them. It’s only trouble if you get too close.”

“Right, André. Of course. You’re right.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Alright. Get to work.”

Now the range of the Netset 100-channel direct-entry programmable scanner André lent me is approximately one and a half kilometers. I drew a circle and performed unnecessary calculations in the dead space between the last call passengers and the conversations, just to keep my mind busy with something more intelligent than taxi-driving. Assuming I could work in straight lines and perfect circles, then this matter of circles and locations could be easily solved. But several complications kept arising almost as quickly as I posed the initial problem. The phone can move, and it takes with it the center of the circle wherever it goes, which I needed to measure the basics: radius, diameter, circumference. Without a fixed center, without stability, my margin of error would grow with each step our mystery man took.

Then I thought, this man is moving around in a city, with buildings and streets, not on a blank page where I could easily draw his circle, and my problem grew two-fold.

I couldn't simply draft straight and curved lines onto a city, nor could I pass through buildings in a taxi, or even by foot. Even the design of the streets makes it difficult; rarely do they keep a straight path for long. The slightest bend, the slightest shift in angles, and they're useless for my purposes. Now, had I had a hand in this city's planning, things would be different. Every block would be a perfect square, every square a perfect copy of all the others, so my city would look like a geometric grid. One could draft their theories on this practical set-up and work in conceivable increments of blocks, arranging and unarranging them as they saw fit. But what I presently had to work with was a seemingly random collage of bends, dead ends, overpasses, and one-way streets. The sight lines are minimal, in every direction one sees only glass, brick, cement, and neon. Mind you, I'm exaggerating. It's not as bad as I've made it out to be. I'm a taxi man, it's in my job to know the quickest way at any given time from one place to the next. My customers demand it and I deliver it. In my mind I can see the entire city, unfolding as if it were a blueprint, and although I haven't had a part in its construction, I have taken great pains to take it apart. Still, as I drive around at night, I am confounded by the sheer impossibility of finding one moving man in all this.

Other than this, all I know about this mystery man is his voice and, of that, there can be no debate. And then there is Heidi. She can be anywhere. Even if I do find this mystery man, I wouldn't know in which direction to step next. She could be around the corner or around the world. The range of these cellular phones seemingly has no limit. The only circumference it knows is the planet. I've often thought, while listening in my taxi, perhaps this is why they only talk at night. Maybe it's a matter of time zones. Maybe that's why I can never catch her voice. Or maybe, just maybe, this distance between them is what makes him so paranoid. Perhaps he and I are alike in more ways



than I imagined. Who knows, if I had a way of communicating with my wife night after night, I might become the same shell of a person.

### 3 THE VOICE AND DISTANCE

I began to keep a journal, in which I transcribed some of the more severe accusations that were made against Heidi. I had no idea what I would do with them, since there was no chance of ever taking them to the police.

December 29: it's the money Heidi... the money... I swear I'll... no, fuck listen... If you don't... I'll handcuff you to the back of the car...

January 4: full of shit... shut up... you're like a leach... yeah, a leach, Heidi... a fucking whore of a leach... can't fuck me over... are you listening... I don't care how many cocks you have to suck... get me my money...

As the winter months passed, I listened to my mystery man pen the most unfathomable, unforgiving portraits of his Heidi. Each accusation only added to my belief that Heidi was not as he described her but quite the opposite, a mirror image in which left is right and right is left. He posed his Heidi in front of this mirror and I, privy to the reflection, saw only my Heidi.

January 7: do you know what you're doing to me... you're killing me, Heidi... killing me... you're stabbing me with your selfishness... you're a selfish whore...

because of you, they'll hurt me... yeah... yeah... no shut up... shut the fuck up...  
I'll tear you apart... limb from limb, Heidi... to pieces... if it's the last thing I do...

January 13: you're a nothing... on your own you don't fucking exist... without me  
you've got no mind... no... no... listen... no drop the fucking crying and listen... if  
I don't love you no one does... don't do that... no... how fucking stupid can you  
get on your own... if you do that... if you... no shut up... one swing of the tire  
iron... one swing... this time I won't miss...

I got to thinking that, in this city, I could find him, help someone, have an effect.  
Wherever I drove, I kept one eye on suspect strangers walking the streets. Every time a  
man climbed into the backseat I checked him twice in the rearview, and then asked him a  
question just to sample his voice. And then there were those who had cellphones. Now  
that I was looking for them, they were everywhere. They stood outside store windows,  
walked into elevators, descended into the subway, even carried on long conversations in  
my taxi as I drove them around. Each time I would register the face, the voice, something  
of how and what they said. As a result, each of these people added something small to the  
grand composite I was trying to piece together, and all these suspect cellphone users had  
influenced my idea of my mystery man, his Heidi, my Heidi.

January 21: that's right... I have a bag full of scissors... I'm gonna cut off all  
your hair...

February 2: it's the worst way to go... don't make me fucking come by and do it... one week.. one week... no... that's all... one fucking week... seven days... one plastic bag, twenty minutes... twenty minutes... I could be over there in ten... with the bag you'd be...

February 5: no... no... are you fucking stupid, Heidi... of course there's gonna be interest... it's been four months... tell me... tell me... who loses that much money... I'll just say this... no shut up for one fucking second and let me talk... it's a big lake... think of how it is under the ice... no one will find you because no one cares

Then, one night, as the snow was beginning to melt, the calls stopped. Suddenly and abruptly. Just like that. I searched up and down the frequencies for over two hours, until the sun began to rise, and was late in returning the cab. I looked everywhere for that familiar tone, his nasal flare, from as low as the obscene 113 megahertz to as high as 1160, but found nothing.

Even though I had anticipated an end from the time I began listening for her, this abrupt and premature closure had me devastated. I was frantic, and for days I could think of nothing else. What had he done to her? Was she dead? André watched me deteriorate over the next few weeks and wanted to know why I snapped at everyone in the garage. I told him simply to leave me be, as this matter was very private, and he, being an affable man, gave me my space. But two weeks later while driving well out of my general area, I fell asleep at the wheel and, when I woke up, my taxi was wrapped around a telephone pole. And I'd be lying to say that it stirred me. I couldn't bring myself to feel either

anxiety or remorse or panic or anything. I sat in my cage of twisted metal and broken glass, unable to leave the car, stayed there for close to an hour until firemen pried me loose with the jaws of life. After that, André insisted I either tell him the truth or look for new work. In the end, I broke down and lied: I had received word from Beirut that my wife and sons had been killed by a car bomb as they were driving past.

“Oh my god,” he gasped. “How long have you been keeping this to yourself?”

“Several weeks,” I replied.

“Man, you will break down yourself in if you keep up this.”

“What can I do, André. What can I do?”

“Let it out. Talk about it. Tell me everything. I want to know.”

And we sat down in his office to talk. I recreated for him the length of my marriage. How I'd met Najwa back in 1972 while both of us were vacationing in Cyprus, and how we'd gotten engaged shortly before the outbreak of the civil war. I held back nothing. I explained how even throughout the early stages of the war I'd been able to find good work as an architect, and after the Lebanese had stopped rebuilding fallen buildings, I'd still managed the odd job from clients in Turkey or Syria or Jordan. I told him unabashedly about the birth of my first son and the subsequent birth of my second, how disheartening it was to have them raised in a city where, gradually, all roads were blocked off and divided by separate factions, how they grew to know no other place to sleep than the cellars where we spent every night for three years. I went on at length about how we lived off our savings, meagerly at that, for the latter half of the eighties, how I began having to leave the country more and more for work, the many failed applications and reapplications for immigration. How no country would have the Lebanese, as if we'd been diseased by the war. And all we wanted was a different passport, new citizenship so

we could work and live. I cried as I, for the first time, spoke openly about the humiliation of declaring refugee status at the airport, the security and personnel, all my age, leading me through the procedure as if I was a lower form of life. Then there was my inability to find decent work because no one would have an old man without North American credentials, or a Lebanese, or a refugee without landed immigrant status. The letters that were never answered by my family, the unnerving suspicion they'd never been received, and now word of this. Ah, the things I said to protect you, Heidi.

He wiped his brow and for a moment I thought he would weep with me. He rested his hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm not supposed to do this, but I will anyway. You take a vacation, paid for, so no worries, and get rest. Come back when you are ready."

I spent my thirty-fourth birthday lying in bed all day, not wanting to move. Only two days later did I realize my birthday had passed, and then it was only with a shrugged disbelief. I spent most days slipping in and out of sleep. At night I sat silently at the kitchenette table, smoking and staring out the window.

## 2 THE ART OF LETTERS

November 8, 1994

Najwa,

*I have been to the doctor because I am feeling dizzy sometimes when I drive and when I wake up it sometimes take me a long time to remember where I am. Also, my heart rate is fast. I do not feel so well in general. The doctor says that my blood*

*pressure is too high and my diet is not good. I eat too many fast foods he says and, I say but I have no stove to cook. He has given me prescription for my heart rate. I will buy it when I have enough money. The other taxi drivers have health plans but because I am a refugee status paid in cash, I have no plan. He also says I have too much stress.*

*I have not heard from you in now over two years. Where are you? What has happened? I am afraid you are not well. The last time I try and called the operator says the number was disconnected. Have you moved? I think of Beirut always. I want to return. I do not care to live in Toronto any more.*

*But now I am tired. It is seven in the morning here, today will be cold weather. There is some snow falling already but it will not stay. I have to work at five again so, I must sleep.*

*Love,*

*Sameer*

*\**

*December 25, 1994*

*Najwa*

*Happy Christmas. I will keep writing you letters but I will stop sending them. I received a package of all my letters to you from the post-office. I am in my room now and the chauffage is broken so, I am wearing my jacket. Do you remember the book*

*by Emily Nasrallah I mentioned? I still read it. They are stories on the war and many bad things happen to the characters. Bombs explode, people die in supermarkets, snipers finish the stories. I cannot help but imagine if all this has happened to you and Eid and Raja. It is very saddening that from one story to the next, only Emily remains. Or maybe you have married again? Do not worry, it is just a joke. I have bought you a Christmas present and I will give it to you when we meet again. It is a little wooden marionette. He has no strings to make him move or dance, but he has small holes in his hands and feet so he waits for you to give him strings.*

*I am going to sleep now. I do not work this evening but, I do not feel like I should be awake right now.*

Sameer

\*

February 6, 1995

Heidi,

*You do exist without him. I care about you.*

Love,

Sameer

# 1 THE LEBANON OF THE IMAGINATION

We left on the morning of August the 27th, 1992, before the sun rose. I had made arrangements to leave with an acquaintance named Fouad. We could not say where we would end up. Looking back, the decision I made was rash. Fouad woke me at three that

morning and told me to pack my bags. I packed and dressed in that cellar one last time. I bade my wife and children goodbye. The manager of the hotel grounds, Eli, opened the garage for us. Fouad started the Golf and we loaded our bags. We each had one bag, a backpack, not even a suitcase. It was dark when our drive began, but we drove with our lights off. Even at that hour, one could hear, below in Beirut, stray bullets passing through the air. He did not tell me where we were headed. But I soon figured out that we were going towards the port. Along the way the car passed my old apartment complex. It was in ruins. If not for the street, I wouldn't have even known the neighborhood.

Several blocks away from the water's edge, we pulled into an alleyway where we were met by a short man who appeared to be expecting us. Fouad got out and they had an exchange I couldn't hear. He returned to the car, bent down and tapped the window. When he saw he had my attention, he motioned for me to get the bags and get out of the car. Once outside he explained what was going on. The short man worked on the dock. In exchange for the Golf, he had arranged passage for us to Cyprus on a trade vessel.

The short man waved for us to follow him. Along the way to the water, we walked quickly, keeping our backs to the walls. At street corners, we darted across, hoping snipers would not shoot us. We heard fire. It did not come in our direction. The port, I could now see, was heavily guarded with foreign soldiers. The perimeter was fenced, and the gates were well lit. We stayed away from the lights, walking away from the port once we reached the last street. The short man led us to a parking lot in between buildings. In the parking lot there was a truck and a driver. The short man talked with the driver. Then he told us to jump in the back of the truck and get inside the large open box. We did what we were told. Both the short man and the driver jumped in behind us and nailed the box shut.



And there we were inside this box, the two of us, with no room to move. Several minutes passed and nothing. Then the truck began to move and we realized just how small this box was. With every bump our heads either knocked into one another or into the box's ceiling. I thought I cut my lip on my knee but I could not be sure. The truck stopped and we heard muffled voices. Then a man jumping into the back of the truck and tapping a hard edge on every surface. This, I decided, must be one of the soldiers at the port gate. I prayed for him not to open the box. I don't think he would have looked twice at us. He would have just fired. And that would have been the end of that.

The footsteps walked away. The truck started moving again, but stopped shortly after. Two sets of feet jumped into the back of the truck. The box began to move. I was so startled I gasped. Fouad quickly placed his hand over my mouth to muffle the sound. We pushed against the sides of the box, so as not to move about and make noise as the box was being carried. The footsteps grew louder. Then the box stopped moving and we were set down. The swaying of the box made me disoriented, then sick. Still we could not say anything. Fouad and I sat quietly, me with vomit over my clothes and bag, he trying his best not to breathe in the stench. We sat like that for forty-five minutes. We did not talk.

What can one think about at such a time? A good many things. Inside the crate, I imagined the world I knew as it once was, not as it now stood. I thought of my sister as I hadn't thought of her since her death the month before. She had a signature fleeting smile that would light up like the head of a match and, for a moment, glow brighter than anything else in the room, and then it would fade away just as quickly. Only in my thoughts, it did not fade. I could never imagine it fading. And she talked of such carefree things, with such love in her voice, and tenderness in her opinions, a voice she had lost

shortly after the first bomb hit the ground. What I remembered was not at all real but, from within my box, who was to tell me what was real and what was not. I could sit here for as long as they wanted and torture myself with the fictions I thought I was abandoning.

# O

## INTRODUCTIONS

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*My dear reader, I have drawn myself into a pensive and self-reflective mood presently, so let us rise above this story for a moment, stretch our legs, and consider the nuptials of my autobiography, which I have thus far been unsuccessful in filtering into my work. This, of course, grieves me to no end. Like others in my position, my ultimate pleasure is a derivative, not a source. I look for refractions of myself everywhere. So, without further distraction, my autobiography!*

*I decided late in my sophomore year of university that I wanted to be a writer, and promptly set about making arrangements to drop out of business school. My mother, who had wanted to see me through to a respectable career as an actuary or financial planner, was not overly pleased, and understandably so. Naturally, I felt I had no choice in the matter, that I'd either been taken by a calling or a disease, and that in either case the cause would see me through to my end. I agreed at first to a short-lived plan whereby I would finish my business degree with night courses while pursuing "the hobby" during the day. But soon after, I confessed that the proposal was only a front to ease my mother into the realization that her first-born and only son had chosen a lifestyle that would most likely amount to an impoverished and defeated failure. But I had no ambition for money. I was interested only in respect and accolades, and I spent my nights devising, with what business habits I had picked up already, a plan to elevate my name to a sustainable entity, a brand entrusting quality for its devout future audience.*

*Regardless of the fact that I'd yet to write anything of interest, I announced to my friends that I had become a writer and that by summer's end a novel would be ready for drafting. But mostly I just enjoyed the category of writer, just as most semi-creative*

*people enjoy calling themselves artists. And I called myself one of those too. I began making notes for potential story ideas, and resolved to read many, many books, so that one day I could make light of their quotables in an interview or something.*

*Let me tell you about the circumstances of my first story. I wrote it two weeks after I had made my fateful decision, in a blind fury over the course of one night, just as I had heard Franz Kafka had done before me with his story, "The Judgement." Here, I'll let his words explain our shared experience. Where I have left gaps, please feel free to imagine the specifics of my first story.*

*This story, " \_\_\_\_\_," I wrote at one sitting during the night of the \_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_, from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning. I was hardly able to pull my legs from under the desk, they had got so stiff from sitting. The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. Several times during this night I heaved my own weight on my back. How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again. ...Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such complete opening of the body and the soul.*

*I refuse to "quote" this passage for obvious reasons, namely that if it were not for the linear progression of time (which we could easily do without), the argument could be made that Kafka has indeed emulated me. No one can own an experience. One can only put a name to it. After all, my first story is also about a father, and it too takes into consideration a certain amount of guilt. I first wrote it in an archaic prose similar to that of Dostoevsky, who in turn had a profound influence on a young Kafka (as if I needed more reason not to quote that emulator!), but in the end decided to strip it down to efficiency and not make the mistake sullen Franz had made. The story, by the way, was*

*about a very dear old friend of mine, who used to be an actress, and her father the filmmaker.*

*But, my dear reader, I have come a long way since those nascent two weeks. How I look back on them fondly. I have now been writing for three years and, as compulsion would have it, I am presently in the mood to don my mask, jump back behind the curtain, and start creating again. Adieu!*

*Directly,*

*The Author*

# 1

## ON THE MATTER OF AGENCY

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Three weeks passed, and I returned to the taxi agency and my taxi. Not that I'd managed to put to rest the loss of my Heidi; rather, time had slowly moved her from memorial to memory. My performance behind the wheel improved by the customer and, by the end of the first day, I felt like a newly sobered man after a bout with alcoholism. Graciously, I accepted tips greater than any in the last few months, and I was warm and intimate with passengers. I had pleasant conversations with lone occupants, and suggested local attractions to wide-eyed tourists in town for hockey play-offs. I even dabbled in some insider trading information, picking up tips from one businessman only to pass them on to the next. I handed out cards and was rewarded with repeat customers. Even André noticed the sharp decrease in complaints, and was reassured in his decision to give me the vacation with pay instead of just firing me, as I'm sure he must have considered.

All was going well until one evening, shortly after eleven, I picked up a impish-looking man at the corner of a not too well-established neighborhood of pawn shops and dark parks. I found his actions strange from the beginning. In hailing my taxi, he ran out

into the middle of the street to wave me down, squarely in my path, although I could have clearly seen him from the curb. Perhaps I had blinded him with my headlights, because he stood dumfounded for a moment, flinched, then ran to the side to jump in the back seat. He was a thin man with long, oily hair. He hadn't shaved in some time, and had a slow beard coming in to match his prominent and wiry moustache. He wore a sleeveless undershirt, the kind of track pants that you can pull off with one hand, and several gold chains around his neck, all bearing in some encrusted rock the initials J.S.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Just start driving and I'll tell you where to go,” he said, and almost immediately the cabin filled with the stench of alcohol.

I went to turn on the meter, but he tapped my shoulder and when I turned he shook his head. He then passed me a hundred dollar bill.

“Just drive, boyo.”

“But where?”

“Just drive. I'll tell you when you're going the wrong way.”

All this was getting on my nerves. I don't like to drive without knowing where I'm going, and I certainly don't take well to a passenger who uses underhanded, clever, condescending tricks, making me out to look like a fool on the road, just to get to where he's going. But I had one hundred dollars in my pocket, so I began driving. I kept one eye on the rear view to make sure he didn't try anything funny. Just last year, I was almost stabbed by a man in similar tear-away track pants.

What I saw in that mirror I was not prepared to see. After he had buckled his seatbelt, he took off one of his hands. Then he put the other one in his armpit, pulled, and off it came too. He held up his wrists, as if studying them. The right one still had the

nub of what might've been a thumb still attached to the wrist, but the left was just scar tissue covering what was left of a wrist that had seemingly folded in on itself. He must have seen me looking in the mirror, because he held them up proudly for me to see at the next light and said, "Beauties, aren't they?"

I nodded. I couldn't think of what else to do.

"All part of the job," he sighed. "Just had the bandages removed two days ago. The new ones aren't so nice, they itch. I just got them today, but I don't know if I'm going to wear them."

I continued driving and he appeared to be dozing off, his legs splayed, his gloved hands resting on one another in his lap, his arms crossed. I thought this ride wasn't going to be that bad after all if he fell asleep and I just drove, yet as I passed the intersection he tapped me with his left stub to tell me I was going the wrong way. I made a u-turn and turned left, cautiously, in case he wanted right. But I was right in choosing left and we continued on our way.

Things could always be worse. At least without his hands I felt relatively safe. Soon we began talking. His name was John. John Spier.

"As in one who spies?" I asked.

"Yeah, like a spy," he said, chuckling, as if I'd just paid him a compliment.

He supervised a small but apparently very profitable import/export business for his father, who for various unmentioned reasons, chose not to live in this country. He had a brother who was presently in prison on racketeering charges, but his time was going to end soon, depending on his testimony in a certain court case coming up that their father was very interested in. I told him I took an interest in everything my sons did too, and he seemed to take well to the fact that I had a family. He said the family was very important,



and naturally I agreed. He told me rather abruptly, as I was telling him about my wife, that I was going the wrong way. But overall he was almost jovial, even humorous, as long as he controlled the conversation. He showed me his hands again and, as we looked at them, he told me never to owe anyone money. I concurred that financial independence was quite important. I drove and drove until I had lost my sense of direction. Not that it mattered, for I found I was growing increasingly absorbed in all he was saying, in how he was saying it. He was really quite intriguing the way his lips moved in my rear view, the way his face changed when he shouted “wrong way,” and by the time he asked me to drop him off in an abandoned factory district, I offered him my card. But he, of course, had no way of accepting it until I had helped him put his hands back on. When I offered again, he refused.

“I don’t want to know who you are, it’s only important that you know who I am,” he said. “Tomorrow. Same time, same place. Same cash. Later, boyo.”

And after he walked down an alley, as I was trying to find my way again into the pattern of the city I knew so well, the pattern he had just shaken apart for me, I kept repeating his words to myself, replaying his voice like an old record, until I figured out the strangest thing about John Spier, that thing I hadn’t been able to shake from the moment he stepped into my taxi and told me what to do. He had authored my Heidi. I had been his reader. I was sure of it.

## 2 THE SECRET AGENT

John Spier, the man with no hands, was quite separate from my imagined John Spier, creator of my Heidi. My John Spier was a bullish, brutish man, over six feet tall, slightly

overweight but a weight that carried well. For some reason, I'd always pictured him with a closely shaved head.

I began working for him, rather unknowingly, that night. In the same manner as the first time, I'd pick him up and drive until he said I was going the wrong way, then correct myself, twice, three times if need be, until I had it right the way he wanted it, or until I was lost and he had arrived where he wanted to be. I would ask him, once we had established a slight kind of working rapport after several rides, why not just tell me where you want to go, we'd get there so much quicker. He never gave me a proper answer, often he would not say a word, and when I looked in the rear view he was always holding with his right nub a hundred-dollar bill, pressing it with his sole thumb against the stub. And I understood, or began to.

Admittedly, I was lured into working for him not only because of the pay, which I thought I could use to buy my prescription, but of Heidi too. At first I thought, but you're over her. That's in the past. Let it go. But Heidi to me was like alcohol. When I had John Spier in the car, he had a hypnotic effect on me, so enigmatic, as if he were the bartender, the only bartender capable of making my drink, and he kept leaning over the bar between us, initiating small talk as he nudged his Heidi drink toward my hand. I felt I had gained his trust a little; he no longer wore his hands in my company. Rather, as soon as he was in my taxi he asked me to pull them off for him, and they spent the rest of the drive in the front with me, taking up the passenger seat.

Of course there was still that matter of hands. Yet I was so sure of his voice. It was imprinted on my memory like fingerprints. There was no doubt of his power over me. I was aware of it too. After he stepped into my taxi that first night and we'd got to talking as we did, I felt as though we were old friends running into each other after losing

touch. I quickly grew comfortable around that familiar lisp, those rolling r's, and for all intents and purposes, I felt I knew this man already. And after I'd found his voice, his hands were relatively easy to explain away. And I thought, Heidi, you're not dead after all. You simply couldn't have been phoned. Yes, I thought, this was my mystery man. Why else would nightly calls end so abruptly? Why, he could no longer pick one up. His phone was where his hands had last left it. Or maybe it was still with his hands, wherever they were. And they could be anywhere. In a dump. In the trunk of a car. In the lake. Or with Heidi. Maybe she had grown tired with those nightly recreations, maybe she wanted to make sure he would never call her again. Mind you, this was all aimless speculation. My imagination has run off on its own again. But who knows? Anything could be true at this point. I'm as lost in thought as I am on the road.

I knew one thing for certain. Without the phone calls, without the scanner, this John Spier was my ticket to Heidi, the only way I had of finding out if she was alright after blaspheming my family's livelihood for her. And so night after night, I drove him where he wanted to go, sometimes just the two of us, sometimes with others. His insistence on having me not know where I was going until I got there soon had me thinking I'd fare better if only I could forget all I knew about how to get around. True, I still used it during the day with other customers, but with him I had to relearn to read the city. Every street eventually lost its place, and with that they all slowly devolved into a labyrinth of dark corridors, one no different than the next, my only queue a 'wrong', as I drove deeper into John Spier's underworld of tax evasion and bribery and other sordid affairs, he being my only navigator.

# 3 THE ART OF LETTERS

March 18, 1995

Mr. Sameer Gerdak,

We are pleased to inform you that your application for Canadian citizenship has been accepted. In the next few weeks, you will be receiving a package outlining the process of integration from hereon in. Included in this information will be the date and location of your citizenship ceremony. Please allow us to be the first to congratulate you on your new life as a Canadian citizen.

Sincerely,

Janet Finch

Assistant to

Minister of Immigration

\*

April 3, 1995

Mr. Sameer Gerdak,

Please be advised that your citizenship ceremony will be held on June 13, 1995, at the Markham Municipal Courthouse at 9:30AM. Your attendance is mandatory. Again, allow us to extend our warmest congratulations.

Sincerely,

Janet Finch  
Assistant to  
Minister of Immigration

# 4

## NEGOTIATING THE TRIANGLE

One night as I was momentarily driving correctly amidst all the wrongs, Spier asked me to pull over.

“Wait here,” he said, then got out of the car.

I lit a cigarette and watched him walk over to a group of four women, all relatively young and, if I must say, all relatively attractive in their own way, and all wearing clothes too thin and revealing for such a cold night. Although I could not hear the conversation they were having -- he had them walking away from the car at a leisurely pace toward a convenience store where their hands would most likely buy him the lottery tickets I usually had to buy for him every night, and a carton of buttermilk which he took a great deal of pleasure drinking messily, carton between stubs, so that at the end of every night I had to spend ten minutes wiping down the backseat -- but as I was saying, their talk seemed very animated. Spier gesticulated with his imaginary hands as though they were still attached to his wrists, as he often did after a few drinks, and would continue to do so freely until he had to scratch his nose or pick at his eye, at which time his illusion would crumble. Three of the women seemed not to pay any attention to his lack of hands, but one gave me the impression she had never met Spier before, at least not since he'd lost his hands, and followed the motions of the stubs as though she all of a sudden had the eyes of a moth and his wrists glowed.

They paused in front of a convenience store, at which point Spier motioned for one of the four to open a bag into which the others all placed some money. All five entered the store, and a few minutes later all five walked out, with three of the women going their own ways while Spier and the fourth, the one who had wondered at his missing hands, walked back to the cab, she now carrying two small plastic bags, he busy seeing that his watch didn't slip from his wrist. They climbed into the back seat and he ordered his usual "Drive" and off we went.

I watched this woman's every move in the rearview, at times more so than the road, as she scratched both scratch-and-wins, as she told him he'd won fifty dollars, the way she kissed him when he told her to keep it for herself. She wore her blue angora cardigan unbuttoned, under which she had on a studded bra. She crossed her legs. Spier's arm was around her neck, he was whispering in her ear as his stub stroked the curls of her hair, he smiled, she giggled, she slapped his knee and he held her hand there with his other stub. He kissed her neck, stopping only to let out a sly "wrong", at which I duly pulled to the side of the road and waited for the opportunity to turn. When I looked in the mirror again I saw he was whispering something inaudible into her ear, something I couldn't hear but I saw his lips move, I saw his lips move precisely as he said what I could only see, "Don't lie to me."

This woman was not at all like the Heidi I had imagined. Let me tell you about my Heidi. My Heidi had black hair that sometimes touched her shoulders when she leaned to the side. My Heidi was very quiet. Now that I think of it, I'd never imagined her outside her apartment, never imagined what that apartment would look like, only that my Heidi sat at a table with a telephone in front of her, and waited for the phone to ring. I imagined her, rather foolishly I suppose, with a more Middle-Eastern look, even though

her name blatantly pointed in another direction. And so what if in my mind she resembled a younger version of my wife. Not exactly, but perhaps a close relation, a long-lost sister. So what? I ask you. She was my Heidi.

But this Heidi spent her time on street corners, and wore clothes that strategically emphasized the most alluring parts of her body. This Heidi was blonde. She wore make-up. This Heidi, in the backseat of my taxi, was teasing John Spier with her tongue. My John Spier also took on another dimension. No longer was he only the abusive articulator of the cellular phone; beyond that he became the sexually driven motivator of this Heidi character of his. And this was how we began, and I say *we* simply because I feel I added something as witness to their actions. Their play in the backseat, still disrupted by the occasional ‘wrong,’ got heavier as I watched the two people who had occupied my last few months slowly undress and join as one. Despite myself, I couldn’t help but sneak the occasional glance in the rearview, even though I was often warned to “Keep your eyes on the road.” Still, I was curious for the details behind those inspired nightly shouting matches that, according to my timeline, would have followed such specific happenings on the phone. That is, if John Spier made his calls anymore. Or maybe the lack of hands had made his calls impossible. Maybe since they had been forced to only talk in person the result was this. A closer, less abusive, arousal of the body, as if without the presence of the phone between them they no longer cared to talk or worry their minds. It was all about their bodies. And as I said, when their acts were so involved that I knew they wouldn’t pay me any attention I watched unabatedly, but not to arouse myself as you might think, oh no, more so to gather information like a scientist, information I would later shape and analyze.

I couldn't help but feel a bit envious now that they were no longer fighting. In my mind, Heidi was never this close to anyone and in that way she belonged more to me than anyone else. So, as I drove in my silence, I grew frustrated with this Heidi, my Heidi, with John Spier, and ultimately with myself. Who was I to warm up to someone I'd never met? Why did I set myself up like this, fully knowing the emotional disaster that would follow?

Their play climaxed, and when they were done they got dressed and generally seemed to lose interest in each other. They no longer sat that close, in fact each sat by their own window, listlessly staring at the passing buildings.

I drove some more. Spier said his "wrongs" almost as an afterthought, as if his mind was elsewhere. Then he said "stop here" and then "wait." He jumped out of the car and ran into a building. I sat quietly in my driver's seat, and Heidi did the same by her window. I couldn't believe she was finally in my taxi, we were alone together without our intermediary. Had she known how I'd watched over her life like an angel, I'm sure she would have leaned over the seat and kissed me the way she had kissed John Spier. I thought of how if I were to start driving now, leaving Spier behind, we could run off together. Just she and I.

We sat in silence for a few more minutes, then she leaned forward and said, "Hey buddy, you got an extra cigarette?"

For you, Heidi, I would gladly buy a carton.

"Yes," I yelped like a pubescent schoolboy, and frantically searched my pockets. "Here you are." I even offered her a light. She lit her cigarette, inhaled, breathed out a smoky breath.



“Thanks, chief. By the way,” she said, extending her hand, “I’m Stella. Who are you?”

## 5 ELLIPTICAL CONVERSATIONS

The next seven nights followed suit. In the rear view I spied as the incorrigible John Spier had sex in the backseat of my taxi, each night with a different woman. They had no regard for surrounding traffic, whether she be mounted on his lap or lay splayed with him heaving on top, wearing nothing but that undershirt, balanced evenly on his stubs as if they were tent poles. At stoplights passengers in other cars would be caught off guard, their eyes drifting lazily until, stumbling upon the scene in the next car, their jaws would waver then drop, they would be silenced, as if entranced by the sight of something so private out in the open. And afterwards, upon my return to the taxi agency, I would clean away their secretions from the backseat with an oily rag.

And on each of those seven nights, I too chased my tail in that vicious circle of irrepressible hope, then envy, only to have it all dashed. They were not Heidi. In a similar fashion as that of meeting Stella, I met in succession, Denise, Dominique, Irene, Gabrielle, Alice, and Sue. If she was not here then where was she, I wondered. How did she figure into John Spier’s life? With every woman that stepped into my taxi with him, I tried to suppress that wrenching sensation, with all its irrational properties, that she was the one, that my search had finally ended. I’d listen closely to all she said, to how she acted, trying to recreate her voice in the dark half of those elliptical conversations.

And then there was the matter of all this degradation going on in the backseat. How Spier expected me to drive along without paying any attention, I don’t know. It was

as if he took pleasure in trampling all over my sublime, serene Heidi. The man could have sex anywhere. Why in my taxi? Why not have me drop them off at a motel off the side of the highway? I could then wait outside or have a coffee. Why me? Why was he doing this to me? And why was he doing this to Heidi? It was one thing to have sex with her in the back of my taxi as I watched. However, it was a whole other matter to have sex with another woman and leave me to weigh the indignities he was causing my Heidi, poor Heidi, as she sat silently at her table waiting for the phone to ring. Better yet, tell me. Tell me where I could find her once and for all, so while he had his sex I could go be with her.

I began having bad dreams in the afternoons again, but now they were of my wife with other men. I dreamed I was being replaced, that she was giving my sons a new father. Could she have fallen in love again, met someone else? Had she finally abandoned me, as she must think I abandoned her? I thought no no no, this can't happen. Again I began dialing that useless number at all times of the day, the number to my home, even though I knew I would come up against that same repetitive beeping of a home that no longer existed. My home had moved and there was no way to know where it had gone. Maybe one of a million other things had happened. There was no way to know. There was no way to know. How long had I held back these insecurities, so obviously insecure yet nevertheless so evasive. Did my Najwa have her own John Spier now, a man with a car with a back seat?

I no longer slept. I was constantly in a frantic state. In my room all I could do was pace back and forth with my feeble attempts to give all these questions adequate answers, yet in the end I succeeded only in raising more questions. These questions were beginning to suffocate me. It was one thing for me to fall in love -- yes, in love! -- with a

non-existent voice. Nothing else can topple that burden of loneliness. And I was lonely, lonelier than anyone else I knew, lonelier still that I didn't know anyone, and the slightest hint of rejection would have me lying down for hours under heavy blankets watching the hands of the clock go round and round. I'm still a man just like other men. I'm not infallible in these kinds of things. But to think that my wife had replaced me was devastating. And I'll admit it, it had been comforting being able to grasp at a non-existent love, all the while knowing I was still loved elsewhere. Daydreams keep the mind active. But if that love elsewhere should slip away then it's -- I can't stand it.

I suppose that's what happened on the seventh night, after John Spier's sexual kettle had already steamed but I was still percolating. As usual, he reclined into his corner of the taxi, watching the road and ordering his "wrongs." That night it was Sue who sat at the other end of the seat, looking out her own window. We drove down a nondescript street I'd never seen before in one of the suburbs and he said, "stop." I parked the car rather abruptly. He said, "Get out, I need some hands." I was fed up at this point with this whole system of wrongs and not having any control over anything in my life. Still, I stepped out of the car without a begrudging word. He did the same, leaving his door wide open for me to close. He began walking, motioning nonchalantly with his stub that I should follow. He looked so cocky and arrogant the way he strutted along, no hands and all, his hair hanging loosely, oily as ever, over his shoulders. What kind of man is this, I asked myself as I followed. What kind of a man plays with people's lives and feelings like this, as if they were puppets? This John Spier has no regard for anyone, not even himself.

And before I had any recollection of doing so, before my mind had even considered it, I was grabbing him by the neck from behind, my fingers digging into his

throat. It was as though my body, so tense from all these unanswered questions, had decided to take matters into its own, well, hands.

I was shouting. This I could clearly hear. Yet on the inside I felt calm. Rational.

“What have you done with her? Where is she? Where?” I kept repeating as I spit at the back of his head.

He kicked me in the groin, and I keeled over slowly.

“What the fuck? What’s got you, boyo?”

But I wasn’t listening. Neither to him nor to my head, which kept urging me to back down. I got up and lurched at him slowly, wearily, and missed, hitting the wall. And then, as I turned, those fists. Those non-existent hands curled into non-existent fists pummeling my head and neck. I’d always thought Spier to be relatively harmless without his hands, but here he was beating me with his stubs. And it hurt. I was crying.

“Where’s Heidi? Where’s Heidi?” I kept whimpering. I was getting very tired and, strangely, I felt like all I wanted was to sleep. “Where’s Heidi?”

“Crazy... old... fuck,” he managed between stabbing stubs into my stomach. “Who the fuck is Heidi huh? Who the fuck?”

Suddenly he backed off a few steps. I could see the expression on his face was no longer anger. I thought, is it over? In fact, if I was not mistaken he looked alarmed. But why was my view of him descending? What was that horrible pain in my neck? And my arm, I couldn’t feel it. It was so hard to breathe, why couldn’t I breathe? I must have keeled over onto my side because I could smell the wet sidewalk. The last thing I remember seeing was John Spier frantically looking around. John Spier running away. John Spier down the street. John Spier turning the corner. And then I saw nothing at all.

# 6

## THE LEBANON OF THE IMAGINATION

I was in Lebanon, once, not too long ago. With my family. My wife, Najwa, and our two sons, Eid and Raja. We lived in an apartment on the fourth floor of a building overlooking the harbor. East Beirut was a wondrous site from the sea before 1975. This was 1981. Three other tenants occupied the building. The rest had long fled to the hills. Our neighbor, next door, was beaten to death by a group of fourteen year-old boys, first for his money, which they would use to buy guns, and then for his beliefs. His head was driven repeatedly against the wall separating our two apartments until he was no longer recognizable. We huddled in a corner and listened. Najwa tried to cover the ears of both our sons but did not have enough hands. No matter. His screams were unavoidable. My children refused to sleep thereafter. No loss. Nobody worried about sleep anymore. The view of the harbor was most captivating in the evening, as the sun set.

\*

I was an architect until one day our offices were shelled. We could not complain. Months had passed with no work at hand. We built cities. This one was being destroyed. And so we gathered our savings from the bank and hid them in the apartment. Every morning, Najwa would stand in line to pay inflated prices for bread that barely fed the children. When the electricity disappeared, we washed our clothes in the kitchen sink. One day, out of hunger and spite, I drove to the mountains and slaughtered a goat for its meat. I had never killed before. The sensation of warm blood trickling through my fingers as I dragged the carcass back to the car was too much. I left the animal to rot.

\*

Once the sun went down, the night sky would burn with fire from many weapons. Bombs caved in the sides of buildings. Bullets pierced walls and other men. Fires burned in abandoned storefronts. Cars were overturned to block the way of tanks and other cars. Streets were conquered and divided. The city turned into one gigantic labyrinth with dire consequences for the mistaken path. The many that once walked freely now chose to not walk at all. The few that remained armed themselves to the teeth.

\*

We moved to a hotel in the mountains and, for a while, our lives were restored. We ate like human beings and were, for the most part, outside the labyrinth. I took my sons out for walks along the many paths. We played careless games of soccer in the vacant fields. In the evenings, they would go off with other such boys their age and do the things all boys that age will do. Najwa and I would sit at a small table on the patio and drink strong coffee from very small coffee cups. And for a time, one could not help but think that perhaps life was suited for simpler surroundings, that it only took the distant sounds of war to make one appreciate cloudless skies and the smell of cedars through an open window. Then in July, the grounds of our hotel were bombed for the first time. We thought, maybe it was just this once. Here's to hoping it will not come our way again. We toasted our optimism. One look around the table that night was enough to see that

optimism only traveled in groups, and that when alone, flashes of the worst possible fate tormented everyone present.

\*

I awoke. My body was immersed in a cold sweat. The room's window was open. A breeze had found its way into the night. I looked to my sons sleeping on the floor at the foot of the bed. They did not stir. I looked to my wife at my side. Najwa's sleep appeared painful. She ground her teeth. There came a time when it was much more comforting to fall asleep to the sound of shelling and gunfire, to doze off to the muted screams of others, knowing that night a victim had already been chosen. Then there were the quiet nights, when the faceless war would brood, in search of its prey, and no peace was to be had by anyone other than those who would eventually enter the headlines of the next morning's newspaper. That night was quiet.

## 7

## SUBJECTIVITY

I had a vision in my sleep, but everything in that vision seemed out of focus. The lines defining all the furniture had disappeared and instead I was met with a barrage of faded colors bleeding into one another at random.

It may have been my imagination but I could have sworn I saw a body, or the slight splash of color representing one. In any case it moved, first into my peripheral vision then out again. It was only after this splash of blue made its getaway that I took

notice of the over-abundant supply of white surrounding me. All of a sudden I felt more alone than ever and I would have greeted any color that would have walked in, anything, anyone.

I began to cry and oh how I wanted to cry for days over the slight pencil mark of a life I had previously led on this big blank page, and how with one stroke of my own doing it had all been erased. Maybe I'd died. Nothing here has a definite shape. All belongs to everything else. Perhaps I am here nor there. Perhaps I am everywhere. The soul is a gas.

I searched the foggy white expanse for some time until, quite suddenly, I was approached by a green and a blue. The colors intermingled then separated, several new colors were introduced, a smidgen of black, a pale yellow, and a silver-gray that, on occasion, burst into a painfully beautiful spasm of light. And then the deep but soothing voice, a voice I immediately recognized as the voice of Heidi.

“It’s good to see you’re conscious. You’ve been sleeping for a long time.”

“Where have you been?” I asked, all at once taken by the sheer effort of talking so much so that I was forced to draw a deep breath and cough. “I’ve been looking for you all this time.”

“I apologize. It gets busy around this time of day. You’ve been through quite a bit. You need your rest.”

Heidi leaned forward, and she kissed me. It was the first time I’d felt a kiss on my skin in over three years. Then she was swallowed by the white again. Blue followed suit but not before I felt a painful prick in my arm. Shortly thereafter, I lost consciousness again.

When I came to, I was no longer lying on the sidewalk. My eyes opened, and from what I could see I was in a room. Above me, there was a white ceiling. I tried to sit



up but my body wouldn't move. I tried again, and nothing happened. I began to wonder if I was tied down, or if this was another of John Spier's games. I tried to move my legs. No luck. When I tried to crane my neck, left, right, up or down, nothing worked. I felt very drowsy. This game made no sense. I closed my eyes again.

No more than a few moments must have passed, yet when I reawakened the ceiling was visibly brighter. I heard a door open. The door closed. Two sets of footsteps shuffled in. I tried to look over to see whom the footsteps belonged to, but was met with the same problem as before.

Now I could see the heads belonging to the footsteps at the edges of my peripheral vision. They meddled along the sides, reaching for unknowns, whispering back and forth to each other in a jargon I found difficult to understand. A man stepped into a position within my sight line, right above me, but before I could find out anything about him he shone a light in my eyes.

"Hmmm, just as I'd suspected," he said, either to himself or that other set of footsteps lurking somewhere outside my range. "Please wipe the saliva from this man's chin."

The first man walked away, a second man entered the picture. He hastily rubbed down my jaw and neck with a towel. I saw him reach down with that towel but that was all I saw. I didn't feel it rub against my chin. He walked away.

The first man returned, and I saw that he was rather young with an even tan and a receding blonde hair. He smiled.

"Good morning," he began. "You are in a hospital. I can see by your eyes that you have many questions. I'll see what I can do about answering the most pressing ones now."

The rest, I'm afraid, will have to wait until the interpreter arrives. You sir, are very lucky to be alive."

The paramedics had found me lying unconscious, he said, on a sidewalk in a deserted area. If not for the woman in my taxi who'd called me in, I would have died. He said I'd had what was called a brain attack, or what was more commonly known as a stroke. By the time the ambulance had arrived, I was already in a coma. Today was April the 24th, the time is 7:13AM. He told me all this because I'd been in a coma for five days.

"What comes next I don't know how to tell you other than to just say it. Because of the severity of your brain attack, because it was left to run its course for a lengthy period before you received proper medical attention, because of the prolonged comatose state, I'm afraid your situation has been made quite complex. You are in a rather rare state resulting from brain attack, what is a bit of a medical anomaly without much precedence or research. You have what is known as locked-in syndrome. This means the entirety of your body is paralyzed; in your case this excludes your eyes only. In the few other reported cases, some patients have, after some time, recovered some motion in their necks. But the chance of any kind of recovery to a normal state of existence is very slim, and has never happened. I'm sorry.

"As I said earlier you have an interpreter who has been assigned to you. He is trained in techniques of communication used with paralysis victims of your degree. He should arrive later today. He will be here every day for three hours. The technique is rather laborious, he will explain it all to you in due time. But I'm sure you'll find it very helpful. I'm Dr. Alexander Strike. I will be your doctor for your stay here. Dr. Kregger will see you in the evenings. You'll meet her tonight."

## 8 THE ART OF LETTERS

Interpreter:

We're going to be spending a lot of time together with these cards, and I think, after a while, we might even be able to say we're having fun. I have a good feeling about this. I think we're going to get along well. Here, let's start and see if we can learn how to use these things. I ask you a question, and then you answer. We'll start easy. How are you today?

SAD

All my communications pass through the interpreter, who visits every day. He has with him a little chalkboard, a notebook, and twenty-six flashcards, each bearing a letter of the alphabet. As always we begin with the letter A. If I blink once we move on to the letter B and so on until I eventually blink twice at a particular letter and he writes it down on the little chalkboard. Then we begin again at A. We continue this way until he can discern a word at which point he shows me the chalkboard. If it is correct I blink twice. If that is not the whole word as I imagine it, I blink once and we continue. When we have a sentence, he reads it aloud to me, and I blink once to approve, twice to disapprove. If the sentence is approved, he then transcribes it into the notebook.

Interpreter:

Well, that no way to be. Here, how about I hold up the cards and you ask me a question.

WHATNAME

Interpreter:

My name? My name is Dimitri Nasrallah. What else would you like to know about me? I'm a very open person. We can talk about me all day if you like.

LEBANESE

Interpreter:

Yes. Yes I am Lebanese. Is it the name that gave it away?

YOUKNOWEMILYN

Interpreter:

Emily? No. No, I don't. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll ask my dad when I get home tonight. He might know. What, do you know her or something? You think we're related?

AWRITERHASLIVEDTHETRAGEDIESOFPEOPLEANDCOUNTRYANDSEESTRAGEDIE  
SUNFOLDINGINOTHERSANDTHENASKSWHATEFFECTTHISWRITINGHASASKSIFT

HEWORDSTILLHASPOWERDOESITSTILLHAVESTRENGTHARETHERESTILLEARST  
HATCANHEARME

Interpreter:

Say, that's kinda nice. Can I borrow that? Do you write? How cool is that. I just started writing a few weeks ago, I mean writing seriously. I have one story already. It's about a girl I once knew. Hah! It's funny when I think about it. Anyways, maybe I'll bring it in and read it to you. You can tell me what you think.

EMILY

Interpreter:

Oh, don't worry. I won't forget to ask my dad. Well, my hands are tired. I'm going to take a break. I'll be back in a bit. Adieu!

# 9

## A CANADIAN FICTION

ANDRE AND I... TAXI COMPANY... FAT HAIRY MAN... TWO MEN SPEAKING...  
ONE MANS VOICE CLEARER... STRANGE FREQUENCIES... SIGNALS YOU  
HEAR OTHER PEOPLE TALKING... FUCK YOU ILLEGAL... DID NOT SEEM  
RIGHT TO TALK... DONTWORRY... LIVE VICARIOUSLY... YOU HAVE TO  
PROMISE NOT TO TELL ANYONE... I CANT STOP CRYING... A BAD HABIT  
I PICKED UP LONG AGO... LYING IN THE BACKSEAT OF THE TAXI IN

THE MIDDLE OF NIGHT... I AM AN EDUCATED MAN... ARCHITECT...  
WRITTEN TO MY WIFE EXPLAINING SITUATION BUT I HAVE YET TO  
HEAR BACK... PRIVATE TALK... IN THE CAR THINKING... I REMEMBER  
THAT MOMENT LIKE... RIGHT NOW... HEIDI... I JUST WANT ONE THING  
HEIDI... DON'T LIE TO ME... I HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING... I LOVE  
YOU HEIDI...

I stayed in the intensive care unit until both Dr. Strike and Dr. Kregger thought my  
condition stable enough to move into the long-term care ward.

THE LETTERS ARE IN BOX IN CLOSET... NAJWA... HOTEL SELBY... NO  
WORK YET... I HAVE BEEN LOOKING A SHORT TIME... LINES NOT  
WORKING... TORONTO IS EXPENSIVE... NAJWA... NO WORK YET... I LOOK  
TOO OLD AND EVERYONE WHO WORKS IS YOUNG... YES... SEARCH FOR  
WORK IS FRUSTRATING... HAVE VERY LITTLE MONEY LEFT... NEED WORK...  
SECOND NIGHT IN TAXI WITH SCANNER... NINE ZERO EIGHT SEVEN SIX  
TWO... WHAT ABOUT HIS LIFE... IF SHE WAS QUIET ON HER OWN OR IT  
WAS THE MACHINE... DRIVE HOME THE DRUNKS... WISH IN SECRET THE  
PHONE WOULD RING FOREVER... LIE... NO ONE LOVES A WHORE...

I am in a hospital, that is all I can be sure of these days. The rest is outside my peripheral  
vision. I see different parts of my room on different days, depending on which direction  
the nurse decides will do each morning. Still, I've yet to see the wall behind me, or the  
pillow I lay my head on. On occasion the door is left propped open and I spend the time  
listening to the sounds emanating from this passageway. However, the effort necessary to

maintain my right eye consistently at the corner of my sight line often proves not worthwhile for the nurses' blue outfits and doctors' green ones. I've found that if I just look straight ahead and allow the ongoings of the hall to meld together into a pastiche of blues and greens, that is somehow more satisfying. I lie there, conscious of this pastiche, as if I'm a passenger on a train watching the forest leaking its colors into one solid blur. But where does this train go? For this is a very strange train I've found myself aboard. The train and its passengers stay still as the world outside their cabins moves along at electrifying speeds. And if I am relegated to one piece of baggage to bring along then it is this little wisdom that I've come to appreciate: things are always moving, no matter how small. I find it strange because, in all this change there must be one thing at least that stays the same, some vast framework, in order for the rest to change at all. Perhaps it is one of those contradictions we attribute to that thing we call life. But what is that? What a vague thing to call it, that life. Should anyone ever make a game of its definition and ask everyone alive to play, then they would surely all point in a different direction. Look, one would say, at that tree. That is life. But the next person would counter, look at that rock. That is life. Yet another would point towards a bird in the sky. That is life. Still another, the decomposing carcass of a bird on the ground. That is life. The buildings of a city. Those are life. The cars we drive. Those too are life.

...I'LL FIND HIM... THIS MAN WAS VERY TROUBLED... MY WORK WAS BEGINNING TO SUFFER... SURE... DRIVE TO THE WRONG STREET CORNERS OR BUILDINGS... MONEY WAS GONE... EVERYWHERE I SPEND MONEY... WORK EVERY DAY FROM FIVE AT NIGHT TO FIVE IN MORNING... THAT'S A DIFFERENT STORY... MORE INTERESTED IN SOME PEOPLE'S TALK THAN

OTHERS... WHO KNOWS WHEN... I DREW CIRCLES... PERFORMED  
CALACULATION... ASSUMPTIONS OF PURE LINES AND PERFECT CIRCLES...  
I COULD NEVER CATCH HER VOICE... IT'S THE MONEY... LIKE A LEACH...  
I KEPT ONE EYE ON STRANGERS WALKING THE STREETS... HIS HEIDI  
MY HEIDI...

My body lies limp on a bed, fulfilling only its natural process of growing hair and nails.  
That is life. But if I were to let my toenails grow uncut, they would eventually curve into  
their toes, breaking the skin and infecting the whole of the foot. That is life. I mention  
this because my nurse informed me of an ingrown toenail on my own foot the other day.  
If I could laugh, then I would. An ingrown nail, I would say. Really? Then let's get rid  
of the foot. And while we're cutting things away, let's get rid of both of them. They're  
of no use anyhow. Actually let's get rid of the legs altogether. Yes, please cut right  
above the thigh. And these hands, they're useless. Cut them off too. Just like John Spier.  
My hair is long and oily now too, incidentally. I'm wearing an undershirt. That is life...

WHAT DAY IS TODAY... TWO DAYS AGO I WOULD HAVE BECOME A  
CANADIAN CITIZEN... THANK YOU... JANUARY TWENTY ONE... THAT'S  
RIGHT... THEN THE CALLS STOPPED... I TOLD A BIG LIE... I CANNOT  
REPEAT IT... I PROTECTED HER... NO COUNTRY WILL HAVE THE  
LEBANESE... WE CARRY A DISEASE... I COULDN'T LEAVE FROM THE  
AIRPORT... AIRPORT TORN DOWN... LEFT OVERNIGHT WITH ONE BAG AND  
NEVER RETURNED... WE WENT TO CYPRUS... I STAYED IN CYPRUS FOR  
EIGHT DAYS THEN TOOK A BOAT TO ATHENS... IN ATHENS I BOUGHT A  
FAKE PASSPORT... WHEN I ARRIVED I DECLARED REFUGEE STATUS...



My body is useless, like that taxi I had the accident with last winter. The car is totaled, yet the driver has emerged mercifully unharmed. I am in a hospital. Rather I am in my room. Rather I am in my bed. Rather I am in this wrecked body. So the driver, although, mercifully unharmed, is still caught within the wreckage, awaiting rescue. For this one they will need the jaws of life. I've heard people say, somewhere back in my memory, that the body itself was the first riddle given to man in an effort to keep his mind busied with a game to play. My game is broken. And as if my mind has better things to do than stay in my body. Would it float away like a balloon if, suddenly, the top of my head were to pop open? Are they naturally opposed, mind and body, like fire and water? Is one always threatening to extinguish the other. Is that other always ready to steam its counterpart into thin air?

...WAS DARK WHEN OUR DRIVE BEGAN... NOT FOR THE STREET... I DID NOT KNOW THE NEIGHBORHOOD... HE WORKED ON THE DOCK... TOLD US TO FOLLOW HIM... WE DID NOT TALK... I COULD NEVER IMAGINE FADING... I RETURNED TO THE TAXI... JUST DRIVE BOYO... HIS NAME WAS JOHN... I DROVE UNTIL I LOST MY SENSE OF DIRECTION... TOMORROW SAME TIME SAME PLACE SAME MONEY... HE WAS A BULL... OVER TWO METERS TALL... FOR THE PAY TO BUY MY PRESCRIPTION... HE TRUSTED ME... HE HAD A TICKET TO...

I used to wonder what was beyond that doorway, just as I used to lament the fact that I am paralyzed. Back then, I don't know when exactly, though I used to try to keep track of the

days also. I used to make plans for what I would do the day I left this bed. I used to miss my wife. That I still do. But I'm resigned to the fact that I'll never see her or hear from her again. Nor would I want her to see me or hear from me in this state. No, let her remember me as I remember her. I no longer speculate about her fate or well being. I no longer speculate at all. She is with me. She is being well inside my mind, where I have cleared out a dusty corner, previously unused, for her. She has moved in. We live together. We are married and still in love. We spend each day together. We have long conversations about cooking and short arguments about my smoking. In the evenings we sit outside on the steps of our front door and watch people walk along the streets. Sometimes we go to the fruit stands and buy watermelons. And then we watch the sun set over Beirut (but in my mind there is no room for war), watch the sun grow unattended through the day like a toenail, eventually curving across the sky and back into the horizon, coming full circle as it extinguishes itself...

I WAS DRIVING CORRECTLY AND HE ASKED ME TO PULL OVER... HE WALKED OVER TO A GROUP OF FOUR WOMEN ALL YOUNG AND ATTRACTIVE... CLOTHES TOO THIN FOR COLD NIGHT ...SHE WAS NOT LIKE HEIDI... SHE WAS BLONDE... I DROVE AND JOHN SAID WRONG... HIS MIND WAS ELSEWHERE... IF I WERE TO START DRIVING... NOW WE COULD RUN OFF TOGETHER... IN THE REAR VIEW I SAW JOHN EATING IN THE BACK SEAT OF MY TAXI... I DRIVE WITHOUT PAYING ANY ATTENTION... I NO LONGER SLEEP... WITH A NONEXISTENT VOICE... I AM STILL A MAN... I PARKED THE CAR... HE SAID GET OUT I NEED SOME HANDS...

WHAT KIND OF MAN PLAYS WITH PUPPETS... SORE IN MY HEAD AND NECK...

I don't know how long I've been here. I have a clock on the empty dresser across from my bed and its red numbers blinked 6:13AM this morning as the sun rose. Last night the sun set at 8:37PM. From what I remember, it must be late spring or late summer. From the door I sometimes hear people chatting about how hot it's been, therefore perhaps it is late summer. Late summer has always been my favorite time of the year. I used to take my holidays in August, so the month was a time of unwinding and regrouping for me. My period of hibernation. I always thought the first of September would make a more appropriate New Year's Day. This year I think I'll move it...

IS IT OVER... HE LOOKED ALARMED... JOHN RAN AWAY DOWN THE STREET AND AROUND THE CORNER... WE FLED TO THE HILLS... WE HUDDLE IN A CORNER AND LISTENED... MY CHILDREN REFUSE TO SLEEP... NOBODY WORRIED ABOUT SLEEP... MONTHS PASSED WITH NO WORK... I HAVE NEVER KILLED BEFORE... BULLETS PIERCED WALLS... THE WINDOW WAS OPEN... I HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU ...IT GETS BUSY SOMETIMES... THE FIRST MAN WALKED AWAY... THE WOMAN IN MY TAXI ...I WOULD HAVE DIED...

Today I am remembering one time long ago, a young boy named Yasser Al Mahflouz. We were in the same class, in any case we had the same teacher, and I think I was fascinated with him because I was forever trying to befriend him on the playground. If he

was at the slides, I would hang around by the slides looking bored. If he was going round the merry-go-round, I would try and jump on while it was spinning really fast in order to impress him. I would pretend to be involved in something really interesting, like building a sandcastle, to arouse his attention. I think eventually I flat out asked him if he wanted to be friends. I think about things now I haven't thought about in ages. I can't help but wonder if I'd ever have thought of Yasser Al Mahflouz again if I could still move. I've become an incubator. In me, there is room for everyone I have ever known. They will all have a place to live in Toronto, regardless where they are now. For a while when I first arrived at this hospital, I was racked with worries and regrets but slowly my mind wandered away from reality as I had, as a young boy, eventually lost interest in befriending that Yasser Al Mahflouz...

I FEEL SOMETHING... MY MUSCLES HURT FROM THE WEIGHT OF MY BODY... I CAN TURN MY NECK SLOWLY... LOCKED IN SYNDROME... FROM STROKES WITH COMPLICATION... THE BODY DIES BUT THE MIND IS ALERT AND UNHARMED... VERY RARE... WHAT BOOK DO YOU READ... ABOUT LOCKED IN SYNDROME... YOU SHOULD READ IT TO ME... BAUBY... IS HE FRENCH... I LOOK FORWARD TO IT... I NEVER READ BOOKS... ONLY EMILY... MY SISTER READS...

I still think of Heidi and there is a part of me that still listens to the hallway, intent on hearing the doctors wheel her in one day. Every time I hear a woman's voice, I can't help but wonder: is it her? At other times, the whole situation appears too strange to have ever happened and I wonder if Heidi, for all intents and purposes, never existed. Had I

imagined the whole thing? How long have I been in this bed? Or is she still waiting by the phone, that unknown beauty? In any case, my imagination has become my reality. That too is life. But even now I think of her less often than I used to. Ah Heidi, I remember how we met that fateful November evening. Why if we'd never met, things could have turned out differently. I can imagine a day not too far off when I don't think of her at all. Maybe on that day, I'll climb out of bed, say goodbye to Rick, to Dr. Strike, to Dr. Kregger, and walk out of the hospital. But Heidi will always exist, she will not disappear. I have cleared out another dusty corner of my mind for her to use. Not near my wife's, mind you. There is room enough for both of them. Sometimes I want to be with all I knew of my Najwa, and other times I'd rather visit will all I never knew of my Heidi...

I DO NOT KNOW... NO MORE QUESTIONS... MY EYES ARE TIRED.

# 10

## A CANADIAN REALITY

Every day I am visited by my interpreter, which is not the right word to call him because he doesn't really interpret. I can only answer what he asks, so I am more like his plaything. Still, I don't envy his job. I am glad it has to be done. It gives me something to do. His job is very simple yet very tedious. He has twenty-six cards with him and a chalkboard. On each of the cards there is a letter of the alphabet. He flashes me a card, and if it is the letter I want I blink twice. If not, I blink once. Once I find my letter, he writes the letter on the chalkboard and returns to A. Slowly we form words. Sometimes he grows impatient and thinks he recognizes the full word from its first few letters. He

fills it in on the board then shows it to me. I blink once for wrong, twice for right. In this meticulously slow scrawl, words emerge from letters, sentences from words, paragraphs from sentences, and so on. He is a university student in need of money for tuition.

I think this Dimitri Nasrallah is related to Emily Nasrallah. In the first few sessions he was, I thought, a nice young man. Rather immature, but I enjoyed his naivete. He would go through the alphabet and let me ask him questions. I asked him if his family is from the east or west side of Beirut. He says he doesn't know. He says he moved away when he was young and all he remembers has most probably been romanticized beyond reality. But that is why we have memories. In us, we each have a romantic. That is life.

However, last week he came in and said that he had spoken to his father and, yes, he was indeed related to the writer Emily. And that even though she had married into a distant branch of his family, he says this reaffirms his feeling that words are coursing through his blood as they make their way to his fingertips and out onto the page. Then, after several sessions I could see he was getting quite impatient with me. He stopped holding up the cards for me to speak, and decided that I would only answer what he asked of me. He was quite interested in how I ended up in this bed, and asked that I start thinking about my story because in a few days we would start working on a "big project." About this he seemed both secretive and adamant. We've been making slow progress. I find it very difficult at this pace to remember my place within the story as I tell it. I suspect that inevitably many parts have been lost in the process while others have been repeated. That is why these days much of my time is spent constructing and reconstructing my story. I know it all word for word, letter by letter now. The whole labyrinth is inside my head. At night, when I can't sleep, I drive around between those

word constructions as if I was still in my taxi, getting to know the way around the structure of my story.

Still, this Nasrallah claims he is a writer. He seems to be getting carried away. He goes on about how, in the end, he will take everything I have told him and polish it for effect. Some things, he says, may be added. Others rearranged. Some things even omitted. I will give the story some punch, he says. He has too many ideas of his own. This is not what I'm looking for in an interpreter. Our meetings are getting worse. Frankly I'm very worried. Sometimes, I blink and he doesn't write down what I want. I try to yell at him, tell him to stop making things up, but all I can do is lie there feebly and blink. It's rather humiliating when he stops paying attention to me, his tongue curled unto his lips in deep concentration as he writes away fervently on the chalkboard, when he exchanges the chalkboard for his notebook.